

Sermon Text for January 26, 2020

By David Bronkema

Leviticus 19: 9-10, Ephesians 2: 8-10

“Business as Ministry”

1. Last week Bob preached on “When a Culture of Profit gets in the Way of a Culture of Providence.” He preached that he did not believe that both cultures could coexist, and that as a result, he has developed a skeptical view of business and sees the principles of the pursuit of profit as being diametrically opposed to the pursuit of Providence or of God. He gave you advance warning that I, on the other hand, do believe that there can be a pairing and complementary approach to business and mission, that I would be preaching on that today, and reminded you that he is your pastor and that no matter what I say today, he is right. Bob, is that a fair summary?
2. So, let me say at the outset, before we dig into the Word on this subject, that I always listen to my little brother Bob. He is full of wisdom and insight. Just one key example: I listened to him a little over 30 years ago when he told me that I should consider dating Robin; we will have been married 30 years this year, and we are both so thankful for the way that God has blessed us, especially with Emily, Jacob, and Josiah.
3. And, let me also say at the outset, on this matter of profit, business, providence, and mission, that I completely agree with Bob that a culture of pursuit of profit, where profit is placed at the pinnacle of our pursuits, is indeed spiritually incompatible with God’s mandates. What I’m going to do today is to build on what Bob said, not disagree with it. In a sense, I believe that what you heard from Bob last week was a prophetic message, a much needed message of warning. What you will hear from me this week is a message of good news that has to do with business, of great tidings of joy around business. And here is that exciting news: that those of you who are called into business have God at your side as you engage in the good works that you and business have been called to do, because Christ our Savior is Lord over all, including business, and has established and redeemed all, including business, for His purposes. To state it

succinctly, business is a ministry to which many are called, just as any vocation, any calling, that God is using to build up His kingdom on earth, to build shalom, to glorify and worship Him, and to bring people to the saving knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Christ.

4. In order to understand the full dimensions of this good news that business is a ministry like any other, to which many are called, for which many are given special gifts, in which we should all take great joy and give thanks, I think we need to look at four things. First, we need to understand what the purpose of business is, in other words, why God has established it. Second, and related to the first, we need to understand what role profit plays in business. Third, we need to understand why business provokes such strong emotions and fears. Let's look at each of these in turn, and in what follows, I draw significantly, although not exclusively, on what is probably the best Scripturally theological book on business: *Why Business Matters to God* (and what still needs to be fixed), by Jeff Van Duzer, which came out 10 years ago in 2010.
5. First, what is the purpose of business?
 - a. Let's go to Scripture. In it we see how the people of the nation of Israel were engaged in many different kinds of businesses, in the growing, making, trading, buying, and selling of all kinds of different products and services. There are mentions of carpentry, of moneylending, and of crafts, but probably the biggest business sector for a rural society like Israel was agriculture, the growing of crops and raising of animals. You grew crops to feed yourself, to help feed others, to present sacrifices to the Lord, to sell or trade some to buy or get things you needed that others made and produced. You raised animals for the same purposes. In all of this, jobs were created for those who had lost their land, enabling people in difficult situations to work to earn their living through being paid wages.
 - b. Now, in all of these small businesses and business activities in Israel, you would be very hard pressed to find people in that time saying that the purpose of buying, selling, and bartering in agriculture, in carpentry, in the crafts, was to make money, even among the rich. In fact, God warned people that if they put the making of money at the center of what they were doing, at the center of their business endeavors, they were getting

off track: God vs. mammon. The ultimate purpose, rather, was to provide products so that people could eat, so that the nation could be fed, and yes, money was to be made on it, but that was not supposed to be the main focus. To state it clearly, then, the purpose of business was to create products that helped society flourish. And, in the process, business also served to create jobs and meaningful work for people in a way that enabled them to earn a decent and dignified living.

