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LET GOD BE YOUR BUSINESS ADVISOR!

Today's Text: Ecclesiastes Chap. 11

Extracts:

He who observes the wind will not sow; and he who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good [Eccl. 11: 4-6]

I heard a testimony recently (January 2005) in our local church in Nigeria when my wife and I went on home leave. A member told the story of how his business was turned around because he had followed God's word. In 1992, he had assessed his business interests and decided to shut down the small factory that was located in one of the industrial estates for small enterprises in Lagos. He had raised the capital for the factory (which produced popular household goods) from his retail businesses. The factory was eating up all his family savings and draining the retail shops to the extent that he and his family had become heavily indebted to creditors. At the time, the little factory employed five workers whose wages he could no longer bear. He planned to lay the workers off on Monday. However, the Sunday before decision day, a prophet called him out during church service to warn him not to close the factory because God had said that it was his "mother business," that if he closed it, all his other businesses would also fail. With pain but in obedience, he changed his mind and continued to struggle. Soon after, following a change in government policy, he was forced to close all his retail shops and to then fall back on the factory. Now, the said business is fully viable, debt-free, highly profitable and with a staff of over 35 workers!

That story confirms a growing trend. More and more Christian business people are beginning to realize that letting God be your business advisor makes for easier, cheaper and more profitable enterprise operations. For example, John Brown, a Texas oilman and founder of Zion Oil & Gas of Dallas, has an oil and gas exploration license covering over 96,000 acres in Kibbutz Maanit, Northern Israel. He started drilling in April 2005, and his confidence is based on Deut. 33: 24 which indicates that there is oil lying beneath the biblical territory of the tribe of Asher.¹ I am excited! Are you not? Let us read what today's lesson can give us on the subject.

¹ Texas oilman seeks gusher from God in Israel, www.msnbc.com/id/7404743/?GTI=6428

1. How business people make decisions

Business owners are risk takers. That is why they are called *entrepreneurs*. Once they see an opportunity, they analyze their chances of making favourable returns should they invest in it. However, they are very careful people; they are not reckless!

Before putting a dime down, they will critically examine the opportunities and the possible threats that could prevent them from exploiting the said opportunities. For that purpose, they will study how those who are currently in that line of business are doing, how much competition there is, and what size of the market remains to be explored. They will look at laws, government policies and regulations. They will assess their potential suppliers, workers and other stakeholders that they will have to face. They will assess the infrastructures and how reliable and cost-effective they will be. Then, they will also examine themselves in terms of their own ability to supply and sell the goods or services that they want to produce. If they do not have the money, they will have to develop business plans and projections to take to lending agencies. In deed, by the time business people start to implement their plans, they have put in enormous time, effort and money to ensure that the risks that they want to take are worth it, that is, profitable.

That *logical* and *rational* approach to decision making is grounded in the scientific method that places emphasis on *facts*, that is, observations that can be *empirically* verified. Such observations will come from using our five senses: sight, smell, taste, hearing and touching. It is such facts that are used to make *projections* and *forecasts*, most times with risk levels (probability statistics) added. The business owner is then left to make the decision based on the information so received from experts who may be their employees or outside consultants. Whether it is to build a new plant or expand into a new territory or to hire a new employee, such questions arise quite often.

Increasingly, we hear of big and famous enterprises going under. For example, ENRON fell in a loud way because of management corruption. SWISSAIR that was doing so well simply collapsed, not because of a fall in demand but because of poor investment decisions by management. Here in the Caribbean, the most popular airline, BWIA, is surviving on bailouts from the government of Trinidad & Tobago. Air Jamaica is still flying because of national pride! So, why are the so-called rational methods not failure-proof?

2. Limitations of human approaches

A study of Ecclesiastes Chapter 11 gives us an idea of why human approaches to enterprise decision-making may be limiting:

a) *They are based on forecasts*

The word of God says, “If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; ... He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards clouds will not reap” [Eccl. 11: 3-4]. In other words, if we use what is in the past to forecast what to expect, we may wind up with poor decisions. Unfortunately, most business forecasts and projections are based on *trends* that can only be drawn from the past. Even where future scenarios are simulated, they still cannot say anything definite about the future because we are using facts that we already know from the past!

