

Honoring God in a Publicly Traded Corporation: Inspiration from ServiceMaster and the Writings of C. William Pollard

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ABSTRACT: C. William Pollard served as the CEO of ServiceMaster from 1983-1993 and again from 1999-2001. During Pollard's tenure, ServiceMaster was honored by Fortune magazine as the number-one service company in the United States in 1985. ServiceMaster experienced growth in revenues and profits every year during Pollard's first term as CEO. In the summer of 2024, this author studied the writings of C. William Pollard and the ServiceMaster story as a Pollard Faith and Business Research Fellow at the Center for Faithful Business at Seattle Pacific University. In this paper, the author seeks to provide an example of, and insights from, a successful publicly traded company that sought to honor God as its primary objective.

KEYWORDS: Pollard, profit, purpose of business, shareholder wealth maximization

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide an example of, and insights from, a successful publicly traded company that sought to honor God as its primary objective. Whereas many publicly traded corporations adopt the Friedman Doctrine (Friedman, 1970) and use shareholder primacy as their guiding principle for conducting business, from inception until the end of Pollard's tenure as CEO in 2001, the ServiceMaster corporation did things differently. The ServiceMaster corporation name connotes both "masters of service as well as serving the Master" (Pollard, 2006, p. 32). For the period from 1973 to 2001 the four stated objectives for the ServiceMaster corporation were to honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence, and to grow profitably (Erisman, 2021, p. 75). Pollard saw the first two objectives as end goals. The second two objectives were means goals.

For purposes of this paper, end goals are a desired outcome and means goals are the specific actions conducted to reach a desired outcome. Honoring God and helping people develop were the desired outcomes and ServiceMaster's purpose. Pursuing excellence and growing profitably were the actions that enabled ServiceMaster to reach their end goals. The end goal of ServiceMaster was not to grow profitably. However, growing profitably was

a means that allowed the company to honor God and help people develop. Actions taken that could lead to higher profitability but did not honor God were avoided. The virtue of profit was not simply financial gain, but rather its essential service as an accountability tool that enabled the company to accomplish the higher purpose of honoring God and developing people.

C. William Pollard served as the CEO of ServiceMaster from 1983-1993 and again from 1999-2001. Pollard's perspective on profit can be summarized with the following quote.

Profit is a means in God's world to be used and invested, not an end to be worshipped. Profit is a legitimate measurement of the value of our effort. It is an essential source of capital. It is a requirement for survival of the individual, the family unit, and any organization of society, whether it be a for-profit company or a not-for-profit organization.... No organization can survive with continuing deficit. (Pollard, 1996a, p. 20)

Pollard recognized some of the pitfalls of profit. For example, if one only pursues profit, then one can fall into temptation. In the absence of a faith-based perspective, work can become motivated by short-term and self-centered goals rather than an eternal perspective. Additionally, Pollard (2014a) noted that "profit as an end

goal of life and measured only in dollars and cents is an empty vessel and can result in the poverty of the soul” (pp. 23-24). Money should be a servant, not a master.

God expects us to be productive and profitable. Pollard (2014a) argued that the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) teaches us that “God doesn’t want us to give back what He has given or invested with us. He wants more, a return or a profit” (p. 24). Pollard (2014a) referred to “God’s economy of surplus” as a return that includes “the potential of an ever-greater return with the multiplication of our lives in the changed lives of others – a profitable return that has an eternal value” (pp. 24-25). Additionally, Pollard (2017a) noted that those “who recognize their responsibility as stewards and regard profit in its proper role, as a means to further God’s kingdom, have a better understanding and basis for integrating their faith and their work” (p. 6).

The paper will proceed as follows. The next section will consider ways that faith and work can be integrated to help bring God’s Kingdom here on earth. The section following will examine the four objectives of ServiceMaster starting with the end objectives to honor God and develop people, followed by the means objectives to pursue excellence and grow profitably. The ensuing section will consider the legacy of ServiceMaster. The closing section will provide the conclusion to the paper.

INTEGRATING FAITH AND WORK IN GOD’S ECONOMY

In Genesis, God serves as a model for creating, producing, and resting. Working in the business world can allow people to emulate our Lord’s behavior. Grudem (2003) writes that producing “goods and services is fundamentally good and provides many opportunities for glorifying God, but also many temptations to sin” (p. 25). Building on the foundational work of Surdyk (2002), God’s economy can be thought of as a higher purpose system for producing, allocating, and consuming goods and services.

