

Best Practices

Firstfruits

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Stewart explains how he uses the biblical principle of firstfruits to integrate faith and learning in his financial management class.

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”
Mark 12:28-31

Abstract

This paper describes a pedagogical approach that I use on the first day of my financial management class to achieve three goals related to faith and learning. These goals are: 1) to communicate my belief that learning about business is a method of worshipping God by growing the talents He has blessed us with and gaining a better understanding of His creation; 2) to stimulate student thought with respect to the biblical principle of firstfruits (that is, offering the first and best of all that we have and are to the

Lord); and 3) to illustrate these beliefs in my own life by offering the first part of the semester to the Lord and seeking His blessing on our work and interaction together. Commentary about the impact of this approach on my teaching style throughout the semester is also provided.

Introduction

I often hear instructors at Christian universities comment on the difficulty of integrating faith issues in courses dealing with topics such as finance, accounting, or statistics, where a large portion of the content

is focused on learning rules, processes, and mathematical relationships. I have struggled with this difficulty throughout my career while teaching finance. My original response to this difficulty was to interject faith-related issues tangentially throughout the semester. This approach was rather awkward and not truly integrated. Over time my perspective and approach to this issue have changed, and I believe that the result is a more seamless integration of faith and learning.

One of the primary ingredients of this approach occurs in the first 20-30 minutes of the semester when I describe my philosophy of the relationship between faith and learning. This paper describes the pedagogical approach I implement during the first part of the first class period. My primary goals for students during this lesson are: 1) to communicate my belief that learning about business is a method of worshipping God by growing the talents He has blessed us with and improving our understanding of His creation; 2) to encourage them to reflect upon the biblical principle of firstfruits, that is, offering the first and best of all that we have

and are to the Lord; and 3) to illustrate these beliefs in my own actions by offering the first part of the semester to the Lord and seeking His blessing on our work and interaction together. The description of this lecture is followed by some of my reflections on the usefulness and benefits of this approach

First Things First

As a Christian business professor, I am constantly reminding my students to keep first things first. Usually the lessons relate to financial management — “Capital is scarce so it should be directed toward the best opportunities first.” At times the lessons relate to time management — “Sure, being the PlayStation champion in your dorm is great right now, but it is hard to make a career out of it.” At other times the lessons are spiritual in nature.

There are many aspects of the Bible that remind Christians to structure their lives in a way that puts God first. The words of Jesus in Mark 12 are one of the most direct reminders that we are to love God with all of our being. This quote from Deuteronomy was probably quite familiar to Jesus’ audience. Furthermore, this is not the only place in

Scripture where the theme of putting God first is emphasized. Exodus 23:19 says, “Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God.” Many other Old Testament passages reiterate that the first and best of the Israelites’ crops, flocks, and herds belonged to the Lord.² Proverbs 3:9 provides a reminder to “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops.” Offering the first and best parts of the resources we have received serves as an indication of our willingness to give everything to the Lord. It also serves as an indication of our thankfulness for those resources. Seeking the Lord’s blessing at the beginning of a venture indicates our reliance on Him and demonstrates our belief that successful completion of that venture is dependent upon His blessing. I think that it is valuable and thought-provoking to point out that the concept of Christian stewardship can encompass and in some areas surpass the level of commitment that the firstfruits commands required of the Israelites. However, the spirit and attitude that God seeks is the same for both of them. He is calling us to demonstrate our reliance on him and our willingness to dedicate all

of our blessings and talents to him.

Often the temptation is to only relate these verses on firstfruits and stewardship to our financial resources. Sometimes the concept is expanded to include other tangible assets. However, a deeper consideration of Mark 12:28-31 makes it clear that there should be no limits to what we are willing to offer to God.³ Optimally, these verses indicate that everything we do should be motivated by our love for God. McNamara (1999, p. 6-7) emphasizes this broader view by stating:

The stewardship ideal urges each Christian disciple to acknowledge what he or she has received by being ready to return these gifts to God through Jesus Christ. Return is expressed in willingness to use one’s time, talent, and treasure to advance the Kingdom of God as expressed in the mission of the church to which the believer belongs.

This desire to glorify God with all that we have and are should impact the methods and motivation of our teaching. It should also impact the methods and motivation of our students’ learning. The question is, how do

I change my students' paradigms for learning? They registered for a finance class and may not have any interest in changing the way they think about learning. How do we start to make that change?

By keeping first things first.

To illustrate these concepts to my students, I begin the first class of the semester by reading Mark 12:28-31. Before I take roll or pass out the syllabus, I attempt to impress on them what I believe to be of first importance and how that is going to influence the way we interact in this class. I let

them know that I believe that there are many good reasons to learn about

financial management. They are aware of several reasons already. Many of them are pursuing a college education in business so they will be able to secure a job that allows them to provide for themselves and their family. This is a practical and important reason for earning an education, but in some cases it may lack the spiritual focus to which Mark 12:28-31 calls Christians. How is our motivation any different from that of those who are not Christians? I answer this question by pointing out three reasons for

learning that they may not have considered before.

