

Week 43

OVERCOMING OBSESSIONS



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Obsessed With Work

"My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about..." - Lk 10:41

Work is not evil *per se*, but work at the cost of our wellbeing is certainly an obsession. Setting unrealistic targets amid a downbeat industrial scenario forces employees to reluctantly accept excessive work hours as the new normal. Workaholism is a form of obsession with tasks, performance and targets, till a sensational success is benchmarked. It may gradually diminish your social skills, break your relationships with friends, destroy your family, and rob quality time that you could otherwise spend in improving yourself or others.

I had to quit a job or two just because the working hours were not well-defined in practice. At times, I had opted to join smaller organisations where my role was insignificant, but my work hours were regular and predictable. Looking back, it helped me build my capacity to think originally, discern objectively, relate cordially, feel empathetically, work creatively, deliver timely, and walk instinctively the extra mile. Parenthetically, I had also picked up lasting friendships across the globe, seized rare opportunities, travelled extensively, educated myself further, read enlightening books, attended exciting programmes and availed quality time to converse with well-accomplished professionals or self-made people.

Satan keeps us busy with things of temporal value and distracts us from things of eternal glory. Young Joseph lost his job because he refused to indulge in sin. In the end, God made him a prime minister. Moses abdicated his princely post at the palace to share the oppression of God's people. He went on to become the greatest prophet of Israel. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were young men who refused to yield to the influence of scheming colleagues and the control of evil authorities. They were spectacularly saved by God Himself Who walked with them in the fire.

Aren't God's people called for a spiritual battle against evil powers in this dark world? A battle against corruption in high places may even cost you your job! Nevertheless, you will someday emerge as a decorated war hero of this spiritual warfare. Above all, let us remember, the battle belongs to the Lord, and so is the victory!

Dear Lord, deliver me from my obsession for success leading to self-destruction, and teach me to do Your will in my life. Amen

Obsessed With Evil

I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. - Jn 17:15

We may face problems of attitude at the workplace where arbitration or disciplinary action or even law suits would be possible solutions. Behavioural sciences still grapple with the problems of people being disrespectful, deceptive, crooks, egotistic, antagonistic, argumentative, mean, pessimistic, hypocritical, spies, ambitious, vengeful, perverse, cunning, intimidating, villainous, profane, opportunistic, flirtatious, sycophantic, fraudulent and slippery.

When I was a desk officer managing development grants for NGOs, there were some men and women who followed me closely online and befriended me on social media for funds. So, to get away from them, I had to swiftly shut down my social media accounts.

The Devil uses people to topple exemplary leaders into abysmal depths of disgrace and infamy. Jesus summarised the state of human fallenness in John 8:44: *you are the children of your father the devil and you love to do the evil things he does*. Jesus prayed for His disciples that the heavenly Father should keep them from the Evil One. When Peter rebuked Jesus regarding what he thought was an unlikely prospect, His death on the cross, Jesus did not rebuke Peter. But he rebuked the devil saying, *Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me* (Mk 8:33).

The Bible calls the devil a tempter, accuser, murderer and ruler of this world. He is described as being cunning, slanderous, fierce, deceitful, powerful to do evil, proud and wicked. It is better to flee from youthful lusts, than to suffer like Samson who lost his eyes, dignity, peace and liberty to a seductress, who made a laughing stock of him.

To keep us safe from any relational obsession, arising out of inordinate affections at the workplace, let us rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is far better to have a closer walk with God and do His will than to be men pleasers to gain cheap popularity. Let us kneel before God so that we can stand before men. Let us use our understanding of the world of demons and the intricacies of obsessions to break free of them.

Father, protect me from the Evil One and false brethren who work behind my back to destroy me. Guide my steps away from improper relationships and obsessions. Amen

Obsessed With Myself

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. - Gal 2:20

Being a leader is more about serving the people than image management. Pastor Rick Warren is famous for saying: "Life is not about you! You exist for God's purposes, not vice versa". The chronic habit of congratulating oneself borders on narcissism or approval addiction. Many are busy blowing their own horns on social media to flaunt their accomplishments: their credentials, wealth, cars, clothes, bodies, sexuality and even spirituality.