In God’s economy, our work can focus on helping others by looking outwardly rather than inwardly. Van Duzer (2010) notes that Christians in business can serve “a hurting world by providing it with the material goods and services that will enable ... humanity to flourish” (p. 48). According to Bretsen (2006), a faithful business conducts its “business as mission by holistically integrating Christian theological and social principles” (p. 75).

Johnson (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of the business as mission (BAM) movement where for-profit business ventures are intentionally devoted to serve as an instrument for God’s mission (pp. 27-28). Rundle and Steffen (2011) provide case studies of Great Commission companies working directly in God’s economy.

God’s economy is based on stewardship: the responsible use of resources—especially money, time, and talents—in the service of God (Oxford University Press, 2025). In chapter one of Saunders’s (2025) textbook, he presents a series of dichotomies that contrast our typical worldly economy with God’s economy. A few examples are listed below.

In our economy, we work too much: we work lunches, work overtime, and work holidays. Within God’s economy, work is balanced with rest and rejuvenation (Exodus 20:9-10, Leviticus 25). Our economy is based on self-service. God’s economy is based on service to others (Matthew 25). In our economy, our occupations are based on how much we can make. In God’s economy, our occupations are based on calling (Romans 12:1-8). Our economy is based on scarcity. God’s economy is based on abundance (Mark 6:35-44).

Orienting our view towards God’s economy gives our work purpose for something greater than ourselves. When Christians compartmentalize their faith when working in the business world, then God’s work is stifled. Intentionally connecting faith and work is necessary for God’s will to be done. One of the ways that ServiceMaster and Pollard oriented their view towards God’s economy was the focus on people. Pollard (2017b) wrote, “People should be the subject of work not just the object of work. They are the heart and soul of the firm. Their growth and development are essential for the success of the firm” (p. 5).

Beginning in the 1950s and throughout the rest of the twentieth century, ServiceMaster leadership used the concept of “shingles on a roof,” based on the overlapping skills of each person. Leaders worked together in complementary ways to fully utilize each other’s best skills (Erisman, 2021, p. 37). ServiceMaster founder Marion Wade believed that a “job has only as much dignity as the man gives it, and the best way to dignify a job is to dedicate your efforts to the glory of the Lord” (Erisman, 2021, p. 29). Ken Wessner, ServiceMaster CEO from 1973-1983, believed that work “does not bring dignity to the individual, but the individual brings dignity to the work” (Erisman, 2021, p. 67).

In a 2013 interview, Pollard closed with a reading from Joshua 24:15 and points out that the word “serve” in Hebrew also means worship and also means work. Pollard concluded that work can be worship to God as we serve others (Seattle Pacific University, 2013). This reminds us of Paul’s teachings to the Colossians (3:23-24, NIV): “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” The next section will consider the four objectives of ServiceMaster that enabled their integration of faith and work and helped bring a reflection of God’s economy here on earth.

THE OBJECTIVES OF SERVICEMASTER

ServiceMaster founder Marion Wade established the ServiceMaster leadership principle “if you don’t live it, you don’t believe it” (Wade, 1966, p.7). In striving to live out their faith, ServiceMaster leadership created a God-honoring culture that was not proscriptive but open. The culture provided the freedom to live out faith but not the requirement to do so. ServiceMaster strove to lead by example, train and develop people, walk the talk in honoring God, pay for performance, and grow.

The objectives of ServiceMaster were not “a formula for success,” but they did provide “a purpose” for the work of ServiceMaster (Pollard, 2006, p. 180). In 1989, the company created a balance beam (depicted below) to illustrate the balancing needed to manage the tension between the four objectives of ServiceMaster.