- c. You will find that these two main purposes of business, creating products and services to help society flourish and creating jobs and work for people, drove much of business throughout the ages and is very much alive today in many businesses, especially those businesses in and focused on their communities. People create businesses because they want to serve the community (the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* comes to mind), or because they love producing things, they love the new ideas and making things, and yes, because they can make money off it. And, people work because it is something that God designed us to do, from which we get meaning, that gives us purpose. Bob mentioned this in his sermon last week, how he loved to work, about his job at Golf and Tennis World, and his paper route.
- d. In fact, Bob was so dedicated to his job as a paperboy, so conscientious in terms of serving the customers of his business, that it became part of his unconsciousness, leading him into one of his several legendary sleepwalking events. I remember one night, about 2 am, we heard Bob run down the stairs, then run up the stairs. Then run downstairs, then run up again. All the time muttering to himself: time to fold the papers! Finally, the third time he did this, our mother called out, "Bob, what are you doing? It's not time to fold the papers yet!" To which Bob replied "Oh!" and went back to bed, getting up to fold papers a few hours later to make sure that his customers received their papers on time and in great shape. As any of the best of business workers, his focus was on providing the best service to his customers, and taking great joy in his work.
- e. So, to summarize, I would claim theologically that the purpose of business in God's kingdom is to make products that help society flourish and to provide people with jobs and meaningful and creative work. Like other vocations, it has a purpose that goes way beyond making money. Think of

it this way: you could become a lawyer to make money, or you become a lawyer to advance justice. You can become a nurse or a doctor to make money, or you can become a nurse or a doctor to help heal and take care of people. You can become a businessperson to make money, or you can become a businessperson to help create goods and services and work opportunities to help society flourish.

6. But, as Bob pointed out, there is still that nagging question and concern over the pursuit of profit particularly in business, because, as the concern and question goes, isn't the pursuit of profit intrinsic to what business is? So, let's take a look at that, let's take a look at the role of profit in the business endeavor.
 - a. Right from the start, as we read in Leviticus, God speaks out clearly that in this business of agriculture, you are not to pursue the maximization of profit. You are not to squeeze out every last bit that you can from your business; you are to leave some of the harvest in your field, the gleanings and the grapes that had fallen or were missed, for the poor, for the foreigner, so that they can subsist. You are not to go over your fields a second time to collect those.
 - b. And, although we did not read these passages from Scripture, Deuteronomy and Leviticus also describe how in God's economic system, in the system that framed the rules and parameters for the resources needed to run a business and specific business practices, all people were given an opportunity to flourish in a way that limited the power of profit: they all had access to land, and if you got in trouble, every 7 years all debts were forgiven and every 50 years the land went back to the original owners, so their kids could get a fresh start. Those were the rules.
 - c. In all of this, if you'll notice, never does God say that profit, making more than what you spend, making money off your business, is wrong. There is absolutely nowhere in Scripture that declares profit to be evil. What is declared problematic are ways that you make money, and placing money as the main and only goal of what you are doing. For example, Scripture does not forbid charging interest, using money to make money, it only circumscribes it, it simply puts limits in terms of who can be charged interest and how much. It is a sin to charge interest to those in need, to those for whom it is a hardship to pay back. It is fine to charge interest

when you are lending money to those, for example, who need capital to start a business or to invest in other things, at least that is the consensus of most theologians who have looked into this deeply, although Bob's prophetic warnings on this from last week also are a good caution here.

- d. In short, when it comes to profit, the idea is that profit has a very specific, important, but also circumscribed role to play in the business endeavor. Since profit is necessary to keep the business going, it can and should be one of the main considerations in business activities, but it cannot be allowed to threaten the ultimate purposes and goals of business that we described above. If it does so, then it becomes an idol, displeasing to God.
- e. To give an analogy, drawing on Bob's one last week. How many of us would say that the purpose of sports is to win? Bob, don't raise your hand. How many of us would say that the purpose of sports is to build character, to teach life lessons, to enjoy the playing of the sport, to have fellowship through it? There is nothing wrong with winning in and of itself, just as there is nothing wrong with making a profit, and in fact you can use the focus on winning to advance much of what you want to accomplish through sports in terms those ultimate ends of character building and fellowship. The focus on winning, the training and practicing geared towards winning, is a key means to accomplishing those other purposes, and winning also provides joy in and of itself. But if the focus on winning becomes the be all and end all, then I would say sports, in God's eyes, has lost its purpose, it has become corrupted, and it is very likely that sports' ultimate kingdom purposes are being subverted.
- f. The same, then, goes for profit in business: if the focus of a business becomes profit to the exclusion of its larger ends, it has lost its purpose, and business becomes corrupted, quite likely doing more harm than good. By the way, this is not just something that comes from Scripture. The business world itself is talking more and more in this way these days: how profit is not the only bottom line for business, but that the social and environmental bottom lines need to be incorporated as well; with profit being the "oxygen" that enables business to accomplish those goals; B-Corporations have emerged in which their legally enshrined responsibility is not to maximize profit for their shareholders but rather to promote the welfare of all their stakeholders, including their employees and the

communities in which they are located; and just this last year the Business Roundtable, the association of chief executive officers of America's leading companies, issued a statement signed by 181 CEOs redefining the purpose of a corporation along these same lines. Yes, at times this can be a cover for bad business practices, but when a whole sector starts talking this way, you can be pretty sure that there is something real going on as well.