When UEFA pundits made forecasts about the European Football Champions Cup Competition for 2005, A.C. Milan (Italy) and Chelsea (UK) were the hot favourites, *based on their current form and record*. In the end, Liverpool (UK) that could not even make the top four of the English Premier League in 2005 won the tournament!

b) *There is insufficient knowledge*

We are told, “As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything” [v. 5]. Scientists can only know what is in the physical realm, what can be experienced. Yet, human beings are also spirit beings. So, how can you claim to know all about people or your business when you have no clue about what is going on in the spiritual realm? Moreover, reality is in the unseen “for the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” [2 Cor. 4: 18].

Take the example of Abram (later changed to Abraham) and his nephew, Lot [Gen. Ch. 13]. To avoid conflict, Abram proposed to Lot that they be separated from each other. He offered the young man the choice between the plains and the hills. Lot “lifted his eyes and *saw* all the plain of Jordan, that it was *well watered everywhere*... Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan” [vv. 10-11]. This well watered land with built up cities included Sodom and Gomorrah! Later, Lot and his family were seduced by their choice and fell to greed, lust and incest [Gen. 19: 1-38]. Abram’s choice, on the other hand, became in God’s words the natural posterity promised to Abraham and his descendants [Gen. 13: 14-17]. Only God has full knowledge of everything, and the little that we know is the much that He chooses to reveal to us [Deut. 29: 29].

c) *The outcome is indeterminate*

We are further told, “In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either

this or that, or whether both alike will be good” [Eccl. 11: 6]. There is no way that we can know the end from the beginning. We may think that we have done the *right things right* but that will still not guarantee the outcomes that we get because only God gives the increase [1 Cor. 3: 6]. Even for the farmer whose seeds fell on good ground, the yield was a hundredfold for some, sixty for some and thirty fold for others [Matt. 13: 8].

We see from the forgoing that no matter how sophisticated may be human approaches to enterprise management, we still face uncertainties that can create anxieties and their attendant bad effects. On the other hand, if we “commit (our) works to the Lord, (our) thoughts shall be established” [Prov. 16: 3].

3. Let God be your Advisor for a change!

Ecclesiastes 11 tells us, “Walk in the *ways of your heart* and in the *sight of your eyes*” [v. 9]. In the words of Jesus Christ, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and “the lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” [Matt. 6: 22-23]. For our eyes to be good, hearts that are surrendered to God must lead them. In well-known language, we must walk by faith and not by sight for “surely, the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants, the prophets” [Amos 3: 7]. He is the One “who confirms the word of His servant and performs the counsel of His messengers” [Is. 44: 26]. Any business decisions that are based on the sure guidance of God *can never fail* to work! Let us examine a few cases from the Scriptures:

a) *Management of a nation’s economy*

Some of us have the privilege and burden to manage a national economy as ministers or advisers. We face multiple stakeholders with competing and conflicting claims to the national purse. When we do well, we are hardly praised, but when we stumble, we are strongly condemned. Some of the issues we are dealing with require information or resources much beyond our control. We face a great deal of uncertainty because we may not be sure of next year’s revenues or whether the politicians we are working with can win the next election. Joseph faced similar issues when he was appointed the governor of Egypt.

You will recall that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had dreams that his magicians could not interpret. God showed Joseph what the dreams meant- seven years of economic boom followed by seven years of economic hardship [Gen. 41: 1-31]. Joseph advised Pharaoh to appoint a competent and wise economic manager to save Egypt from total destruction. Joseph even prescribed a detailed work plan for such a manager [vv. 33-36]:

- ❑ appoint officers over the land to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years;
- ❑ store such produce under the authority of Pharaoh;
- ❑ keep the food in the cities as reserves for the people during the seven lean years.