First, I believe that business in general, and specifically the world financial system, was put in place by God to allow us to function more efficiently and effectively. The very nature of the universe rewards cooperation. Ecclesiastes 4:12 emphasizes this basic truth when it says, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." The framework of developed markets, institutions, and financial systems allows individuals to cooperate,

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specialize, and allocate resources in a way that is not possible in less-developed

systems. Most Americans do not grow their own food, sew their own clothes, or build their own homes unless they choose to do so. These are fundamental activities for living. This system that we function in is a blessing that many people in the world, both historically and presently, have not had access to. One way to demonstrate our thankfulness for this system is to learn more about how it works and then glorify God with the talents and resources He has blessed us with. Furthermore, since God has put

this system in place, I believe that understanding it within the context of His Word allows us to lead a more balanced and higher quality life with respect to the things that matter to Him.

Second, I point out that one of the main reasons that Christians work is to share with others. Hebrews 13:16 calls us to "not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." With a goal of giving and sharing in mind, it follows that if we understand business well, we will be more likely to reap the benefits of this knowledge. The more success we have in the area of business, the more time, money, and other resources we will have available to share with others. I remind students that the knowledge and skills that they are going to obtain from their undergraduate education are likely to provide them with significant resources over the course of their lives. Many of those resources will be financial in nature, but that is not the only gift they will be blessed with. They will have to decide how they are going to spend their time, words, influence, and effort each day. Many of them will be blessed in ways that will provide them with the time and ability to

visit people who are sick or lonely, volunteer at a local school, participate in a medical mission, or take part in a number of other positive activities. My hope is that they will seek to do this in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. Throughout the semester I periodically reiterate the idea of sharing what they have with others as an offering to God, who has blessed them with those resources.

Third, I encourage them to be good stewards of the blessings that God has bestowed upon them. I want to instill in my students a desire to learn that is motivated by an attitude of thankfulness for our abilities and resources. The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) provides the motivation for this point. This parable clearly encourages us to grow the blessings God has given to us. It also expresses God's disdain for those who are not faithful with their blessings. I point out that as women and men who have the opportunity to study business at a private university in the United States, they have clearly been blessed with gifts and talents that many people in the world do not have. One way to be good stewards of and show our thankfulness for these blessings

is to do our best to grow them. Throughout the semester I attempt to reiterate this point by encouraging them to grow their mental abilities by learning more about finance in this system that God has established for us to work within.

Finally, I attempt to take this concept beyond words and into action. I illustrate these thoughts by applying this thinking to my own job. As I conclude this initial lesson, I tell them that I feel that it is important for us to begin the semester with a prayer in order to seek the Lord's blessing on our work together. I want them to think of this as us offering the first part of the semester to God. During this prayer I lead the group in showing our thankfulness for all the Lord has blessed us with. I also ask Him to take my limited ability as an instructor and combine it with the ability of my students to create something greater than would be possible without Him. I ask Him to bless us with thankful and giving hearts. I ask Him to give us an attitude that is consistent with Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 3:23 so that whatever we do, we will work at it with all our heart as we were working for God and not men.

My experience with this approach has been a positive

one. I have always felt that the Lord has been faithful to bless our work together. I attempt to remind the students of this periodically throughout the semester by, at the end of each class period, offering a thankful prayer to God for His faithfulness. My intention in the short-run is to give the students a chance to look back and remember where we started and reflect on how far we have come. In the long run, I hope that it trains them to look back periodically over the course of their lives and reflect on how they have been blessed along the way, thereby moving forward with a stronger spirit of gratitude and determination to grow their abilities, share what they can, and glorify the Lord in all that they do.

Conclusion

This paper summarizes the process and thoughts behind a pedagogical approach that I use in my financial management courses. As of this writing, I have used this method eight times in the course of two years. My experience is that it has been a very effective and positive starting point for the semester. Twenty minutes after class has begun, my students are aware

that I believe that Christianity is not something to be packed in on top of the rest of our lives, but rather something that permeates everything we do, including teaching and learning.

Many students have responded positively to this approach in their evaluations of my courses. I feel like this approach has greatly improved the integration of faith and learning in my classes in three ways. First, it starts the semester off on the right foot by seeking the Lord's blessing on our work. Second, it helps me quickly establish in my students' minds an expectation that we will consider faith issues along with financial management topics throughout the semester. Third, it provides a foundation for me to build upon with respect to faith issues in business during future class periods.

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ENDNOTES

¹The author would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of John Neill.

²See Exodus 23:14-19; Exodus 34:22-26; Leviticus 2:12-16; Leviticus 23:9-22; Numbers 18:8-32; Numbers 28:26-31;

Deuteronomy 18:1-8; and Deuteronomy 26:1-15 for additional examples regarding the requirements and uses of firstfruits offerings. ³Miller (1991) provides a more detailed consideration of the concept of firstfruits and how it can be applied to the life of a Christian.

REFERENCES

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