

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church,  
Springfield, Virginia, on Sunday, October 23, 1993,  
by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D. D.

**PROVERBS 16:3**

"Commit your work to the Lord, then it will succeed."  
(Living Bible)

**PEARLS FROM THE PROVERBS**  
**(8) How to Succeed at Work**

You're going to spend about 150,000 hours of your life working. That's about 40% of your waking hours. However, if you're a mother of preschoolers that's 100% of your waking hours! A Harris Survey found that in 1973 the average American spent 40 hours a week at work. If you are a professional, you work an average of 52 hours a week, and if you're a small business owner, you work an average of 57 hours a week. The fact is -- you'll spend more time working, and commuting to work, and thinking about work than you will eating, playing on week-ends, and vacationing combined. Work dominates our lives.

What does God have to say about that? God says that He wants you to succeed at work. Proverbs 16:3 (LB) says, "Commit your work to the Lord, then it will succeed." There is a tremendous promise and guarantee in that verse. Now, with every promise there is a condition. God says, "Commit your work to the Lord, then it will succeed."

So the question becomes: "What does it mean to commit my work to the Lord? I want to succeed. Don't you? How do I commit my work to the Lord. Proverbs says there are four characteristics that will ensure your success at work.

**(1) You SEEK God's direction.**

Proverbs 15:8 (GN) says, "The Lord is pleased when good men (what?) PRAY." Circle the word "pray."

Proverbs 16:20 (NAB) says, "He who PLANS a thing will be successful." Circle the word "plan."

Now these two things go together: praying and planning. It's a major theme of Proverbs -- the planned life. If a football team wants to score a touchdown it must have a game plan. And what Solomon is saying here is that it takes more than hard work to succeed. I have known lots of people who worked hard and were going nowhere fast. Along with hard work it takes prayer and planning.

Seek God's direction. You say, "God, what do You want me to do with my life? What career opportunities do You want to

provide for me?" I often tell young people to learn from the mistake I made as a teenager. From the time I was a little boy I had an intense desire to become a doctor. But although I had become a Christian at an early age, I had never really asked God what *He* wanted me to do with my life. I was accepted into medical school, and then, just two weeks before I was to begin my studies there, an amazing providential circumstance took place that changed my whole focus. God said to me in the inmost recesses of my soul: "You want to be a surgeon, but do you realize that you have never asked Me what I want you to be? I don't want you to be a doctor at all; I want you to be a minister." And it almost tore me apart. But I thank God that He gave me the grace and the wisdom to do what He told me to do, rather than mess up my life by living in constant disobedience to His will. And that is why I often say that I was dragged, kicking and screaming, into the ministry. But looking back over more than half a century, it has been a life of wonderful fulfillment, because nothing but blessing can come from obeying the Lord.

So I plead with you young folks; ask God what He wants you to do with your life, and He will tell you very clearly what His game plan is for you. Guidance may come from His Word itself, or from Christian friends, or from providential circumstances, or from persistent prayer. Just be able to say with the Apostle Paul, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19).

Proverbs 13:16 (LB) says, "A wise man thinks ahead; a fool doesn't, and even brags about it!" Solomon is saying, "Through prayer and planning, set your career goals." The planned, thought-out life is the way you get things done. Just think ahead. The fact is that successful people think farther ahead than do unsuccessful folk. Seek God's direction through prayer and careful planning. Ask this question -- "God, where do You want me to be in fifteen years?" Ask yourself this question -- "Where and what do I want to be in fifteen years?" And write it down. That's the first step in succeeding in your career: you seek God's direction.

**(2) You SHARPEN your skills.** You develop the talents and abilities God has given you. We never stop learning, do we?

Look at Ecclesiastes 10:10: "If your ax is dull, and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success." What does it say will bring success? -- "Skill." We should work smarter, not harder. If I have a dull ax, and I'm chopping wood, it's going to take a lot more energy. So develop your skills.

Now this is taught all through the Bible. The cream rises to the top. You look at people like Joseph or David or Daniel. They were men who sharpened their skills, and in the midst of bad circumstances, they rose to the top. Are you more valuable to your business today than you were a year ago? You become

more valuable by continually learning. All leaders are learners, and the moment you stop learning, you stop leading.

Some people say, "Well, thank goodness, I finished my education when I got out of school." Who are you kidding? All leaders are learners; and you read, you study, and you ask questions, and in these ways you develop. Benjamin Disraeli, the famous British statesman of the 19th century, used to say that the person who has the most information is the one who succeeds. And what you don't know, you can learn.

Now, how do you sharpen your skills? There are 3 ways to do this:

(a) **By trial and error.** That is the hard way. You learn through experience in the school of hard knocks.

(b) **By learning from other people.** It's wise to learn from your own experience, but it's wiser still to learn from the experience of others. I don't have time to make all the mistakes myself; life is too short. So I learn from other people, from their achievements, their insights, and their mistakes.

