

My current Facebook status says we're talking about how to turn co-workers into people. Most of us will spend something like 100,000 thousand hours on the job before we die. That's a lot of time with people we didn't choose to be with. Some of them are toxic. Some of them are pushy. Some of them are masters at throwing other co-workers under the bus. Most of them are masters at office politics ... some are vicious competitors. That may not be your experience, but evidently that's a lot of life for a lot of people. Working closely with people can be frustrating. How do you bring Jesus into the mix of your work relationships so that at least *that* part of your work experience is less of a curse and more of a blessing?

Of course, you and I know that the only person we can change is ourselves. So I want to invite you during this message to listen for that one thing you can begin working on in your own life that might make a positive change in the atmosphere at work.

In his book, *The Difference Maker*, John Maxwell talks about how loggers work the logs down a river. When a log jam happens, an experienced logger doesn't immediately get in there and pull one log off another. Instead, he gets out of the river, climbs a tree and from that vantage point looks for the one log that's causing the whole jam. Then he goes in and works on that log. Today, we're talking about workplace relationships from a couple of different angles and I want to ask you to listen for that one thing causing the log jam in your workplace relationships. And these concepts transfer to any relationship so whether you work or not, listen for solutions.

Last week, I asked you to write down on a card one thing you wish your co-workers knew. By far, the most common response had to do with office gossip. You said:

- I wish they would not brown-nose the boss and be overly critical of their co-workers.
- I wish they wouldn't be negative and talk about each other.

- I wish my co-workers would not gossip about everyone at lunch.
- One person took personal responsibility, saying, “*I* need to quit talking about my fellow co-workers.”

So listen to what James says about this. The book of James is a really practical book on living the basics of the Christian life. James must have worked in an office ... because so much of what he says is so relevant to workplace relationships. James says (James 4:11-12) – *Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.* (The word here literally means, “evil speech.” Oswald Chambers defines slander this way: “Slander happens anytime the result of our communication about someone ... truthfully or not ... brings them low in the eyes of another.” Let me say that again. “Slander happens anytime the result of our communication about someone ... truthfully or not ... brings them low in the eyes of another.” So James says, “Do not slander one another.” Do not bring anyone low in the eyes of another. James goes on ...) *Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.*

Now, that’s a sort weird thing to say but there’s a pretty powerful image in there. Basically, what James is saying is that the point of slander is to bring someone else down so you can feel higher than them. Think of it this way: In order to eat, you can either grow your own food (or buy it) or steal it off someone else’s plate. Either way, *you* get what *you* need. But in one of those cases, someone *else* ends up with less.

That’s what slander is. Its stealing off someone else’s plate (taking value from them) so your ego is fed while theirs goes hungry. Some workplace environments are just like that. It’s a

whole bunch of people stealing off each other's plates. So if we're talking about how to bring Christ into the mix of our workplace relationships, here's where we can begin.

James gives us a remedy in chapter 4, verse 12. He says - *12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?* In other words, the only one with a right to judge is God. In your workplace, are you letting God be God, or are *you* playing God? And in any case, how do you break through that culture of back-biting so you begin to affect the atmosphere for good?

Now, let me just say that I can complain about colleagues with the best of them. Just this week, I was wondering aloud about the legality (and *maybe* the morality) of sending a colleague to heaven ... now. I reasoned he'd be happier and so would I! So I get the frustration of having to work with people who aren't easy to work with. But as I've thought about how I can improve my own responses, I've had to remember something I've preached over and over again. Rather than feeling the need to pull others down in order to establish your relevance and value, why not simply let God take care of your reputation? ***He made you ... he knows you ... he loves you ... and he is the only one who actually has power to judge you.*** And if your trust is in Christ, God sees you as a full plate. God sees your value. Turn to your neighbor and say, "I don't have to prove myself, because God says my plate is full."

When I was a kid, I lived within walking distance of a movie theater. I probably watched two or three movies a week, and every time I got popcorn. So now, thirty years later, the movie and popcorn connection in my brain is well established. I can't imagine watching a movie in a theater without popcorn (even if a "small" does cost \$12.50). I have to have it. The point is that our brains create pathways. And it's possible that your brain has created a pathway from

hearing criticism to responding with criticism. But what if you re-routed your thoughts so that every time you heard a critical word, you responded with kindness? Paul teaches this. He says (Romans 12:19-21) - *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath ... "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. (in other words, don't take food off his plate ... put food on it!) In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The Bible gives us permission to kill 'em with kindness. Although actually, in this process, what dies is *us*. Os Hilsman says, "(This) can only happen when we have come to the death of ourselves so that Christ can love through us. It is truly one of those acts of identifying with the cross." Instead of entering into office gossip, slander and criticism, let God take care of your reputation and kill 'em with kindness.

