

I hope you're very well. We often use the phrase "How are you doing?" as a greeting, but in this editorial I want to take it as a question; a question about our spiritual lives. Civil servants are familiar with performance appraisal – each year, line managers give a comprehensive written assessment of how each of their staff has performed over the previous 12 months. So far as the Christian life is concerned, occasional reflection on how we're getting on can be a worthwhile exercise. Indeed, the scriptures encourage self-examination (see e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:28), with a view to corrective action where necessary.

At the outset, it is worth re-iterating that acceptance before God is *not* based on any efforts of our own, but solely on the finished work of Christ upon the cross (see e.g. Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 10:10).

Over the decades that I was in the NICS, the forms used for annual appraisal were changed several times. Being something of a hoarder, I still have copies of my annual reports back to the 1980s. The headings under which staff were assessed in those days would still be applicable today, and I've decided to use many of them in this article.

Conduct

This may seem rather basic, but there are certain standards of behaviour to which civil servants are expected to adhere. Similarly for Christians! Here's what Paul tells Timothy (a young man) in 1 Timothy 4:12: "be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (NKJV). Peter writes, "as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15, NKJV). Elsewhere in his first epistle he refers to chaste conduct (3:2) and to good conduct (3:16). In verse 1 of chapter 3, he writes that an unbelieving husband may be won over by the behaviour of his wife.

Communication

This is something we are doing all the time, both verbally and non-verbally. Non-verbal communication can be subconscious, but it makes a strong impression. Consider this: Paul likens the Corinthian believers to a letter known and read by everyone (2 Corinthians 3:2-3). And what of our verbal communication? The Lord Jesus taught that what comes out of our lips is an

indication of what is in our hearts (see Matthew 12:34-35). James has many observations about the tongue, and the damage it can do. He also warns of inconsistency: “Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be” (James 3:10). Here’s Paul on the subject: “Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Colossians 4:6).

Work Activity

In Colossians 3:24, Paul tells Christian employees (in fact, slaves) that – in their secular duties – they “serve the Lord Christ”. If we all realised this, it might change our attitude to our jobs. In particular, it should motivate us to give our best. Verse 22 refers to “singleness of heart”, and verse 23 says, “whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord”. Of course, work in the Christian life is by no means restricted to secular employment. It is crucial that we grasp that we have been “bought with a price” and are Christ’s servants (1 Corinthians 7:22-23). Servants are expected to work. Whether in a church, CSCU, or other Christian setting, there is always plenty to be done ... and sometimes there aren’t enough people willing to do it.

Ephesians 2 teaches that those who have been saved by grace, through faith (v.8) should be doing good works, which God has prepared for us to do (v.10). Titus 2:14 describes God’s redeemed, purified, people as “zealous of good works”. These scriptures should challenge all of us.

Some members of the public have the erroneous impression that work in the civil service is easy, with light workloads and long tea breaks. I hope we don’t think that Christian service should be like that. In fact, the word ‘labour’ is often used in the New Testament (see, e.g., Romans 16:12). The Greek word implies ‘toil resulting in weariness’. There will be a recompense: “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour” (1 Corinthians 3:8).

Application of knowledge and skills

The operative word in this heading is ‘application’. An impressive store of knowledge or a wealth of skills are very valuable assets, but useless unless applied. I reckon that most readers of this magazine have at least a reasonable knowledge of the word of God. The question is, how well are we applying that knowledge? In the upper room, after teaching the disciples that they ought to wash one another’s feet, the Lord Jesus said, “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17).

I suppose the biblical equivalent of skills is ‘gift’. Romans 12 teaches that there are many different gifts, and the implication of the passage (see v. 6 in

particular) is that each individual believer has at least one. The point is that these gifts are to be exercised, for the benefit of others in the body of Christ. I could neglect my gift (1 Timothy 4:14); but instead, I should make use of it. Timothy was later exhorted to “stir up” (rekindle, or keep in full flame) the gift he had (2 Timothy 1:6).

Working relationships

The importance of good working relationships should be obvious. But sometimes the reality is different. Paul’s epistle to the Philippians comes to mind. In chapter 4, he has to beseech Euodias and Syntyche to “be of the same mind in the Lord” (v.2). Earlier, in chapter 2 of the letter, he has already written about the need for like-mindedness (verses 1-4). This would be the outcome of a Christ-like attitude. There follows the famous passage: “Christ Jesus … made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant… he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (verses 5-8).

In conclusion

May we each hear the Lord say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).