Many years back, with a view to get married, I hurriedly made a photo album of some of the best photos of my growing years. It included stage performances of my singing, playing guitar and preaching. (I couldn't do the same with my academic records!). Long story short, I got married! The bride's family was happy to see the photos and the album was quickly passed among the wedding guests from her side.

After sometime, I asked my wife where was my photo album. But she couldn't recall its whereabouts. We checked with her relatives and the guest house manager where they stayed. But nobody could say where that album went! All my precious photos were lost. There ended my bachelorhood!

But I learnt a lesson that day: not just to live for myself, but also for my wife. Soon we both learnt to give our time for God, the Church and the Society. We remembered Jesus' teaching, *If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it (Mt 10:39)*.

Jesus shattered His own Image (with a capital I) and wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples. Naaman had a title as a military general. But his poor servant girl, an orphan, had no title, but a testimony. The high priest had a lofty title recognised by a powerful theological body called the Sanhedrin. But the wandering disciples of Christ who were no more than illiterate fishermen had a testimony of turning the world upside down! Nebuchadnezzar had a title as a grand emperor, but Daniel and his associates had an incredible testimony of overcoming unimaginable trials and tribulations.

Almighty God, I refuse to be obsessed with myself. I surrender myself and my titles for Your Kingdom's sake. Amen

Obsession With Worry

...don't worry about tomorrow. - Mt 6:34

Managers are trained to visualise worst-case scenarios and be prepared for any contingency. But when worry and fear engulf the mind 24x7, it is a warning sign of an obsession. If that state of mind continues for weeks or months, it may drive one to depression or suicidal tendencies. Moreover, worry is contagious and can erode the morale of a team.

Last year, I suddenly found myself in an unexpected situation of joblessness. Right when I had a job offer letter on hand, the office of my would-be employer closed indefinitely because of the country-wide lockdown due to Covid. I was worried about paying my bills as my waiting stretched from days to months.

One day, my confidence dipped too low that I was unable to even drive my car. I called a friend who rushed me to a nearby hospital. The doctor checked my blood pressure and prescribed some medicines for a week. I felt better but certainly not normal. I desperately had to do something to stop myself from slipping into depression and fear. So, I picked up a book which had a collection of promises from the Bible and read it every morning and night. Joy struck me like a lightning when I read the verse: *I will not die; instead, I will live to tell what the Lord has done (Psalm 118:17).*

Recurring worries or unfounded fears need early detection. Worry is a passive disobedience to Christ's teaching as we momentarily fail to recognise that He is in control. Our Lord Jesus, Who taught us not to worry about tomorrow, is our very present help.

The Bible triumphantly talks of fullness of joy, making a joyful noise, joy in the morning, good news of great joy, joy amid trials, the joy of the Holy Spirit, the joy of Salvation, joy of the Lord, and rejoicing in the Lord. Joy has no human origin, but is produced solely by the Spirit of God in us.

For a leader whose hope is in God, worry and fear vanish into thin air in any circumstance, because our Lord has said, *Cheer up! I have overcome the world (Jn 16:33).*

God of all comfort, I don't have to fear or worry about tomorrow since You care for me. I thank You, for Your help is on the way. Amen

Obsessed With Relationships

Don't team up with those who are unbelievers. - II Cor 6:14

There are dilemmas at the workplace based on identity. A believer believes and surrenders to Christ as He is the Way, Truth and Life, whereas an unbeliever disbelieves Christ. If at all they appreciate Christ, they still would not surrender their will to Christ. Paul greatly advocates living in peace with everyone, as far as a person can find scope for it. (cf. Rom 12:18). Then why does he say, *don't team up with those who are unbelievers*?

Now, this warrants scrutiny of the word 'unity' in terms of collaboration and co-existence. Co-existence is tolerating or just admiring 'the otherness' in people for the sake of peace, communal harmony, social inclusiveness, social justice and global peace. On the contrary, collaboration is commonality that begins with consensus backed by conviction which goes beyond legally permissible work or legitimate collective action.

Unity in diversity may appear brilliant to the human mind, but will anyone change spouse at one's whim and fancy, for the sake of diversity? Or will anyone who has emigrated to another country return to his own country for the sake of national unity?