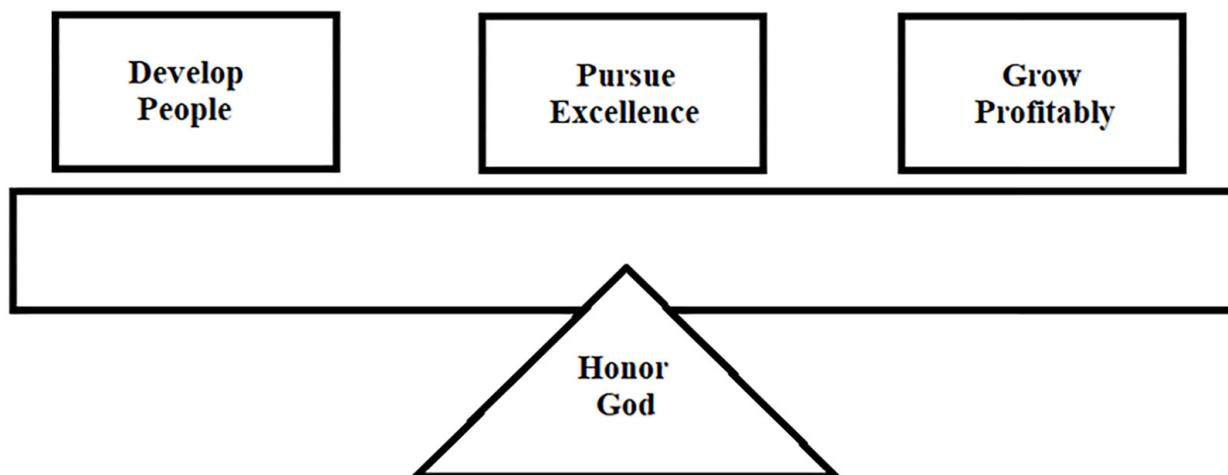
Pollard (2006, p. xxi) recognized the inherent tension in the application of the four objectives and suggested that tension may best be summarized by Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:24 (NIV): “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” Sometimes there was tension between the objectives and other times there were synergies. An example of synergy was the ServiceMaster leadership’s belief that growing profitably was necessary to develop people (e.g., promotion, leadership opportunities, and increased responsibilities). The next four subsections will examine each of the four objectives starting with the end objectives to honor God and develop people, followed by the means objectives of pursuing excellence and growing profitably.

Honor God

Psalm 24:1 (NIV) tells us that the earth “is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.” Thus, the board at ServiceMaster was accountable “not only to our shareholders, partners, and employees” but also to “the ultimate owner” which is God (Pollard, 2006, p. 103). All the objectives of ServiceMaster were balanced by the end goal of honoring God. Pollard (2014a) believed that followers of Christ should “affirm our faith but not impose it. To seek to honor God in all we do and say. To be ambassadors of Christ so God can make His appeal through us” (p. 4).

How did ServiceMaster measure the end goal to honor God in all we do? In the ServiceMaster 1981 Annual Report, Pollard described the difficulty in measuring

Figure 1: ServiceMaster Balance Beam



this first objective. Pollard (1981) discussed worth and proposes an equation to measure worth as the quantity of God plus man multiplied by the lives of other men. Greater worth is not measured solely in economic terms but rather “as we spend ourselves in the lives of others” (p. 27). In a 2006 interview, Pollard offered the following response:

In honoring God, we recognized that there was an authority above ourselves for determining right and wrong and that there was a reason for treating every person with dignity and worth The company did not impose a belief in God, but with this objective, we did raise the question of God Different people with different beliefs are all part of God’s mix As a part of our training sessions, we specifically included what it means ‘to honor God in all we do’.... We promoted an inclusive environment that allowed for diversity of faith and belief but required everyone to treat people with dignity and worth. (as cited in Erisman & Van Duzer, 2006)

Patricia Asp, who served as an executive with ServiceMaster for twenty-five years, provided details for how ServiceMaster measured honoring God through its development of people. Asp indicated that ServiceMaster was inspired by Genesis 1:27 and recognized that each person is created in the image of God and has God-given talents and that work is a means for them to apply those talents and become all that God intended. Asp noted that measurements of development included internal promotion rates, turnover, participation in training, and investment in training and development. The mission of ServiceMaster was to “be an ever expanding and vital marketplace vehicle for use by God to work in the lives of people as they serve and contribute to others” (Asp, personal communication, July 8, 2024).

Develop People (The Soul of the Firm)

For ServiceMaster, every person was “special with their own fingerprint of potential. It is the whole person, not just a pair of hands, who comes to work every day, and it is the whole person God loves and in whom He sees His likeness reflected” (Pollard, 2006, p. 79). The guiding principles of ServiceMaster recognized that every person has “dignity and worth ... freedom of choice ... potential to excel ... immortality and eternal value as the object of God’s love” (Pollard, 2006, p. 80).