7. So why, then, if business has as its fundamental purpose creating products and services that help society flourish and to provide jobs and meaningful work, and if profit is simply a means to this end although also the source of enjoyment and flourishing as well, why does business as a category and businesspeople as a group generate so many strong emotions and fears to the point that many times business is seen as tainted, corrupt, and equated with evil?
 - a. The easy answer might be that it is because for much of history, businesses and businesspeople have generally not been running their businesses according to these purposes and principles, much the same way one could say that an easy answer for why Christians have generated strong emotions and fears in many places is because they have not lived as Christ would have them live.
 - b. But, I think there is more to it, and it has to do with the fact that business has an inherent enormous power attached to it, and can and does literally determine so much in people's lives and in society as a whole. In fact, business has so much power, that many would see it as being just as powerful, if not more, than government. What is the source of its power?
 - i. The answer is simple: it is the fact that it is the major source of the creation of wealth and material resources and access to these that people need to live and to flourish.
 1. It is business that creates jobs, and that holds the power over them. It holds power, therefore, over lives not only in terms of the pay, but the hours, the benefits, and other things associated with them.
 2. It is business that creates financial and material wealth, through profit, and holds the power over it, and creates this wealth in a way that is not a zero-sum game: it enables, in

the best of situations, for all people to be better off because there is more to go around.

3. It is business that creates products that are seen as key to advancing not only solutions to problems in health and other sectors, but also products that people look to in order to enjoy life more.
 - ii. This gives business its great power:
 1. Governments and governmental representatives tend to be beholden to it because resources are needed to be reelected, the economy tends to play a major role in whether people see the government as legitimate or not, and so on.
 2. And, this wealth can and has been used to buy people off in the justice system, in government, and in other corrupt ways to advance the interests of the few, to create structures that unjust, something that the prophets were constantly and consistently denouncing and speaking up against.
 - iii. In short, because of its enormous power, and the fact that its power has been used so often for corrupt ends at all levels of society, business comes in for special scrutiny and criticism, much in the same way and for the same reasons that government also does because of its enormous power.
8. And, that is why it is so important for all of us to encourage those followers of Christ who have a calling into business, who have special gifts and skills in that area, to see it as a calling into ministry just as any other, no less and no more than any other. We need to encourage youth in entrepreneurial pursuits, and we should be encouraging all those going into business to hold themselves and their businesses accountable to the question: is it serving its purposes? I would dare to say that a calling to business is in fact probably a calling into one of those fields of ministry that Scripture talks about as being subject to more accountability than others: just as teachers are to be judged more strictly in terms of their faithfulness because of the power and influence they hold, so should business, because of the power and influence it holds. As it says in Luke 12: 48: "From

everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.” Business gives much in ways that other callings don’t and therefore falls into this category.

9. So then, to come back to the point with which I started. The exciting news is that the pursuit of business, the enjoyment of being in business, of closing the deal, of creating products and services that bring joy to others, of making money, of providing jobs and meaningful work is not only fully compatible with God’s mission, it is indeed part of God’s mission and ministry through those who claim Christ as their Lord. And, as such, it means that all you do in that ministry needs to be done the way that Christ wants you to do it, to do the good works of business in a way that will give witness and testimony to his Lordship, in a way that brings glory to Him. I am not saying, as with all ministries and vocations, that this is always easy, in fact it is most certainly not. But, as you engage in this calling, and as we who are called to support you in this calling engage with you, it will be important for you to do what 1 Thessalonians 5 urges: pray continuously, test everything and hold on to what is good, and give thanks and glory to God.

10. In conclusion, building on what Bob said last week, reject the culture of profit, even as you give thanks for it and delight in it; embrace the purposes for which business was created as part of your calling into that ministry; pursue the culture of Providence in doing the good works of business and take great joy in them, giving thanks to the Lord and glorifying Him in all you do as you seek to be God’s faithful witnesses in the business world.