

**Human Self-Reliance vs. Reliance on God:
Understanding God's Design for Man's Participation**

by

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As teachers of business in a free enterprise system, we cultivate within our students an attitude of entrepreneurship, independence, and self-reliance. We teach the mechanics of determining internal strengths and weaknesses, analyzing environmental opportunities and threats, developing strategic alternatives, and making strategic choices to establish a competitive advantage. We encourage our students to take the initiative to create their own success and provide them with the necessary tools to do so.

On the other hand, even our best efforts are subject to failure, and success, when it comes, can be in spite of ourselves. Even in the darkest moments, we know that He who holds all things together (Col. 1:17) can work "all things together for good" for those who love and follow Him (Romans 8:28). Therefore, we acknowledge that the fruits of our labor depend on God as the harvest depends on Him supplying the rain.

On the surface, there seems to exist a conflict between these two sources of confidence and faith: our own self-reliance versus reliance on God. It is important that we and our students understand how our responsibility and our faith are intertwined.

The Law of the Harvest

As servants of God, we recognize that our talents and opportunities are gifts from God through Christ. Recognizing our reliance on God, we know that in all facets of life we have the responsibility to plant and water - but God supplies the increase. Our role, then, is to participate in the plan designed by God for us. Others have described our participation as being "proactively" involved in "creating the future." These words are included in the following quote:

"I have become convinced that those who focus effort on proactively creating the future rather than reactively coping with the future are the individuals and institutions that will succeed. While we should avoid the hubris of ever thinking that we control the future...we are nonetheless responsible for thinking through what we want to happen and for acting in ways that make such outcomes more probable" (Sharon Johnson, 1999).

God's plan for our participation may be referred to as 'the law of the harvest,' instituted by God in response to man's sin. After the fall of man, God said,

"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food..." (Genesis 3: 17).

The law of the harvest requires man to participate in providing for his own needs. As instituted by God, the law of the harvest applies not only to agricultural activities, but all worthy endeavors of earthly life. Meaningful relationships, faithful marriages, personal character, and respected careers are all established through persistent attention to fundamental enduring principles.

Although the principles do not change, our willingness to abide by them can be fickle and shortsighted. We see this practiced by students who habitually cram before tests and attempt to memorize their way through college. Worse, yet, are those who fail to prepare and then, succumbing to the short-term pressure of grades, resort to cheating with little thought given to the long-term consequences to their character, reputation, and career preparedness.

In his highly acclaimed book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey compares two philosophies, or ethics, for achieving success. The *Character Ethic* encompasses the attributes of “integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, simplicity, modesty, and the Golden Rule” (p. 18). By definition, the character ethic is built upon a long-term vision of growth and development – in other words, the law of the harvest.

The other philosophy Covey discusses, the *Personality Ethic*, treats success as “a function of personality, of public image, of attitudes and behaviors, skills and techniques, that lubricate the processes of human interaction.” While some contributions are noteworthy, the personality ethic’s focus is on “quick-fix influence techniques, power strategies, communication skills, and positive attitudes” (p. 19).

Covey highlights the differences between these two philosophies as follows:

“Did you ever consider how ridiculous it would be to try to cram on a farm – to forget to plant in the spring, play all summer and then cram in the fall to bring in the harvest? The farm is a natural system. The price must be paid and the process followed. You always reap what you sow; there is no shortcut” (Covey, 1989).

Although Covey’s original focus was the individual, his emphasis on character, relationships, and the need for a long-term vision has been added to a host of other voices (i.e., Deming, Juran, Crosby, etc.) critical of Corporate America’s shortsighted attention to the bottom-line. Although foreign competition provided the motivation to change, it is the fundamental mission-minded shift toward quality management, supplier and customer relationships, and cultivation of human resources that has been credited for the economic expansion of the 1980’s and 1990’s.

In sum, the law of the harvest regulates both personal and professional endeavors. As we provide our students with the tools of the trade to begin their careers, we must also encourage them to extend their horizons and sense the long-term significance of their daily choices.

Integrating Faith into Life

Accepting responsibility for the consequences of our behaviors is a humbling prerequisite for repentance and growth. Yet, acknowledging personal responsibility can also lead to arrogant self-reliance when we are blessed with success. Historically, our human nature leaves us waffling in the middle – denying our shortcomings, yet gloating over accomplishments. A prayer found in the wisdom literature acknowledges this aspect of the human condition:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God” (Proverbs 30: 8,9).

As Christian teachers of business, our challenge is to help our students integrate their own responsibility to participate in God's plan with the deep heart-felt assurance that comes from trusting in God's providence. Stated another way, our goal is not just to integrate our faith into our teachings, but to teach our students to integrate their faith into their learning and living, both personally and professionally.

Further, our students need to be assisted in the understanding that their professional lives and their spiritual lives are one. Too frequently in our society we see a compartmentalization of the professional, spiritual, and personal lives - neatly segregated with different standards and expectations for each. Unfortunately, this behavior is accepted and appears to be a product of our contemporary pluralistic society. Pluralism is not harmonious with a biblical, faith-based approach, and our students need intellectually to understand this.

Our spiritual nature and temporal stewardship were intended from the beginning to be seamless, not segregated for man's convenience. Moreover, the seamless nature of God's plan for us is consistent with good business management and sound financial principles. It works in harmony with proven marketing processes and accounting standards (Harrison, 1990). It is The Master Plan of balanced scales and honest wages. It is the law of the harvest. Our confidence is in God's plan—not arrogantly in our own abilities.

We are admonished in Proverbs 16:3 to “commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. The Lord works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.” God intends the full integration of our temporal efforts with our spiritual faith. This is affirmed in Proverbs 16:9: “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” By design, God's plan calls for man's participation and reliance on Him.

