

Pay and Benefits: Social Justice?

By Carrie Cavanaugh

When it comes to pay and benefits, or wages for work done, in the Bible one theme clearly emerges – justice. In Colossians 4:1 God has a word for leaders, “Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” The reasoning here is that because our master, God, is just, so too should we be just to those in our employ.

Other verses, such as James 5:4 affirm this idea, “Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.” This verse helps us see that God cares for those who are not great or powerful – he cares that they should nonetheless receive what is rightfully theirs. Should we, as leaders, fail to give just payment, not only does God feel for those who have not been provided for, but he also hears a case against us. Likewise Deuteronomy 24:14-15 states, “do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.” This verse not only calls withholding of just pay a sin, but it reveals the state of dependence that the employed have upon their employer. This may not be as dramatic in most of modern America, but it does become more apparent when medical issues arise; if adequate medical plans are not in place, families can be burdened with debt for years.

God’s wrath is against those who do deprive workers of their fair wages as Malachi 3:5 reveals, “So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the Lord Almighty.”

Romans 4:4, part of the powerful explanation of how we deserve death because of our sin and yet have been given life as a gift from God, lays out the basis for the argument by stating, “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.” As leaders of organizations, it is not an option to pay fairly.

Leviticus 25:43 establishes the argument that to fear God means to oversee without being ruthless. God is the one who establishes some in positions of authority (Rom 13:1). They are to recognize that it is by God’s authority that they lead others and thus not take advantage of others. You, as Christian business leaders, are stewards of God’s authority, you act on His behalf, so oversee as He would. Further, the resources God has entrusted to you are not yours alone; Deuteronomy 25:6 explains, “Whatever the land yields during the Sabbath year will be food for you – for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you.” That is, the gifts God gives are not only for the employer, but also for the employee.

What is just payment? I do not believe that there is any magic formula to determine it. Ultimately it is between you and God – your conscience should be at peace when you decide on a number. That being said, you may consider investigating what other organizations pay (even secular jobs), ask your employee or determine what their work is worth to your organization.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the way you pay is a reflection on your valuing of the person you employ. As Christians, we know that everyone is made in the image of God. Shouldn’t Christian organizations, more than any others, pay fairly?! Shouldn’t they set the example as places where employees are treated well?!



I encourage you to extend your application of fair wages to the area of promotions and raises. Your employees will see your integrity as you reward those who work hard; Proverbs 12:14 propounds, "From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him."

In conclusion, God has given leaders their authority and as such they need to serve as stewards of His people. The primary application of this, as spoken of in scripture, is that workers need to be paid fairly. Please take some time to prayerfully rethink what just wages means for your employees.

