

1-1-2008

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### **Recommended Citation**

Ramsey, Richard David (2008) "Business Ethics in the Sermon on the Mount," *Leaven*: Vol. 16: Iss. 4, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol16/iss4/7>

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# Business Ethics in the Sermon on the Mount

RICHARD DAVID RAMSEY

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To some, “business ethics” may seem an oxymoron, but for many years the Assembly to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has required ethics instruction in every accredited business curriculum.<sup>1</sup> The College of Business at Southeastern Louisiana University attempts to meet the ethics requirement by spreading ethics instruction into various required courses. In the mid-1980s, in the business communication course, the textbook was replete with references and documentation of every item quoted or paraphrased or in any way used, with one exception. The textbook,<sup>2</sup> while naming and stating the Golden Rule, failed to mention its source, Jesus of Nazareth, who articulated this benchmark of ethics in Matthew 7.12 during the Sermon on the Mount. Later a book representative explained to me that publishers were skittish about citing the Bible this side of 1963,<sup>3</sup> but ironically the non-mention of Matthew 7.12 almost seems like an ethical problem in itself.

Many years have gone by, but the need for ethics in business is more acute than ever. Corporate scandals have rocked the business world. In 2001 I taught a graduate course in international business. Two ironies of the otherwise excellent textbook<sup>4</sup> were unforgettable. First it bore a 2002 publication date and contained a section titled “Postscript 2002” but went to press in August 2001 and thus had nothing to say about the events of September 11, 2001, which have had tumultuous effects on international business. Second the book contained a case study of Enron, which attested admiringly to the company’s success; by the end of 2001, corruption and fraud were causing Enron to unravel, taking down the worldwide public accounting firm Arthur Andersen LLP as well. Similar tragedies occurred with Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Tyco International and WorldCom, among others—including multibillion-dollar federal loans and buyouts for Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, and American International Group. Those observations came to mind when, with great interest, I saw that *Leaven* planned an issue on the Sermon on the Mount, which conveys many principles of ethics. Four of the most poignant of these principles, as direly needed in business today, are in Matthew 5.23–24, 5.37, 6.24 and 7.12.

## **TALK TO PEOPLE, NOT ABOUT THEM**

Matthew 5.23–24 concerns the unacceptability of a gift at the altar if an interpersonal problem exists between the giver and someone else. “First be reconciled,” Jesus says. You do not have to work in a business very

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1. See, e.g., AACSB’s “Ethics Education Resource Center” at [http://aacsb.edu/resource\\_centers/ethicsedu/default.asp](http://aacsb.edu/resource_centers/ethicsedu/default.asp) (accessed June 23, 2008).

2. William C. Himstreet and Wayne M. Baty, *Business Communications*, 8th ed. (Boston: Kent, 1987); the absence of a citation for the Golden Rule has continued in all editions including the present one by current authors Carol M. Lehman and Debbie D. Dufrene, *Business Communication*, 15th ed. (Mason, Ohio: Thomson South-Western, 2008).

3. The year of the U.S. Supreme Court case *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (consolidated with *Murray v. Curlett*), 374 U.S. 203, which effectively banned required Bible reading in tax-supported schools.

4. Charles W. L. Hill, *International Business*, 3rd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2002). “Postscript 2002” appears on pp. P.3-P.16; “Enron International in India,” on pp. 110-113.



long before you witness the grapevine (rumor mill), which can contain everything from the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the painful unvarnished truth, all the way to outright lies and hallucinatory falsehoods. You will also observe that grapevines are easy to plant and nourish and manifest a tendency to circumvent the person they are about, even more so as the malevolent motives and vicious fabrications in the grapevine increase. People are maligned; careers are destroyed; morale goes to pieces; energy which could go into helping the organization meet its objectives instead dissipates into reciprocal backstabbing. If individuals would leave their presumptive gifts before the altar and first be reconciled to their colleagues, the ethical climate of the entire business would improve, as would its productivity. Further, the success of the ethical principle of talking *to* people instead of *about* them necessitates a willingness to listen, and it can be a particular challenge when a subordinate seeks to be reconciled to a superior. Moreover, in communicating about the grievance (often a grudge on one side or other), “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Prov 17.22, KJV), which may be taken to mean that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. “If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil 4.8); so lead off with something commendable. Use positive words (“you’re a person of deep conviction”) for negative concepts (“you’re too set in your ways”). Recommend a more pleasant alternative to the current situation. Emphasize your desire for a bright future relationship.

