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A Serious Call to the Marketplace

By James Catford

Private lives fascinate people. Social media has only served to fuel an already burgeoning market dedicated to the dissemination of gossip. So much so that scrolling through the hidden lives of celebrities has become a daily obsession for millions, if not billions.

But this prurient consumption of the hidden side of public figures has created an understandable backlash. Surely what people do behind closed doors is none of our business? Isn't it irrelevant who we are on the inside just as long as we do a good job?

Welcome to the world of virtue ethics. This is the ancient view dating back at least as far as Hippocrates (400 BC) that our interior lives are the primary driver of how we live and act in the world. Contrast this with the alternative idea that we can, and that we should, separate the personal from the public. Why should it matter what's going on under the surface, just so long as the results are beneficial?

Leadership from the core

Look around our world and there's plenty to suggest that we have paid a heavy price for ignoring the straightforward words of both Jesus and Paul on the matter. "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" taught Jesus in his famous Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 7.18). Later he made much the same point when he said, "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean" (Mt. 23.26).

Paul put so much stress on this that he admitted to being in the agony of childbirth that "Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4.19). As many public leaders of society will testify, eventually who we are on the inside does come out. As a result, a number of leading business schools now offer psychometric tests and high-end courses on what is known as 'the dark side' of leadership. Essentially, they are asking "who are you when no one's watching?"

If the definition of 'spiritual' is everything that is not physical, then the interior journey of the leader is a deeply spiritual affair. It takes us to the core of what it is to be human with all of our dark side and frailties. If we are to be successful, then it will require a deeply reflective life and lifestyle. Or, as Dallas Willard put it, "our gifting will only take us as far as our character will allow."

In my observations and mentoring, the classic spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude are the most essential part of true leadership. "Spend more time leaning back in your chair and looking out of the window" is the counterintuitive advice I sometimes give the



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upwardly mobile and hard-driven executive. The deliberate habit of slowing down is both the most challenging and yet the most rewarding part of the leader's routine.

Sometimes I even suggest that the most courageous and valiant act that a busy person can do is to switch off their laptop and iPhone and to go to bed. Why? Because in doing so we are consciously trusting God for the outcome of our work. Try it yourself sometime and see what it feels like to quit running the universe for a while.

Business is Business

Victorian social thinker John Ruskin considered how such inner virtue played out in the wider world of his day. A modern take on what he said would be to ask what a businessperson, or merchant as he called them, would be willing to die for?

In other professions, according to Ruskin, a captain would expect to go down with his or her ship. In times of war a surgeon would be willing to risk his or her own life while treating combatants on the battlefield. Even a pastor prefers martyrdom to preaching error.

So, what would the leader of a bank or insurance company be prepared to die for?

The answer goes to the heart of what drives the marketplace today. Sadly, from fixing the Libor exchange rate to mis-selling financial products, the merchant has not always demonstrated impressive inner virtue.

Quaint as it might sound, the role of business is to provide for the community. It is to offer the highest quality product for the widest number of people at the best possible price.

Yet such virtue is often lacking. Instead the assumption is very often simply "to make money." Of course, it might be wrapped up in the good motivation to provide for your family or to give some of it to charity, but even this can disguise a worrying lack of social holiness and moral character.

"Business is business," said Dallas Willard, suggesting that it's an expression most often used by someone about to do something they know to be wrong. With a shrug of the shoulders and a sigh they say, "Well, business is business."

But business is never just business and, deep down, everyone in the marketplace know this. It's about the people we are leading and the customers we are serving. It's also about the physical environment that we are leaving behind us.

As Ruskin puts it, the merchant is responsible not only for the product of their business but also for the welfare of those that they lead. To do this requires "the highest intelligence, as well as patience, kindness and tact" along with considerable amounts of energy. The



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merchant “is bound, as a soldier or physician is bound, to give up, if need be, his [or her] life, in such ways as may be demanded” of them.¹

What would a merchant die for?

John Ruskin writes:

“The fact is, that people never have had clearly explained to them the true functions of a merchant with respect to other people. I should like the reader to be very clear about this.

Five great intellectual professions, relating to daily necessities of life, have hitherto existed...

The Soldier's profession is to defend it.

The Pastor's, to teach it.

The Physician's, to keep it in health.

The Lawyer's, to enforce justice in it.

The Merchant's, to provide for it.

And the duty of all these... is, on due occasion, to die, for it.

‘On due occasion,’ namely —

The Soldier, rather than leave his post in battle.

The Physician, rather than leave his post in plague.

The Pastor, rather than teach Falsehood.

The Lawyer, rather than countenance Injustice.

The Merchant — What is his [or her] ‘due occasion’ of death?

It is the main question for the merchant, as for all of us. For, truly, the [individual] who does not know when to die, does not know how to live.”

Ruskin’s question seems so removed from much of what happens out there in the marketplace. Yet leaders ignore it at their peril, and at the peril of wider society. With the primacy of the market, it’s hard to even imagine where such a debate would take place.

¹ J Ruskin, ‘The Roots of Honour’, originally published in 1860. This lecture is available online at <https://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/ruskinj/last/chap1.htm>



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“The era of market triumphalism,” wrote Michael Sandel in *What Money Can’t Buy*, “has coincided with a time when public discourse has been largely empty of moral and spiritual substance.”² Just at the point when what we need most is a renewed civic virtue, the distinctive voice of Christian reason is often sadly missing.

Yet, if gifting can only take us as far as our character will allow, then leadership in the marketplace is a high calling. Often the world of work directly challenges both the very nature of our character and how we have been formed spiritually. Eventually what we are on the inside will show.

² M Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 202.