I want to come back to a line we found when we were talking about family relationships. It's that line about becoming courteously reverent. We found it in Ephesians 5:21, in *The Message* version of the Bible. *Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.* We've learned how to be courteously reverent at home. How do we become courteously reverent at work? I think James hits the nail on the head again. He says (James 1:19) - *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*

Can you imagine how the emotional and spiritual atmosphere would change if we all followed just that one verse? Everyone wants to feel like they've been heard. Listening is a great way to apply courteous reverence to a situation. All the leadership material I read teaches that developing the art of listening is a huge asset in leadership. People tend to follow the ones who seem to care. Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. You know, I've discovered

you really can't play online Scrabble and be fully present to someone on the phone at the same time. I'm working on stepping away from my computer when I'm on the phone. The one other thing I'm trying to work on right now is how to listen with empathy. Not listening for truth or for the advice I can give or the quick fix, not waiting for the other person to breathe so I can tell a story that tops theirs, but listening to understand. It comes back to seeing that other person as a person with a full plate ... with value.

I wonder if the people who live inside your 100,000 hours of work would call you courteously reverent? Would they say you're accessible? That you care about them? That you value them? On those cards you gave me last week, some of you wrote things like, "I wish my co-workers would take pride in their work," and "I wish my co-workers appreciated their jobs." These are comments about integrity ... about respecting the office and the people in it. Paul talks about this to the Colossians. He's actually talking to slaves. In Paul's day, the working-class people would basically sell themselves to a household. So the slavery Paul talks about was not usually forced slavery, like the American version. It was a way for a working-class person to get food and shelter. And Paul told them (Colossians 3:21-24) - *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with* (listen to this ... this is how to practice integrity at work) *sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.* (and here's the punch line) *It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

What you do all day every day (whatever you do) ... do you see it as a way to get a paycheck, or a way to serve God? That's the difference between a job and a life. Are you focused on yourself and your needs and getting ahead, or on God?

I want to show you something developed by a guy named Charles Green. Green is all about developing trust in the workplace. And he puts trustworthiness at the center of integrity. And he has developed a trust equation.

$$\text{TQ} = \frac{\text{C} + \text{R} + \text{I}}{\text{S}}$$

He says your trust quotient equals your ability to generate credibility, reliability and intimacy (or transparency) in a relationship. And the “s” stands for self-orientation, which Green says needs to be a lower priority than credibility, reliability and transparency. In other words, the more self-oriented we are, the less credible, the less reliable, the less transparent -- the less trustworthy. In *other* words, if the job is all about the paycheck or getting ahead or taking off other people’s plates so ours is always full, we’re missing the mark.

I tell you ... James really seems to understand this dynamic. He talks about how a misplaced focus can totally change the atmosphere. He says (James 4:1-3) - *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

Do you hear it? Do you hear the danger of too much self-focus? When Paul says that at work we must remember that it is *Christ* we are serving, what he’s really teaching us is how to take our focus off ourselves and place it on the one who loves us most.

It’s been awhile since I’ve reviewed the Opie Principle with you. Opie was our dog for fifteen years. Opie had this habit ... which he didn’t pick up until he got old and senile ... of staring at

me. Whenever I'd sit down to begin writing, he'd come right up next to me and stare. If I sat there for hours, he'd be there the whole time, staring. I must have written a million words in the years I was in seminary and every one of them was written with a dog staring at me. I never had the heart to make him stop, because the more I watched Opie watching me ... the more philosophical I got about it. It seemed like for that little sick dog – when he sat down and trained his eyes on the one who loved him most – life was good again. That's the Opie Principle: Keep your eyes on the one who loves you most.

And that's the key to every relationship, actually; and certainly the key to workplace relationships. Keep your eyes on the One who loves you most.

We've talked about several things. We've talked about valuing other people – not entering into office gossip or taking off someone else's plate to feed our own egos. We've talked about being quick to listen and slow to speak or show anger. We've talked about trust and integrity, and about keeping your focus not so much on yourself but on Christ.

So here's how I want to guide your response today. We're going to hear a song (Empty Me, by Jeremy Camp), and I invite you, as we listen, to consider what one thing you need to focus on and change in your own life so that your relationships at work or at home can improve. Remember the log jam idea – that sometimes it helps to pinpoint where the real issue is, rather than trying to change everything? That's what I hope you'll look for. Climb a tree and look for the one log that's causing the jam in your workplace attitude or maybe in another personal relationship. Once you see it, share your log jam with a couple of folks, and maybe three or four of you can commit to praying for each other this week.