

Study 6: Getting on with people at work - Common Grace

Bible passage: Matthew 5:43-48

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. **He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Key idea:

Understanding Common Grace can help us work better with people at work.

We have far more in common with the people we work with than a ‘them v us’ approach may permit. Common Grace can help bridge the gap with our work colleagues who are not Christians, help us get closer to them, and bring other benefits of good relations.

-
1. Where does ‘getting on with other people’ rank in terms of the hardest things at work? [By people, I include, bosses, colleagues, people who work for you, customers, clients, suppliers, etc. For most of us it ranks at or about the hardest thing we do. If it’s not the hardest thing, it’s often the thing that causes the most stress]
 2. Why is it so hard to get on with other people? [Reasons can include bullying, sexism, misunderstandings, irritations, unfairness, selfishness, poor communication, different priorities, indifference, etc.]
 3. What are the benefits of getting on with people at work? [Work is more pleasant. It allows us to have friends at work (see study 8 for the importance of this in conversion at work). It helps with recognition and promotion.]
 4. How might our theology of work help us get on with other people at work? [To start with, we know why we work (its fundamental to how God has made us and his purposes for us). We know we must seek to do

good, work well and care for other people. Having a low view of, or using, other people is not an option for us. We are to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We do that through obedience to God's purposes for our lives which includes seeking the good of other people.]

5. Is there any reason we would not want to get on with people at work? [There is obvious self-interest in getting on with people, as your life is easier and they may help you, rather than resist or fight against you. However, I do not see this as a good reason to not respect and care for other people.]
6. What do you have in common with the people at work? [You have an extraordinary number of things in common with the people you work with, e.g. our humanity, purpose, and finitude (we all make mistakes). We all bear the image of God. We all have a sense of good and bad, truth and lie, even if some people are very good at hiding this. We all have the capacity and need for relationship. We are all sinners.]
7. What do you take from this? [We have a lot in common with everyone at work, even if we have different ways of thinking about God, big questions and the world.]
8. What is good about the people you work with? What good do they do? Do you ever think they work better than you?
9. Where do they say that 'good' comes from?
10. Where do you think it comes from?
11. Read Romans 1:18-20 and 2:14-15. Explore the idea of common grace. ['Common grace' is a term we give to the idea that God shares many things with all people. We live in his world. We all bear his image. He loves us all. He gives us all a sense of good and bad. His rain falls on all of us. The passages from Romans are discussed more in the notes below.]
12. How does this help us think about the people we work with? What does it mean to be 'common'? Why is it 'grace'? [It is underserved. Augustine's response to Pelagius, who thought we could do good on our own, was, 'All good is either God or from God'.]
13. How does the good they do make you feel about the way you work and lead your life? [I often find it a way that God pricks me into being a better witness.]
14. Do the people at work expect more from you because you are a Christian?
15. How do we hold together their 'goodness' and 'truth' and their rejection of God? [We all have some imprint of God in us. The doctrine of sin means

we are never as good as we should be, and the doctrine of grace means non-believers are never as messed-up as they should be, given their worldview.]

16. What practical steps can we take to get on better with people at work? [Simply being nice too people is a great place to start. Say, 'hello'. Don't ignore people who may not be important to you or your job. See the notes on this below.]
17. How does Common Grace help us understand why some people do their jobs better than we do, and display other qualities we value better than we often/sometimes manage (e.g. kindness, generosity, patience, friendship, warmth)? [We can aim for humbler cooperation and respectful differences.]

End of Study

Study notes

Theology

Your theology shapes who you are and the way you do your work. The way you interact with work colleagues will reflect your theology, even if you don't think of yourself as a theologian. 'Theology' is the things you know about God.

Common Grace

I have included the references to Romans 1:18-20 and 2:14-15 for the purpose of showing that we have some biblical basis for thinking about the things Christians share with non-Christians. These passages help us understand better why non-Christians are capable of being truthful, kind, hard working etc. Everyone has an imprint of God on them, and some sense of his 'invisible attributes'. We can all recognise beauty. We all have some sense of right and wrong. God has made and touched us all. However, I suggest you be careful how you use this truth with non-Christians.

Many people will not appreciate being told that they have always been able to see the divine nature and eternal power of God. I was an atheist for the first 30 years of my life, and can say truthfully that, for as long as I can remember, until I was 30 I had no sense of the existence of God. Not when I was dumped at Nowra Anglican Sunday School when I was 4. Not when I was

forced to sit-stand-sit etc through school assemblies. Not when I idled away my time in school scripture classes. And not when we started to discuss the big questions of life in my early teens. The words of Paul in Romans 1 and 2 are true, but I had no sense of God. I genuinely, if mistakenly, believed all matter and life, even beautiful sunsets and perfect waves, were random accidents. So there would have been no point in telling me, 'you must see God's hand in creation', or, 'your sense of good must come from God', or, 'the Bible says you have a sense of God's power and divine nature'. It would have only annoyed and alienated me.

