

Jesus Didn't Teach Us to Juggle

By Al Hsu

Remember the parable about the bad servant who spent too many hours at the office and the good servant who had a flexible work-from-home telecommuting arrangement so he could spend more time with his kids? No? Jesus didn't tell any parables like that. You would think the Bible has a lot to say about work/life balance. But it is hard to find passages that speak directly to the issue. There is no verse that tells me when I'm traveling on the road too much and neglecting my family.

I leafed through a book by a respected Christian businessman to see what he said on the issue of work/life balance. He offered various nuggets of practical wisdom: try to limit travel, have frequent and meaningful communication, attend children's school events and so on. But the author didn't quote any biblical passages to support his points. Maybe he couldn't find anything in Scripture on this either!

In fact, the Bible doesn't make a dichotomy between work and life because in the ancient world, work life and family life were often integrated. Families worked together in their family trade, whether in agriculture or commerce. For much of human history, people worked on the family farm. Or your home also served as your butcher shop. Jesus probably didn't have to leave the house to do his carpentry with Joseph; they likely worked together within their own house. It wasn't until the industrial revolution and the rise of factories that more people worked outside the home.

Even though the modern world is significantly different from the biblical world, Scripture still speaks to our need for work/life balance. A key passage for me is Colossians 3:23,24: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." So all our work is done on behalf of Christ.

A parallel verse occurs just a few verses earlier, in verse 17: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Again, whatever we do, in work or business, it is to be done in the name of Jesus, with integrity and a sense of Christian service.

But something jumped out at me that I hadn't really noticed before. The verses sandwiched in between those two verses are all about healthy family relationships. Wives and husbands are to be in loving relationship to one another. Fathers are not to embitter or exasperate their children. In other words, good work situations and healthy family relationships go hand in hand. This would have made perfect sense in biblical times when your coworkers were probably also your family members. Even today, unhappy family situations can prevent you from doing good work, and problems at work can cause conflict at home.

So what practical steps can we take to have better work/family balance? Paul isn't very specific in the details, but he is very concerned with the big-picture principles. In verses 12-15, he tells

us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, to forgive one another and to love each other, and to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. There's no quick fix here. Paul is more interested in the long-term character of who we are as Christians, that we might become more like Christ in who we are and how we treat one another.

The people in the biblical world integrated their work and family life more closely than we usually do today. One practical implication is that we might try to reintegrate our worlds so that we don't have too strict a barrier between work and family. Instead of keeping long hours at the office away from the family, we can look for opportunities to work from home.

Technology now gives us more options for flexible work situations like telecommuting. I work at home several afternoons a week, and that allows me to spend more time in closer proximity to my children. They can see that work does not necessarily keep me away from them, and they get a better understanding of what I do to earn a living.

Also, Christians can work alongside their family members. This already happens in countless family-owned small businesses across the country, where your business partner might also be your uncle, sister, or cousin. My wife and I both work at the same company, and both we and our company benefit from our sense of partnership as a couple and as coworkers. We find that working together strengthens our marriage, and that our marriage improves our contributions as employees.

And perhaps companies could be more inclusive of their workers' families.

Many of my colleagues' teenage and college-aged kids have worked in our warehouse or office during summers or winter breaks. Spouses and children are welcomed at company picnics and parties. Some companies even allow nursing mothers to bring their infants to the office. All this can help foster a family-friendly corporate environment, where work is not the family's enemy.

Not every family or workplace will lend itself to these kinds of situations. But however you figure out the details, try to lessen the dichotomy between work and family life. They don't have to be adversaries. They can be collaborators—parts of the same organic whole life that God intended us to live.