When There Is No Work

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The impact of unemployment upon a family's financial wellbeing is bad. Its impact upon the family's emotional functioning is worse. Its impact upon the unemployed father may be shattering.

The initial reaction of many men to being laid off or terminated is anger. They get angry at their bosses, the government, the economy, and President Reagan. Unless anger is controlled or constructively redirected, it may develop into bitterness and cynicism. Behind the anger and bitterness, though, lies a much more closely guarded feeling. This feeling may not be expressed as freely as anger or bitterness because it is not consistent with American culture's stereotype of men. The unemployed man feels threatened and vulnerable.

Why do men who are laid off feel this way, sometimes to the point that they become depressed or make poor judgments? When these emotional reactions are extreme, they are usually the result of faulty, unbiblical beliefs which are widespread in American society, even in fundamental churches.

Many men believe that their personal significance and value are based upon their ability to provide economically for their families. Often men measure their success in life and their value to their families in economic terms. As long as they can provide the money to have a nice home, vacations, a nice car or two, new clothes each fall, and Christian school for the children, they feel as though they are an important part of the family. When that ability to provide is removed through unemployment, they may feel unimportant and unnecessary. Not a few unemployed fathers have lamented, "My family doesn't need me anymore," or "My family would be better off without me."

These feelings of worthlessness and crushed self-esteem result from a philosophy of life which is more world centered than Bible centered.

The Scriptures make it very clear that personal value is not earned but imputed. Men are valuable because God created them and died to redeem them, not because they earn $30,000 per year. Unemployment does not change men's spiritual standing in God's eyes. Unemployment does not prevent men from serving God and living spiritually effective lives.

Men who simply accept God's claims that they are personally valuable and able to please God regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves are much more likely to successfully cope with unemployment than men whose personal value is dependent upon their own efforts, a particular income, or other material things. The latter are the men who feel
the most crushed, threatened, and helpless when unemployment strikes.

The most important issue in counseling men who have been unemployed is to help them realize that their value as persons, their standing with God, and their purpose in life are not lessened by their inability to provide economically for their families. Men should not evaluate their worth in financial or material terms such as income level, assets, and skills. Christian fathers must distinguish their ability from God’s unconditional love for them as expressed through Jesus Christ’s atonement. Self-esteem must not be based solely upon men’s accomplishments. Instead it must be based upon God’s high regard for them.

Make no mistake. Scripture commands that men support their families (even their extended families) if they are able. But God controls employment and sometimes He withholds it for His glory and men’s potential spiritual benefit. Men who are unemployed or disabled and unable to work are not less valuable persons than their working counterparts.

Men who have recently been laid off are especially vulnerable to using poor judgment. Because their self-esteem has been bruised, they are experiencing financial pressure, and they are in a novel situation, they may make decisions that they would not ordinarily make. Sometimes they too rapidly decide to leave the much needed support of family and friends at home in order to go to another state where employment conditions are supposedly better. They may use their savings in a get-rich-quick scheme. The husband may, in an attempt to bolster self esteem, buy a new truck, flirt with the temptation of an extra-marital affair, or consider divorce. When unemployment strikes, the family should avoid hasty decisions and work especially hard to increase communication and mutual support.

Families suffer because unemployment may pressure family members out of accustomed, traditional sex roles. Society’s values and norms are rapidly changing. There are so many different positions being advocated that many people have not resolved for themselves what the roles of the husband and wife should be in the family. Getting laid off often forces the man out of his accustomed sex role into a new unfamiliar one. Perhaps only the wife can find work and he must stay home with the children. If these sex role issues of who works, who cooks, who changes diapers, and who cleans the house are not settled, the conflict may tear the family apart. The wife of an unemployed husband is especially vulnerable because she may be forced into new responsibilities before her husband is ready to accept her new role. She then gets trapped in a no-win situation where she can only lose. If she gets a job when her husband cannot, his manliness may be threatened. But if she stays home, the family cannot meet its bills.

Stress is another consequence of unemployment. Stress is simply the body’s response to any demands placed upon it. The person who is forced out of an accustomed work routine and lifestyle is especially vulnerable to stress because many adjustments are necessitated – in sleeping, exercising, eating, and socializing. One’s personal timing is thrown off.

Being under stress reduces a person’s resistance to disease. People are likely to become ill after a layoff. The terrible thing about this is that medical insurance was probably lost along with the job, so the medical bills heighten the stress which contributed to the disease. This is a vicious, deadly circle. Alcoholism and drug addiction may also result from the stress of unemployment.

Can anything good come of unemployment? Yes, many benefits can come of it if the family resolves to honor God, regardless of the circumstances. First, faulty philosophies of life, work, and personal worth may be exposed and corrected. Other than salvation, this may be the most important event in a man’s life.

Second, the experience of unemployment may sensitize a man to the fact that he is totally dependent on God and that his own efforts at controlling his life are extremely limited. This is very valuable if the man responds by putting his life and family in God’s hand.

A third benefit accrues when the family looks at itself and its sex roles and through deliberate effort conforms them to Scripture rather than to American culture. True, we are born Americans; but we must expend effort to develop Biblical lifestyles. This often results in some very positive changes around the home. Fathers often assume more responsibility for parenting and spouses may not take one another for granted as much after a shift of roles.

Unemployment provides time for self assessment and planning. It may provide a good opportunity for setting family goals and vocational redirection. Some men have done very well by viewing unemployment as a new beginning. They may get reacquainted with their children, return to school or get more training, apply for jobs different than they have held in the past, get more involved in church activities, and even lose weight. The way parents respond to unemployment provides a powerful testimony of their faith in Christ to their children and neighbors.

The church also must take an active role in supporting the unemployed financially and emotionally. Through the love and persistent prayer of determined brothers and sisters in Christ, a very frightening, stressful, and dangerous time may become a springboard for spiritual growth.

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