Proverbs 15:22 (GN) says, "Get all the advice you can, and you will succeed; without it you will fail." Talk to people who are doing what you want to do. Ask them what works and what doesn't work. And you build a network of advisers. Christians, of all people, ought to be the most skilled folk in the work place.

(c) **By studying the Bible.** Read the owner's manual! In these pages are answers to all of life's basic concerns. We can learn much by studying biblical characters and how they coped with life -- how they learned from their own experience, from their temptations and sins, from their enemies, and from their friends. Above all, from the Bible we can gain godly wisdom and a godly perspective on life, so that we are in a much better condition to learn than are ungodly folk who have no such spiritual resources from which to draw.

What does it mean to commit my work to God -- because if I do that, I'm going to succeed? It means that I seek His guidance and direction. "Lord, what do You want me to do with my life?" And then I'm continually sharpening my skills for the glory of God. I want to do a better job at my work this coming week than I did last week -- always developing, always improving.

(3) **You SHARE the profit.** When I commit my work to the Lord, it means tithing part of that income back to Him.

Notice Proverbs 3:9-10 (LB), "Honor the Lord by giving Him the first part of all your income, and He will fill your barns with wheat and barley to overflowing." *Note the premise and*

*the promise.* The premise is that you honor the Lord with the first part of what you earn, and the promise is that He will bless your life.

I saw a bumper sticker once that said, "God is my business Partner," and I wondered what percentage of the profits his Partner was receiving!

What do these men have in common? -- William Colgate, founder of the Colgate-Palmolive Corporation; Henry Crowell, founder of the Quaker Oats Company; William Proctor, founder of Proctor and Gamble; R. G. Letourneau, founder of the Letourneau Corporation that makes almost all of the heavy earth-moving equipment; Wallace Johnston, founder of Holiday Inns; Robert Welch, founder of Welch Grape Juice Corporation; John D. Rockefeller, Sr. of Standard Oil; and J. C. Penney. Do you know what they all had in common? All of them have published testimonies of how tithing was the difference in their business. From the very beginning of their business life they made a commitment to tithe. Many of them, like Letourneau and Penney, as they prospered, increased the percentage until they were giving at least 90% before they died. They made God their senior business Partner.

I read about a young man who began a small cheese business in Chicago. He failed miserably and went deep into debt. A friend told him, "The problem is, you didn't commit your business to God, and you haven't asked for His help." The young man said, "If God wants to run my cheese business, then I'm going to commit myself to Him completely and ask Him to direct me in all I do; I'll work with Him and for Him and share the profits." From that moment on, God became the senior Partner in his business. He got out of debt; his business prospered and became the largest cheese company in the world. That young man's name was J. L. Kraft.

Is God your Partner? Have you committed your work to Him? You're going to spend half of your life working, and if God is not involved in your work, then He is not involved in your life. So you seek God's direction, and you continually sharpen your skills to be the best you can, and you share the profits, and then

**(4) You STAY with it.** People who succeed don't know how to quit; they just keep on keeping on. Persistence is a major theme of Proverbs. If you've been reading through the book as we have studied it during the past eight weeks, you know that there is a fellow who keeps popping up who is called the "sluggard." He's the lazy guy! And we read that "the lazy fellow does this...while the diligent, persevering man does this..." Persistence, diligence, determination, tenacity, endurance -- these are qualities which Proverbs says are ingredients to success in your work -- just the ability to keep on keeping on and to be a hard worker.

Look at this verse -- Proverbs 12:24 (NEB) -- "Diligence brings a man to power." That just means that persistence pays off, that you conquer by continuing. Do you know how you become a success? You simply outlast your critics! They say that a mighty oak tree is just a little nut that refused to give its ground.

Persistence, diligence, brings a man to power. The Duke of Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, was once asked, "How is it that the British army is so successful?" He said, "It's because we have been trained to always fight for five minutes longer than the enemy."

The fact is, most people give up too soon. Successful people always stay the course. Proverbs 21:5 (LB) says, "Steady plodding brings prosperity." Somebody asked William Carey, the celebrated missionary to India, "What is the secret of your success?" He said, "I am a plodder." Do you know how to do that? You don't have to be a genius with an IQ of 160 to succeed in life. You just have to be persistent -- working, plodding, persevering, with a tenacious, determined attitude.

I have memorized only one of Winston Churchill's wartime speeches. It is the one he delivered to the students at Harrow, his old school, and it was given at one of the darkest hours of World War II, when Hitler's panzers had done an end run round the Maginot Line, coursing down through Holland and Belgium into France, and to the shores of Normandy, where they were poised for a swift invasion of Britain. After being introduced by the Headmaster, Churchill stood up, squared his shoulders, and said: "Gentlemen, never-never-never-never-NEVER give up!" And he sat down amid tumultuous applause as they rose and cheered him to the echo.