Therefore, until you become friends with people you work with (see notes for study 8), it may be better to act like you believe you have a lot in common with them, and appreciate the good things you see in them. Save the explanation until they are interested in finding out more about Jesus, and the way he made the world and us.

Some implications that Common Grace has for the way we think about other people

Theologically, getting on at work starts with recognising what we have in common. We may say it starts with the command to love our neighbours as ourselves. That is very important. However, if we start with the view that we are the goodies, we are the lovers, and they are the baddies who need us, then that will shape the friendships and other relationships we form.

Love, and an understanding of common grace, allow us to treat all people the same. We show respect through:

- Punctuality - being punctual shows that we value a person because we value the limited time they have in this life. If we keep people waiting for long, we are saying they do not matter to us. (I know some cultures do not share this view of punctuality, and believe 'westerners' are obsessed by time. However, at the least, I suggest we do not assume that our casual approach to punctuality is shared by everyone. I would rather err on the side of cautious respect.)
- Reliability - flakiness is neither a good witness nor a good work habit
- Not gossiping about them (see study 5).

Dealing with conflict:

Conflict at work is a bigger subject that can be dealt with adequately in this study. However, an understanding of common grace can help avoid conflict. At times Christians face persecution at work because of their beliefs, and because they have a strong sense of right and wrong. This persecution can take many forms, from constant ridicule, snide comments, being made to work when you have growth group or church service, or always been made to feel like an outsider. It's easy to say, 'don't rise to the bait' or 'don't let it get to you'. It's much harder to do that consistently. There are, of course, laws against religious persecution, but resort to the law is stressful and often not very satisfactory. Yet we can sometimes find allies within human resources departments, or managers who want to improve the workplace culture or minimise compliance risks. So, resort to complaint processes should not be ignored.

Before we get to formal complaints, two good places to start are:

- Thinking about the things we have in common with all people at work (not matter differences in racial or religious background, politics, sexual preference etc).
- Not being drawn into an 'us v them' view of life at work.

A few others suggestions are:

- Don't pick fights. I have been amazed at how self-righteous, belligerent and thin-skinned some Christians can be.
- Try to avoid fights, and, if conflict is necessary, fight clean.
- Pray for yourself and for God to change the heart and behaviour of those you conflict with.
- Never cease to try to see others as God sees them.
- Ask for your Christian friends or pastor for help.

To this list some people would add, 'winning isn't everything'. That is true, and we can think of teachings, such as being prepared to 'turn the other cheek' (Matthew 5:39), that support this view. However, I would want to urge some balance in this. We need Christians in all lawful workplaces (and Christians to unwind, and rehabilitate those in, unlawful or immoral businesses). This will not happen if Christians are not prepared to stand up to persecution, including low-level discrimination. We can remember the

baptismal prayer to, 'fight bravely under [Christ's] banner against sin, the world and the devil'. We do not want Christians retreating into Christian ghettos. Therefore, we need to learn to deal with conflict. We should stop before reaching a 'win at all costs' position, but survival is the first step towards thriving. We need to be prepared to help each other with the conflicts we face at work.

Be nice to everyone

I can hear some readers saying, 'Argh, do we always have to be nice because we are Christians?' Church history is full of weird, belligerent, combative, Christians, including heroes like Athanasius of Alexandria, and Luther. However, I am not giving them advice on how to get on well at work.

At a fundamental level, we should show kindness and respect to everyone, because of their value to God. Showing respect and kindness to everyone at work is a great way of proclaiming Christ. The person who influenced me most to consider the claims of Jesus was my Christian boss. I knew he was a Christian, because he did work for the church, but he never mentioned Jesus. However, he was kind and respectful to support staff and lowly junior lawyers like me. It was clear he 'marched to the beat of a different drum', and had a certainty of purpose and ethical framework that sustained him to be an outstanding lawyer. Yet, when he came into my office to correct my work, he would ask if he could borrow my pen. He didn't need to ask. He owned the pen! But he still asked. Why? Because God had made him the man he was. Often the first place some people meet God is in the people they work with.

We often are critical of self-interest as a motivating force. Far better to do things out of love. That is true. Yet, being kind and respectful to others brings benefits we may not consider when we are busy, stressed or tired. The person in the next office may end up as the CEO. The junior colleague who irritates you may end up in a significant position at one of your clients. When you have to work late, and there are few junior or support staff about, you will find the ones you have been kind and respectful to, the ones who you have taken the time to find out about them and their families, will be the people who are more willing to help you than people who have ignored them. So, Christian virtues do have their own rewards. Don't despise them.