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Gleanings

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Rationalized Disobedience

Early in 1931 the financial officer for RGL, Inc. reported the results of the previous year to the owner and key managers of the company. The report was glowing—record revenue and a 30 percent profit margin. Robert, the owner, was already very proud of his company and the report emboldened his attitude to the point of hubris.

RGL was a site work contractor, whose future looked bright. The hard work of the past few years was beginning to pay off. The company had already inked two large contracts for 1931, which were forecast to triple the profit performance of the previous year. Despite the depression, business was looking terrific.

As Robert reflected on the financial blessings that his company had enjoyed, he wanted to acknowledge the Lord's hand of favor by obeying the biblical mandate of Proverbs 3:9–10:

Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. (NIV)

As a means to obey this mandate, Robert believed in tithing. So he considered options. For example, should he tithe to his church or his favorite missions program or to something or someone else? Perhaps he should spread the tithe among a number of worthy causes. Then an idea hit him. Given the prospects for the coming year, why not invest the tithe in his own business? Then next year, he would have a much greater tithe, which could bless more people and organizations. The plan sounded good to Robert, so he decided to do just that—but he didn't bother to ask the Lord.

RGL's first project in 1931 was a subcontract from General Construction Company to build a six-mile-long road from the construction site for the new Boulder Dam to the nascent Boulder City.

During the early part of the twentieth century, the southwestern region of the United States was arid and desolate. The fourteen-hundred-mile Colorado River was an untapped source of water and energy that could bring life to this region. For nearly thirty years, government officials had pondered how to best utilize the Colorado River. Finally in the late 1920s, the federal government approved a project to realize the potential of the river. Part of this project was a dam to be built near Las Vegas.

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The dam location was isolated; the closest housing was thirty miles away in Las Vegas, which was very inconvenient. So the government authorized the construction of Boulder City to provide housing for the workers. Despite Boulder City's close proximity to the dam construction site, there were still six miles of inhospitable terrain to traverse to transport men, material, and equipment to the construction site.

Work on the dam began in May of 1931, which meant RGL had less than five months to build the six-mile road. At a rate of slightly more than one mile per month, the project did not seem daunting even with the equipment limitations of the day. Furthermore, before RGL had submitted its bid, the company had carefully studied the proposed route and even conducted test bores to ascertain subsoil conditions. The preliminary assessment led the company to believe that its bid, including the construction time frame, was appropriate.

Not long after starting the work, the company encountered unexpected subsurface rock formations. In fact, these formations were the hardest the company has ever encountered on any project. These rock formations had to be penetrated to complete the road as planned.

Committed to completing its projects on time, the company mustered all resources to attack these hidden rock formations. Using explosives, massive manpower, and heavy equipment, the company slowly carved out the road. The company met the May deadline, but at a heavy price. The cost far exceeded the bid price. Upon completion of the project, RGL was virtually bankrupt.

Robert pondered why this had happened. After all, he had carefully assessed this project before submitting his bid. But for some reason, his engineers had totally missed the hidden rock formations. Every test bore they made was in soft rock; not one test bore detected the hidden hard rock formations. Was this just bad luck or misfortune, as we are prone to say?

Deep down Robert was convicted that his situation was not the result of bad luck or misfortune. He acknowledged to his key people that he knew the reason for this predicament. The reason was his own presumption. He knew the principle of honoring God with the firstfruits of his labor, but had rationalized a way to disobey this mandate. He also knew that his disobedience sowed the seeds of judgment. In this case the judgment came in the form of financial disaster.

Sin always extracts a price and frequently our sin impacts others. In this case, Robert's presumption put his company at risk to fail, which threatened to leave hundreds of his workers unemployed during a time of severe economic depression. Now not only would Robert pay the price for his sin of presumption, but also his workers and their families.

Robert learned his lesson. Never again would he presume to countermand Scripture. He understood that his ability and opportunity to profitably work were gifts from God. Hence, any and all success that he enjoyed was due to God's benevolence. How presumptuous to think that he could have any success in life apart from God!

This experience reshaped Robert's life. He went on to build a world-class manufacturing company that practiced biblical principles. In the process he became a world-class giver who eventually gave away 90 percent of his income and lived on the remaining 10 percent.

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By the way, Robert's last name was LeTourneau, a name you probably recognize because he became an outstanding Christian businessman.

Robert LeTourneau was an example of how great men and women of the Christian faith in the workplace are shaped by dramatic and many times hard lessons.

What is the take-away for you? Consider these questions regarding how presumption may be affecting you.

- What principle of Scripture do you know, but have rationalized disobeying?
- What judgment have you incurred as a result of your disobedience?

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