God clearly communicates His plan for man. By commandment, precept, promise, instruction, example, proverb, and parable, God instructs how we should live. Moses summed it up powerfully in his final instruction to the Israelites before ascending to die on Mount Nebo. Here he “solemnly declared” with regard to the Word of God that “they are not just idle words for you - **they are your life**” (Deuteronomy 32:46-47). What a powerful statement for our students! In teaching faith-based principles, we must guide our students' understanding that their professional, personal, and spiritual lives are one and the same and must be built on the same biblical foundation.

Acknowledging God's plan for our participation encourages us to follow proactively the law of the harvest - personally, professionally, financially, and socially. By its very nature, the law of the harvest does not typically yield immediate rewards. We are sure to face “trials of many kinds” leading to patience (James 1:2,3). Here, again, we are called to faith. As we allow “patience to have its perfect work” (James 1:4) we allow our challenges, failures, and disappointments to prepare us for greater works of service. Clearly, we are to wait upon the Lord with a *proactive patience*, while continuing our efforts to plant, nurture, and water. The rest is in the providence of God.

God's Providence

As we labor according to the law of the harvest, we must remember that we are participating in God's plan for our welfare. It is, however, His plan – not ours:

“You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for **so you have ordained it**” (Psalms 65:9).

It is foolish and displeasing to God to forget that our labor is a part of His plan and the harvest is up to Him – when and where He chooses:

“When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, . . . You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me’” (Deut. 8: 12-14, 17).

“Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you” (Deut. 11:17).

Though we are bound by the law of the harvest, God is not. While difficult to understand, the providence of God is evident in scripture: “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13); “There is no authority except that which God has established” (Romans 13: 1); and “The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord: he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Proverbs 21:1). We profess our faith in God's unseen hand each time we sing the familiar “God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform” (Cowper, 1774).

When it seems that the harvest is slow in coming, God may be preparing us to be a Joseph, an Esther, a Gideon, or a Joshua. Indeed, these individuals were successful because they persevered while God was preparing the harvest. Perhaps, when we look back on how our lives have unfolded, we shall experience a sense of camaraderie with the great heroes of faith “whose weakness was turned to strength” (Hebrews 11:34).

Passive Reliance on God

There is, then, a balance that we must achieve in our lives as we seek to understand our role in God's designed plan. We must avoid the two extremes of being totally self-reliant (for God “detests all the proud of heart,” Proverbs 6:5) and being a sluggard who expects God to take care of life's situation without any proactive effort on our part. We must avoid becoming overly dependent on God for what He by design has established as our work. Many in scripture have been rebuked for slothfulness and for being sluggards. Moreover, God has established a divine purpose for work (Smith and Wheeler, 1999).

To be clear, God does not need our help. He has told us repeatedly that the world is His and everything in it (Psalm 24:1). He does not need our sacrifices. He is not dependent upon us to satisfy his hunger (Psalm 50:10-12). God says “the silver is mine and the gold is mine.” (Haggai 2:8) God simply wants the designed participation between Himself and His created.

Too often Christian instruction instills in the student an inappropriate sense of passivity and over-reliance on God. This can be described as ‘The Lord Will Provide’ syndrome. Some are fearful in their life’s stewardship, such as the one talent servant in Matthew 25 who was fired and cast out because he did not do even the minimum that he could do. Others are just lazy as we see in the wonderful business lesson about the man and his vineyard.

“I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man” (Proverbs 24:30-34).

Our students can understand that this vineyard keeper found poverty in his laziness. God is not going to bless those who are idle, regardless of their spiritual intent. Based on the biblical model, it is fair to state that those who practice passive reliance on God may not be prospering in business due to their lack of participation in God’s plan.

Unfortunately, some Christian business people are careless in the management of their material blessings – thinking they will continue to receive despite their poor business stewardship. However, accumulation of wealth in business and personal financial efforts is designed as tedious and arduous. Proverbs 13:11 indicates that we are not to seek pride-filled returns, but rather accumulations “little by little.” Further, we are not to dissipate what we receive or accumulate today, but rather be prudent in our saving back a portion for tomorrow as can be seen in Proverbs 21:20, “In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.”

A wonderful lesson on the balance between self-reliance and reliance on God is found in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah, an Israelite who found favor in the court of Artaxerxes while the Israelites were in Babylonian captivity, sought to organize the return to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the fortress walls. Upon his return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah found the antagonistic rulers of the smaller surrounding kingdoms quite distressed and threatening in their overtures toward the once captive nation of Israel. In Nehemiah 4:4ff, we see the invocation of God’s blessing and protection on their work by those who had returned to Israel. Then following immediately after the integration of God in their work, the biblical record indicates the Israelites “prayed to God and posted a guard” (v. 9) in order to meet the work challenge they were undertaking. What an amazing example of the integration of faith in our temporal undertakings! Pray to God and post a guard. In summary, we are to bind ourselves to God and work hard with all of our God-given ability.

Conclusion

We must instill within our students our faith in both the law of the harvest and the providence of God - both of which are God-ordained. Seeking to discover our God-given talents and then use them to God's glory, we must approach our work with humility. It is then that we access the greatest source of confidence - for it is those who recognize their weakness who are strong indeed (II Corinthians 12:10). Rather than looking down at the sinking sand of our own frail accomplishments, we look up at the glory of God. We are held in the hollow of His hand, firmly standing on our Rock and Savior.

Trusting in the law of the harvest and in the providence of God is not a 'get rich quick' approach to life. Nor is it a 'get rich slow' approach either. It is simply the way of wisdom and truth.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding: in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5,6)

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