



How to Really Know What Matters in Your Work

By Michael Zigarelli

What matters most is the extent to which you were Christ-like from 9 to 5.

“Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountainside and sat down...and he began to teach them” (Matthew 5:1-2).

If you're like I am, you work for a living. It's not always fun, it's not always meaningful, but most months it pays the bills. Let me ask you to take two minutes and think about this job of yours. Think about the tasks involved, the people with whom you typically associate, the work environment, the product or service you provide. Think about what you like and don't like about it. And think about what you're doing in your work life that matters the most.

That last one is kind of tricky. Many of us can rattle off our daily routine to anyone who asks. And we could talk for days about what we enjoy at work and (especially) what can be improved. But identifying what really matters in our work – what has lasting significance – is another question. A critically important question.

To better answer it, come at this from another angle. This approach has been helpful to a countless number of my undergraduate and MBA students. Fast-forward the tape of your work life to a few years down the road. You're now retiring. There's a dinner to honor you and all the others in your cohort who have earned the gold watch (or pewter plaque, depending on the generosity of your employer). Look around the room. Who's there? Who is speaking with whom? What's the mood in the place? Do people seem to be enjoying themselves? From across the room, a co-worker glances over at you and whispers to a friend. The friend responds with a nod, eye contact and a casual wave. A lot of people are talking about you tonight because this is your night. What are they saying?

The time comes for the obligatory short speeches commemorating, thanking, sometimes roasting the retirees. One by one, employees come to the microphone to share stories and raise a glass. Some stories are funny, some are touching, some seem merely polite. Obviously, there wasn't much to say about that person. Then up steps the person slated to say a few words about you, your career, your contribution...about all you've meant to the organization. What will this person say? What is it about you that will be remembered as significant? What is it about all of those years – about all of that effort – that this person thinks really mattered?

If you would, let that set in for a second. Don't sell yourself short by rushing through this exercise. What's being spotlighted in this short speech? Accomplishments? Securing clients? Work ethic? Your personality? What will stand out when others reflect on the job to which you gave your life?

Now take this scene one last step. Imagine for a moment that the person at the podium is not your co-worker, but Jesus Christ Himself. You didn't know He had a ticket to this shin-dig, but there He is, scars and all. He even managed to somehow get around the jacket-only requirement.

Unlike the other speakers, though, He elects to sit down with the microphone – and right next to you. The room falls strangely

silent – more quiet than it was for the others – as He says your name. A smile comes to his face, a smile of caring, a smile of friendship. He says your name again. “I’m going to tell you good folks what this employee did at work all of these years that really mattered,” He begins.

You listen in awe at what’s chronicled over the next few minutes. Everyone in the room is captivated by just how different this speech is from all the others. What Jesus emphasizes as important is quite unlike what was emphasized by the other speakers. Had you only known Jesus’ opinion about what your goals should be on the job...had you only been able to see what was preventing you from pursuing those goals...had you only heard His words decades ago...

What Matters Most in Your Work?

What matters most in the Christian’s work life is not what matters to the world. It’s not the size of the paycheck, the impressiveness of the business card, the prestige, or the number of battles won. It’s not even your productivity or the quality of your work, although hard work is certainly a worthy pursuit. Instead, when it comes to your job, what matters most to the Man with the microphone is the extent to which you were Christ-like from 9 to 5.

Stop the presses! This is a revelation, right?

Hardly. Many of us Christians know this implicitly. We hear it pretty regularly from the pulpit. Problem is, our thinking gets transformed from Sunday to Monday. Invisible but powerful workplace realities create obstacles to Christ-likeness on the job. Some are work environment realities, some are innate to our nature, but all of them relegate God’s priorities to the back seat. By Tuesday, they may fade from the rear-view mirror entirely.

From what I’ve seen, that’s a source of continuing frustration for many Christians. We struggle with it. We feel guilty about it. We may even recommit for awhile to doing things differently on the job. Somehow, though, many of us backslide into this traditional mind-set about how we should think and act in the workplace.

Perhaps you too have had some personal experience with this. Perhaps you’ve made some effort to apply your faith in the workplace, only to be repeatedly discouraged by the results. Perhaps you’ve even reached the point of concluding that real, enduring change is hopeless for you. It’s not. It’s just a matter of seeing more clearly – maybe for the first time in your life – the many obstacles that have prevented you from modeling Christ on a daily basis. And then it’s a matter of cooperating with God to defeat them.

What’s keeping you from being more Christ-like in your job and in your career? What are the barriers that have always stood in your way? And how can you overcome them to pursue what really matters at work? These are questions worth exploring long before your retirement dinner.

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