Can the Just Succeed?

Can the just succeed? Can people living by Biblical principles successfully compete in a capitalist economy without compromising? Should we even try? Steve Cable provides a biblical perspective.

Corrupting Cultural Climate

At the turn of the twenty-first century, America was hit with a tsunami of corporate corruption. Names like Enron, Tyco and WorldComm became synonymous with greed and failed corporate leadership. Today, even after Congress and the SEC have strengthened their oversight, high profile cases, such as backdated stock options at Apple, continue to plague us. We can't even take comfort in some past golden era of corporate ethics as we look back at a history filled with robber barons, ruthless company towns, and shady land deals.

In the light of this discouraging reality, we are asking the question, Can the just succeed? Can people living by Biblical principles successfully compete in a capitalist economy without compromising? Should we even try?

Let's begin our exploration of this question by considering the overall cultural climate surrounding our free market economic system. A number of recent studies indicate less than honest behavior, and downright dirty dealing are common throughout our culture.

Let's begin at the top. What type of standard is being set by our business leaders? One recent poll showed that less than twenty percent of Americans had confidence that CEOs would consistently make job-related decisions that were morally appropriate.{1} Is this skepticism well-founded? After all, most CEOs have worked their way to the top as a result of

excellent performance in lower positions. Almost fifty percent of corporate executives in a recent Tulane University study were willing to commit fraud in role playing exercises.{2} What was particularly disturbing was that these same executives had affirmed their unwavering commitment to the highest ethical business standards.

Perhaps, we can rely on our workforce to apply their solid middle class values to curb the effects of corrupt leadership. Sadly, a recent study found that forty-eight percent of workers admitted to acting illegally or unethically in the workplace during the previous year.{3} Over thirty percent of them said that their coworkers condone questionable ethics by showing respect for those who achieve success using them.{4} In other words, cheating is not only condoned, it is respected.

We all hope that the upcoming generation will improve upon the sins of the prior generations. Are they bringing a standard of personal values that will clean up the marketplace of the future? Or, are they following in their elders' footsteps? From 1969 to 1989, the number of students who let someone copy their work rose from fifty-eight to ninety-seven percent.{5} A recent survey published in *Education Week* found that three out of four students admitted to engaging in "serious cheating" within the previous year.{6}

People emulate the behavior they believe will make them successful. Perhaps, today's Christians should join Habakkuk as he questioned God: "Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?" (Hab. 1:13){7}

It appears that we will be dealing with a culture of dishonesty in the marketplace for the foreseeable future.

The Slippery Slope

Surprisingly, most Americans identify themselves as trustworthy. So, why are all of these good trustworthy people demonstrating by their behavior that they are not worthy of our trust?

Well, Paul gives us a lot of insight in his first letter to Timothy when he writes, “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil” (1 Tim. 6:9,10).

When we want to accumulate money for our own enjoyment beyond what we need to live, we are tempting ourselves to unethical behavior.

In his book *There is No Such Thing as Business Ethics*, John Maxwell identifies three primary reasons “good” people are led astray in business dealings.{8}

First, we do what is convenient. Many times doing the right thing is a lot more trouble than doing the convenient thing. Have you ever discovered that you were given too much change, but you didn’t want to go to the trouble of returning to the store? Sometimes a convenient lie can help us avoid the consequences of a mistake.

Second, we do what we must to win. After all, everyone is doing it. I have to compromise my standards in order to compete. During my years in a very competitive industry, one of my co-workers often stated, “If you can’t lie on a proposal, when can you lie?” In other words, promise whatever you need to get the job, and try to wiggle out of it later.

Third, we rationalize our unethical choices with relativism. We tell ourselves that our ultimate intentions are good. And, besides, if it is good for me, then it must be good. It is scary to think how easy this will be in a postmodern society

where all truth is relative truth.