### **MAKE YOUR WORD AS GOOD AS YOUR BOND**

In Matthew 5.37 Jesus addresses a major problem in business—the need to make only those commitments which you can actually keep, and then fulfill those commitments. It is a need which affects Americans as much as, and perhaps more than, other nationalities, and it plays a definite role in international competitiveness. My wife Birgitta and I have been married “twice,” to each other, in that she and I had one ceremony in Sweden, for her relatives and friends, and a *pro forma* ceremony several months later in America, for mine. For the Swedish wedding, 97 Swedes RSVP-ed yes to the wedding invitations, and fifteen minutes before the ceremony, 97 Swedes were sitting in the pews, including the Swede who had to come one hundred kilometers (sixty miles) on a bicycle because his car had broken down. For the American wedding, 241 Americans committed to attending the ceremony, but just 164 showed up, including a few who had not RSVP-ed. Never mind that a lot of expensive food was never eaten. American culture has come too easily to let its sense of individualism (I-take-care-of-me-while-you-take-care-of-you) and last-minute convenience override the quality of commitment. Without doubt everyone reading this article has been victimized by a circumstance in which someone who could have come through failed to do so. Letting one’s light shine among people (Matt 5.16) has everything to do with reputation, and most of us, after a few inductive experiences, reach hard-to-change deductions about which individuals and organizations to trust and not to trust. The church is an organization, and it is in no way immune to the need for members who say what they will do and who do what they have said. Teamwork in the congregation can happen only if the people on the team say yes or no and stick to it, whether it’s a matter of who is going to do what during the corporate worship or who is going to bring what to a congregational meal.

### **AVOID DILEMMAS IN LOYALTY**

In Matthew 6.24 Jesus provides some useful advice about how to resolve ethical dilemmas in business, particularly those that involve choices between or among people. An ethical dilemma arises when you face a decision and there’s something at least seemingly unethical about every one of the options. If you are Victor Mills (1897–1997) and invent a contraption that will absorb but not leak, do you put disposable diapers on the market and subject the environment to polymers that will not decompose for hundreds of years? Or do you say nothing to your employer (Procter & Gamble) and continue to subject the environment to use of water, electricity and detergent? When faced with an ethical dilemma, most people (and organizations) probably err on the side of convenience, but that route is often blocked when a choice must be made between



or among not things but people. If you have two part-time jobs, and both employers inflexibly tell you to work for them at the same time, you have such an ethical dilemma. Of course, your situation would be easier if the employers stick with their promises about what would be expected of you and respect your decision to adhere to the commitment you first made; if so, go back to the section above on Matthew 5.37. Otherwise, you need a clear understanding of the pecking order—your *priorities*. If you are gnashed between employers, inexorably you will come to love one and hate the other (and naturally the employers will develop reciprocal attitudes toward you). The specific phraseology Jesus uses concerns the dilemma of having to choose between the two options of God and mammon (μαμμ ν α, often “money” in modern translations).<sup>5</sup> You cannot, as Elijah observed, long halt between two incompatible loyalties (1 Kings 18.21). “A double-minded man,” James (1.18) warned, “is unstable in all his ways.” The problem in corporate scandals over the last decade has been ironic: Short-range fixation on making money, especially out of nothing, instead of commitment to everlasting principle, has made scores of crooks (later jailbirds) destitute, along with the investors over whose eyes they pulled the wool, and it put hundreds of thousands of previously well paid and mostly honest employees (eighty-five thousand of them with Enron alone) out of work. If you believe in God, behave as if he is who he says he is. Your earthly employer may not be looking, but your heavenly one is. Without breaching the wall between church and state, aspiring business managers, even those in public institutions, need to know this: If you learn nothing else in the business school, learn to do what is right. If you face an ethical dilemma, know your eternal priority. No amount of formal religion (which the directors of I.G. Farben practiced in abundance while selling Zyklon-B to the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau) can substitute for purity in heart. Outward appearance may impress people, just like downtown Houston’s tall, gleaming Enron building, but if the inside is carrion, then that is what the Lord is going to see (Matt 23.27, 1 Sam 16.7). What you are is what you think in your heart (Prov 23.7).

### DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU

Practice the Golden Rule. It is the benchmark of ethics in business. Although the statement “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” appears explicitly in Matthew 7.12, it actually encapsulates the overall flow of the Judeo-Christian scriptures on interpersonal relationships. The bulk of the Ten Commandments specify Golden Rule behaviors which honor parents, sanctify human life, tell the truth and respect marriage vows and property rights. Leviticus 19.18, described as the “royal law”<sup>6</sup> in the New Testament, admonishes each Israelite to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Proverbs 10.12: “Hatred stirreth up strifes, but love covereth all sins.” Deuteronomy 10.19: “Love ye therefore the stranger; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Small wonder that Jesus—after saying, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—then says, “for this is the law and the prophets.” That’s the King James phraseology, but the emphasis on the verb (εστίν) is unlikely to change if the preference is a modern translation such as the New International Version: “for this *sums up* the law and the prophets” (italics mine). So there you have it—among all the trees of Moses and Elijah and the countless theorists and debaters, one must not lose the forest, which is the Golden Rule. Consider how much more respectable business practitioners would be and how much overhead of statistical tests and other auditing procedures would be rendered unnecessary if business people could universally be depended on to adhere to the Golden Rule.<sup>7</sup> Stated as “Do unto others as you would have them do unto

5. On the basis of Matthew 6.33 and other passages, advocates of “success theology” (such as Joel Osteen in *Your Best Life Now* [Nashville: FaithWords, 2007]) may have some wiggle room, but the essence of that philosophy is to attempt obviation of the dilemma by asserting that serving God puts one on the track to making money.

6. Or “law of the kingdom.” See James 2.8 and discussion in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 1175 (947d), and in *The New Bible Commentary* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1965), 1121.

7. Henry Cloud, in a chapter titled “Forget about Playing Fair,” *9 Things a Leader Must Do: Breaking through to the Next Level* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 85-94, analyzes a distinction between playing fair and playing right. Cloud argues for playing right and avers that playing fair leads to trading “Good for good, bad for bad . . . That’s only fair. *But it will destroy every relationship in life, including your relationship with superiors, colleagues, subordinates, customers, vendors, and so on*” (italics his).

you,” the Golden Rule takes just eleven *words*; by contrast, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002,<sup>8</sup> the U.S. government’s attempt to oblige ethical character into the financial statements of American corporations, has eleven *titles* (major sections). It is one of the most complicated pieces of legislation in the history of the American republic and, in the economies of scale, places a disproportionate burden on small companies which were not the cause of its adoption.<sup>9</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The Sermon on the Mount is timely, relevant, and useful today. Among its many points of advice, consider how much more trustworthy, dependable, and just generally ethical business would be if its practitioners consistently manifested these four principles:

- Talk *to* people, not *about* them (Matt 5.23–24).
- Make your word as good as your bond (Matt 5.37).
- Avoid dilemmas in loyalty (Matt 6.24).
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matt 7.12).

Ethical principles advocated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount generate and enhance mutual respect among all God's children in business.<sup>10</sup>

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8. *Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002*, Public Law 107-204, 116 Statute 745, enacted by Congress and signed by the President on July 30, 2002. See Richard David Ramsey, “Communication, Litigation, and Financial Auditing: Grady Hazel’s Views,” *Business Communication Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (June 2007): 236-240.

9. Lest there be any confusion or naiveté, the prophetic and apostolic writers never condemn anger, an emotion of which even Jesus was capable (Mark 11.12–20). Rather, the sin is in *extended* anger (Eph 4.26). A *grudge* can be held only in defiance of the Golden Rule (Matt 7.12) and is frequently found in conjunction with evasion of the earlier-cited Matthew 5.23–24 principle to talk *to* people instead of *about* them.

10. Ministers who feel a call to use this article in remarks of their own may find the following hymns reinforcing in the order of worship: “Angry Words,” “Be Thou My Vision,” “Did You Think To Pray” (“Ere you left your room this morning”), “If I Have Wounded Any Soul Today,” “Is Thy Heart Right with God,” “Is Your Life a Channel of Blessing?” “Make Me a Channel of Your Peace” (Francis of Assisi), “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee,” “O To Be like Thee,” “Others” (“Lord, help me live from day to day”), “Purer in Heart,” “Take Time To Be Holy,” “We Are Called To Be God’s People” and “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life.”