Sometimes, when colleagues or neighbours celebrate a local festival or engage in a conversation at a social event, they would talk about a superstition or a cultural practice which was incongruent to my Christian faith. In such situations, I saw to it that my faith in God's truth conditioned my behaviour with grace, so that I was prepared to speak the truth in love. While many turned away from the truth, a few observed with wonder that my belief accompanied a deep-seated peace within me that could only be from God.

So, when Paul says, *don't team up with those who are unbelievers*, he talks of Christian living. Marriage, worship, charitable engagements, meditation, fellowship and prayer are matters of faith than work. In such matters, teaming up with an unbeliever would not practically work! In my worklife, my colleagues and I didn't team up for life, but merely for work. We can coexist, but not collaborate with people at the cost of our faith.

Heavenly Father, help me to live in peace with everyone and also share about my faith, with grace, so others can be led to the hope of eternal life in Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen

Obsession With The Past

I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead... - Phil 3:13

Calendars, schedules, appointments and agenda are meant to propel us forward from where we are. Many official or business emails end with a brief sentence, "Looking forward to hearing from you". So, there is always something to focus on. The past should be visited to take stock of God's enduring mercies towards us that we may glorify His name. But we must not dwell on the negative things of our past.

A few years ago, I counted all those who came against me (directly or indirectly) and the reasonable list added up to 93 people. I am sure, before I die, the list may expand to a 1000 (or a million online) who may troll me, snoop on me, criticise me, intimidate me, tarnish my image, gossip behind me, parody me, rally against me or coin a scornful byword out of me.

Look at your personal past for a moment: you may gloat over your past glory (pride); feel burdened by mistakes of your past (guilt), by lost opportunities (regret), by liabilities (desperation), by wasted years (dissatisfaction), by broken relationships or broken marriages (bitterness); by overwork (exhaustion or fatigue); by realisation of the consequences of the past (fear); perhaps by the memory of abuse, cruelty or ill-treatment (anger and shame); perhaps by the low estate of our lineage over which we had no control (dejection), and the list goes on. These negative feelings can become an obsession to reduce us to zombies. That's why Paul advises us to look into the future, where God has a high calling for us.

Benjamin was orphaned at birth and his was the smallest tribe in Israel. None would have thought that an outstanding apostle St. Paul would arise out of the tribe, centuries later. Esther, an orphan girl, even in her wildest imagination, would not have thought that she would be a queen one day. God still blesses and still chooses those considered by the world as foolish – to shame the wise! That is why your future and mine are secure in God's hands – despite our past!

Father in Heaven, help me to forget the burdens of my past. Give me eyes of faith to look into the future and pursue my high calling in You. Amen

Obsession With Possessions

Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own. - Lk 12:15

Companies customarily advertise sale of used machinery, equipment, vehicles, upholstery, carpets and furniture. Even the shredder and uncategorised scrap goes on sale! Accumulation of articles in an extreme form may be an obsession. Good managers know how much is too much! But there are those who repetitively modify their offices, mansions and change from one luxury car to another, or add up one luxury item upon another to their personal collection. Some focus on augmenting their net worth by the hour through investments everywhere. But God commanded the Kings of Israel that they must not build large stables of horses for themselves.

I am a bibliophile and have been a regular buyer at book exhibitions in Delhi, where one can walk among books for a mile or two. I bought the complete works of Shakespeare, Tagore, Tom, Dick and Harry just because of the discounted price. I also bought coffee table books, cook books and a concise Encyclopaedia of which I didn't read a page for the last 25 years. As the bookshelf at home couldn't contain all of them, I had carefully stacked cartons of books under the TV stand, atop the almirahs, under my study desk, in a corner of the dining room and even by my bed. The ones by my bed help me fall asleep faster after a hard day's work.

To free up space in my house, I looked for serious, avid readers to give away some of the books. But many these days are cursory kindle-ophiles at best. So, I gave away a lot of books (even the unread ones) to my house maid who made good money by selling it to a waste paper dealer.

King Solomon who was rich enough to send a welfare package to the billionaires of today, observed: *No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content (Ecclesiastes 1:8)*. Now, after giving away many books, I felt I have advanced in my pilgrimage a decent distance, to be ready for the second coming of Christ! Godliness with contentment is the biblical formula for Christian living.

Father in heaven, help me to run the race of faith shaking off the unwanted load of materialism. Amen