All three of these relate to putting our success ahead of our values. John Maxwell put it well when he said, “Ethics is about how we meet the challenge of doing the right thing when that will cost more than we want to pay.”{9}

I would like to add a fourth reason I call the Sudden Slippery Slope. We are taught that as long as we can justify our actions by the rule book then they are OK. In order to get ahead, we start to push the envelope of how we interpret the rules. One day we wake up to find that we have clearly gone beyond the boundary. We discover that we are on a slippery slope where the more we try to cover up or undo our actions the more we find ourselves breaking the rules. Enron is an excellent example of this effect.{10} No one at Enron started out with the objective to wipe out $50 billion in shareholder value overnight through unethical business practices, but a culture of pushing the ethical boundaries will inevitably result in a culture of corruption. Proverbs warns us that when we get in this mode, we have a hard time telling right from wrong: “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day. The way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know over what they stumble” (Prov. 4:18-19).

A Christian Perspective on Capitalism

Let’s consider a biblical perspective on capitalism.

People are rarely neutral when it comes to capitalism. Some people blame capitalism for the excesses of unethical behavior described earlier in this discussion. But capitalism as the primary cause of corruption is exonerated by comparisons with many communist and socialist economic systems. Historically, these systems have raised corruption and graft to the highest levels.

On the other hand, some commentators seem to equate capitalism with Christianity, implying that one of the tenets of Christianity is a capitalistic free market system. This premise does not hold up to scrutiny either as Christianity has flourished under a variety of economic systems.

Before we go any further, a simple definition of capitalism is needed. Capitalism is an economic system in which the means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned, and development is proportionate to the accumulation and reinvestment of profits gained in a free market.{11} In other words, private individuals own the resources and make decisions on how to use those resources based on an expectation of return. The genius of capitalism is that individuals or corporations who can provide valuable services better or more efficiently are rewarded with more resources. So, resources tend to be allocated to those who are most capable of using them to produce desired goods and services.

However, one can approach capitalism from either a secular or a faith perspective. In secular capitalism:

- the purpose for business is to return a profit,
- the standard of conduct is the rule of law, and
- the measure of success is accumulation of wealth.

Under a Christian view of capitalism:

- the purpose for business is to honor God,
- the standard of conduct is the Golden Rule, and
- the measure of success is the ability to bless others with the resources God has entrusted to us.

A secular capitalist is accountable only to himself and his shareholders. A Christian business person is accountable to God with a responsibility to all of the stakeholders in the business, including customers and employees.

Capitalism is not essentially Christian, but, as Max Weber

pointed out in his classic book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,*{12} Christianity is good for capitalism in many ways including:

- An excellent work ethic motivated by Paul's admonition in Colossians to "work with sincerity of heart as unto the Lord." Our work results reflect on our Savior, so we are motivated to excellence.

- A willingness to put integrity above profits and to forego investing in businesses which degrade or take advantage of others. As Proverbs 28 says, "Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than he who is crooked though he be rich. . . . He who increases his wealth by interest and usury gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor" (vv. 6,8). Integrity reduces the "greed tax" which is all of the effort wasted on monitoring others to prevent theft.

- A long term perspective that is willing to forgo near term gratification for long term benefits such as investing in hospitals and schools.

Counter to the view of Michael Douglass' character in the movie *Wall Street*, greed is not good. Greed is not what makes capitalism successful. Trusting resources to those who are productive and want to do something of significance is the key to long term economic success!

Called to the Marketplace

What is the role of Christians in the marketplace?

Over the centuries, Christians have had varying responses to the secular marketplace. Some, like the Amish, attempt to isolate themselves from the corrupting influence of the secular world. Others, like the Puritans, believed that excelling in the marketplace was a critical part of the Christian life as evidence of one's election. In recent years

the trend has been for Christians to segregate their spiritual church life from their secular work life. This attitude allows many to believe they can conform to the compromised values of our culture without impacting the spiritual aspects of their life. However, since God's truth is the truth in all aspects of our lives, this attitude could not be truth.

What does the New Testament have to say on this subject? Out of twenty-two letters to churches, not one advised Christians to quit working in or participating in the Roman economic system. None of these letters encouraged all Christians to leave their secular vocation and immediately leave for the mission field. The overall picture is that some people are given as gifts to the church, devoting their energies to equipping the church for ministry. But the majority of us are called to be ministers in our vocation (whether that vocation is as a business leader, a laborer or a stay-at-home mother). As Christians, we are called to be a redeeming influence in the place where non-Christians can be found, the marketplace.