Pharaoh did not hesitate to appoint Joseph for “can we find such a one as *this man in whom is the Spirit of God?*” [v. 38]. There is no doubt that this 30-year old young man did an excellent job as governor and economic manager of Egypt. He saved Egypt and his own people, the family of Jacob who joined him in Egypt. Joseph succeeded *because* God was his business advisor.

b) *Managing a small family enterprise*

Some of us may be struggling right now to set up and run our own businesses. We may have the education and experience but we lack managerial training or the finances. We may have business ideas but we lack how to harness them for success. Some of us may have just retired and are tempted to put our retirement benefits into a new business. Be careful! It may not be as rosy as you think. There are so many thoughts racing through your head. That is why you need to go to God for guidance. Let us see what happened to Peter’s small fishing enterprise.

Peter and his brother, Andrew, had a fishing business by the Sea of Galilee [Mk 1: 16]. They were in partnership with James and John and their father, Zebedee, who had paid workers [vv. 19-20; Lk 5: 7]. The business was hard. Sometimes, they would fish all day and night and catch nothing. Yet, Peter had a wife and mother-in-law to take care of [Mk 1: 30]. One day, after he had again toiled all night and caught nothing, he and Andrew anchored their two boats by the sea and went to wash their nets. You can imagine what was passing through their minds at such a moment. Unpaid bills. Peter’s worried wife with her demanding sick mother. Hunger!

At that moment, Jesus came, sat on one of the boats and asked Peter to put it a little from the land [Lk 5: 2-3]. Peter did as he was commanded without asking for a fee. After all, his business had excess capacity and here was a good customer to pay a premium price. Peter charged nothing and he was not in a hurry to get Jesus out of his business premises. After Jesus had finished teaching the people, He said to Peter, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Peter replied, “Master, we have toiled *all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net*” [vv. 4-5]. Remember, Peter was the expert on fishing and Jesus was a carpenter! However, recognizing who was speaking to him (he called Jesus “Master”), Peter obeyed the voice of God and “when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their net was breaking.

So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and *filled both the boats, so that they began to sink*” [vv. 6-7]. Peter was so overwhelmed by what he saw that he gave up the business and followed Jesus. He no longer worried about his mother-in-law’s medical bills because Jesus healed her [Mk 1: 29-31]. He no longer worried about his taxes because Jesus paid them for him [Matt. 17: 24].

From fishing for fish, Peter graduated to fishing for men when he became the leader of the disciples after Jesus had returned to heaven. His small enterprise had become a global business! God was his business advisor.

4. Conclusions: Incorporating God’s principles into your business

A major difficulty that business people face is uncertainty. They are not sure of the stability of government policies or nature of competition or reliability of customers and suppliers or cash flow, to name a few headaches. That is why executive stress is a major medical concern. However, when you let God take centre stage, He shows you *in advance* what or how to do and with what outcomes. Therefore, all God asks for is that you *put Him first in your life* [Matt. 6: 33-34], *be mindful of heaven* [Matt. 6: 19-21] and *pay your dues to Him* [Mal. 3: 8-12]. Then, He will take care of the rest by guiding your steps to your expected end.

Learn a lesson from Jesus Christ’s earthly ministry. Within three years, He established an organization to take the gospel all over the world. Have you examined the composition of His team? First of all, they were all Galileans, most of whom were poorly educated fishermen with a myopic vision of global issues. Their leader, Peter, was a mercurial fellow who could be bold this moment and cowardly the next. James and John had political ambitions to corner the top posts in heaven for themselves [Mk 10: 35-45]. Thomas was an incurable skeptic [Jn 20: 24-29]. Even Judas Iscariot, a greedy thief and betrayer, was their treasurer [Jn 12: 6]! Which consultant would recruit such a team for your enterprise? Yet, through them, Jesus has changed the world forever by the power of the Holy Spirit. By that same power, God will *enable* you to turn around whatever enterprise you are currently running, be it a business or school or marriage or ministry.

With God as your Business Advisor, you *cannot* fail!