In October 21, 1879, after expending more than \$40,000 in over 700 fruitless experiments, Thomas Edison finally succeeded in making the first incandescent light bulb. Somebody said, "What a waste of time and money -- 700 failures." Edison said, "No, it wasn't a waste. I now know 700 things that won't work! Don't call it a failure; call it an education!"

So Proverbs says, "Steady plodding brings prosperity. Hang in there! There's no shortcut to success." Do you know that the average length of time a person spends with a company before he or she becomes chief executive officer is seventeen years. Twenty-four percent of all CEOs have never worked for anybody else but the company they now head. So stay with it. In most instances you don't succeed by jumping around from job to job. You get in there and say, "God, what do You want me to do?" You discover God's plan for your life, you start developing your skills, you tithe your income, and you stay with it.

Now, what keeps you from giving up? Everybody feels like giving up at one time or another. We get discouraged and frustrated with our job. You say, "I don't like my job; I'm ready to chuck it." Well, before you do, you ought to understand

motivation. There are three types of motivation. You are motivated to work for one or more of three reasons:

(1) There is **external motivation**: "I work to get a pay check. I can win a trip to Hawaii." Many people work only because of external motivation.

(2) There is **internal motivation**: "I work because it feels good. I work because it brings satisfaction, because it raises my self-esteem." And these are commendable motivations.

(3) But these external and internal motivations will not carry you through the crisis experiences. Proverbs says you need a third kind of motivation -- **eternal motivation**. You ought to be eternally motivated to do the work that you're called to do, be you a taxi driver, or a salesman, or a manager, or a doctor, or a secretary, or a wife and mother at home with children. You need eternal motivation to keep you going.

That means that you're working for the Lord. Look at these verses -- Colossians 3:23-24 (GN) -- "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for men. Remember that the Lord will reward you...for Christ is the real Master you serve." We all need to memorize those verses and say, "Yes, I've got a boss, but that's not my real boss. My real boss is Jesus Christ." Always remember that you're working for the Lord, and work as if He is your Boss. And He will reward you.

I remember hearing years ago back in Britain about a young girl who worked in the Cadbury chocolate factory in Birmingham, England. She had a horrible boss, an impossible woman whom nobody could please. She had been given the nickname "The Cat" because she was always sticking her claws in those who worked under her supervision. Well, this girl got converted, and sometime afterwards, someone who knew her situation in the factory said to her, "How are you getting on with 'The Cat'?" How can you put up with her?" And the girl replied with a smile, "Oh, her treatment doesn't really bother me any more. You see, since I became a Christian, I'm now making chocolates for God!" That girl had learned a lot in a short time about the grace of God.

So you stop worrying unduly about promotions. In the forefront of your thinking is this: "What does God think of my work?" And you realize that He is watching, and He is your Master, and if you are faithful, He is going to reward you. You say, "Pastor, do you mean that the work I do in my office -- God is going to reward me for that?" Yes, if you do it faithfully and with the right attitude -- if you do it "as unto the Lord."

So, to Christians, I say this: Part of your testimony is how you work, and Christians ought to be the most dedicated and skilled workers in our society. It's a poor testimony to be

lazy, or to do sloppy work. We should do our very best with the help God provides.

Have you committed your work to God? Do you want to be successful in God's eyes? Commit your work to the Lord; then it will succeed.

How do you do it? You seek God's guidance through prayer and planning, you sharpen your skills on a regular basis, you share the profits through tithing, and you never give up.

Some of you may be tired and frustrated. You say, "I'm ready to give up." I just want to remind you that perhaps most people do not want you to succeed! Did you ever realize that? The devil certainly does not want you to succeed! And there are very few people who want you to succeed. In fact, if you *don't* succeed, if you fail, then they'll condemn you. If you *do* succeed, they'll be jealous. If you're mediocre, then you'll be accepted by most people. God keep us for wanting to be acceptable and mediocre!

Let me close by reading this poem to you:

I want to let go, but I won't let go;  
There are battles to fight  
By day and by night,  
For God and the right, and I'll never let go.

I want to let go, but I won't let go;  
I'm sick, 'tis true, and worried and blue,  
And worn through and through  
But I won't let go.

I want to let go, but I won't let go;  
I will never yield. What? lie down on the field  
And surrender my shield? No!  
I'll never let go.

I want to let go, but I won't let go;  
May this be my song to the legions of wrong...  
'Oh God keep me strong!'  
That I'll never let go.

What are you tempted to give up on this morning? Your work, your marriage, your children, your family, your education, your finances? You say, "Pastor, I want to let go!" Just Remember this: Successful people do not quit. It is diligence that brings a man or a woman to power.

Amen.