As we enter the business world, we should be clear as to our purpose. I don't think that it is to prove our salvation by getting the most promotions. Four clear biblical purposes for Christians in the work place are:

1. To honor Christ through my attitude, performance and integrity (Col 3:22-25). In my career, whenever I was asked to state my career objectives, I would focus on Colossians 3 for my answer. I would tell them that since I was called to "work heartily as unto the Lord" and to serve with "sincerity of heart", my career objective is to fulfill the role that creates the most value for my employer. That statement was not only true, but was also warmly received by my supervisor.

2. To share Christ in my unique mission field. We interact with more non-Christians in the business world than just about any other venue (Col. 4:5-6).

3. To provide for the physical needs of your family (1 Tim. 5:8).

4. To be able to share with others who need help (2 Cor. 8:12-14).

Jesus summed it up for us when He said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

Compelling Results

Let’s conclude by considering the characteristics of a just business and looking at some measures of success.

Whether for the individual or for a corporation, Christian behavior is going to be characterized by the Golden Rule taught by our Lord: “Treat others the way that you want them to treat you” (Luke 6:31). This means that we are not going to deceive, covet, or steal in our business dealings. We are going to treat others with respect and with grace. We are going to choose integrity over convenience or profit.

Since we all like to win, does the Golden Rule mean that I should always let my competitors win? Should I just turn over the market to them? I don’t know about you, but I absolutely hate it when someone lets me win. Everyone loses if we allow inferior or more costly products to claim the market because no one wants to compete with the status quo (think about the fall of the Soviet Union when you consider this topic). Competition promotes better products and greater productivity which creates more resources and opportunities even for your competitors. The problem arises not from having a competitive system, but from greed causing some to hoard wealth. So, a Christian business will compete aggressively but fairly. They will also realize not to compete by destroying the lives of employees through long hours, poor working conditions, or unfair wages.

Won't a company or individual applying these principles put themselves at a disadvantage? After all, when swimming with sharks, a guppy will always get eaten. In his book *Profit at Any Cost,*{13} Jerry Fleming analyzed the results of corporations who appeared to place a premium on a high standard of ethical behavior. He discovered that these businesses typically induce others to behave ethically toward them. There is also a strong correlation between a firm's commitment to ethics and a lower employee turnover. Typically, a lower turnover rate results in greater productivity from experienced, content employees. At the bottom line, he found a significant positive correlation between a firm's ethical behavior and its economic performance. Companies promoting unethical practices pay a price in the long run (think Enron). An investment in ethically responsible firms has resulted in a return eight times better than the return on the Dow Jones Industrial Average over a period of thirty years.

What conclusions can we draw from our study of Christian principles in the workplace? Applying Christian principles to business is not:
• a magic shield against failure, or
• a way to always avoid criticism, or
• an assurance that your product will be the best on the market.

But, it is:

- a part of our calling to follow Christ,
- the best way to conduct business, and
- a consistent companion of long term success.

No matter the financial results, we are a success when we follow Christ's example in the work place.

Notes

1. Barna Update: "Americans Speak: Enron, WorldCom and Others Are Result of Inadequate Moral Training By Families," The

Barna Group, July 22, 2002, www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=117
2. 1996 Tulane University study reported in workforce.com/archive/feature/22/14/56/index.php
3. Samuel Greengard, “50% of Your Employees are Lying, Cheating & Stealing”, workforce.com.
4. “2003 National Business Ethics Survey”, Ethics Resource Center.
5. Urie Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, *The State of Americans: This Generation and the Next* (Free Press, 1996), quoted on Plagiarism.org, www.plagiarism.org/facts.html.
6. Ibid.
7. All Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Updated Edition.
8. John Maxwell, *There’s No Such Thing as “Business” Ethics*, Warner Books, 2003.
9. Ibid.
10. For an in depth look at what happened at Enron see Kurt Eichenwald, *Conspiracy of Fools* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005).
11. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed., s.v. “capitalism.”
12. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd; January 27, 1977).
13. Jerry Fleming, *Profit at Any Cost* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003).

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