Pollard (2014a) and the leadership of ServiceMaster considered “the people of our firm as the soul of the firm”

(p. 9). Pollard (1995) wrote that “the firm must nurture the potential of people and must find and develop its soul (p. 2).” Pollard (1994) wrote that entrepreneurial spirit at ServiceMaster is developed and encouraged starting with its “basic premise that every person has been created in the image of God with value, worth, and dignity— with the potential to create as well as produce” (p. 6). In response to the rhetorical question about how to unlock the potential of people, Pollard (1996b) responded as follows:

[I]t begins with a clearly stated mission that extends beyond the means goal of making money and allows the firm to value each person as an individual with unique skills and talents; to recognize the benefit and reality of diversity within the firm; to celebrate work, productivity, and profit; to encourage empowerment, ownership and accountability; to recognize learning as a lifelong experience; and to demand of its leadership service by example. (p. 5)

Having presented ServiceMaster’s end objectives of honoring God and helping develop people, the author will now examine its means objectives.

Pursue Excellence

The pursuit of excellence traces back to the ServiceMaster founder Marion Wade, who when not satisfied with the moth-proofing solution or the carpet cleaning agents of his day, invented innovative solutions and agents (Erisman, 2021, p. 30). Pollard (2014b) wrote that ServiceMaster strove to excel “at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders” because if they did not play by those rules, then “we didn’t belong in the ballgame” (p. 7).

Pollard (2013) believed that God has called us to be excellent in what we do, whether we call it a job, profession, or ministry, and when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, business person, minister, or educator, and live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained, we have the platform to proclaim and share our faith. (p. 5)

Pollard & Erisman (2014) note that it is important to be productive and excel as an ambassador for Christ. For Pollard (2007), when we are called to serve in the business world, it is essential to excel in what we do “to bring honor to the One who has called us” (p. 5). At ServiceMaster, pursuing excellence to help people develop created an inward focus on the employee and resulted in elevated levels of customer satisfaction and growth in profitability. The means goal of growing profitability will be considered next.

Grow Profitably

The topic of profit is one of the guiding principles for managerial decision making. Organizations that use limited resources efficiently and productively attract investment that can lead to growth and human flourishing. In principles of economics and managerial economics courses, the goal of profit maximization is presented as a primary goal. Undergraduate and graduate corporate finance texts typically highlight shareholder wealth maximization as the principal goal of the corporate form of business. Erisman (2015) considers shareholder wealth maximization analogous to a nonlinear optimization problem subject to the constraints of the law and the ethical norms of society (p. 59). Since the solution to constrained optimization problems typically occurs on the boundaries of the constraints, many firms seeking to maximize shareholder value push the boundaries of the law and ethical behavior too far, which results in scandal. Additionally, Hamel (2009) recognizes that wealth maximization as an emotional catalyst “lacks the power to fully mobilize human energies” (p. 2). What then is the role of profit in God’s economy?

This author recognizes the need for profit as a lifeblood for business existence. The means of attaining profit and the use of profit, however, should be noticeably different for a Christian or a business that adopts a Christian culture for conducting business. For example, John Wesley (1872) with his “Sermon Fifty” on the use of money suggests that the purpose of profitability is to be generous. Specifically, Wesley says we should be productive and “gain all you can.” We should be thrifty and “save all you can,” so that we may be generous and “give all you can.”

Role of Profit Negatives. Pollard realized that profit can be earned from goods and services that may be objectionable. Pollard (2006) stated that when profit is an end goal, “profit and wealth can become addictive and self-consuming,” and profit “can become a person’s god, leading to the loss of ultimate purpose and meaning in life” (p. 138). Profit maximization as an end goal is devoid of purpose, as Jesus warned in Matthew 16:26: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” In a 2013 interview, Pollard argued that a fundamental question every businessperson should ask themselves is, “Would you buy the goods or services that you are selling?” (as cited in Seattle Pacific University, 2013).

Role of Profit Positives. Pollard (2017a) wrote that the challenge of profitability is to use profits “as a trustee

in God’s Kingdom” (p. 6). For Pollard, profit was not the end goal but rather a measurement of the effectiveness in using “resources to benefit the people we serve, the fellow employees we work with, and those who invest in our enterprise” (Pollard, 1981, p. 27). Further, Pollard (2017a) wrote that when “we, as stewards, are involved in transforming the material world so that it can be of greater use by God, it is both an act of wealth creation and a service to our Lord” (p. 6).

When profit is viewed as a means goal in God’s world, then profit is a “virtue of accountability” (Pollard, 2006, p. 139). Pollard (2006) recognized that profit has a direct relationship to “the truth and value of our promise to the customer and to the people of the firm” (p. 137). For Pollard and ServiceMaster, profit was “a tool for accomplishing our end goals of honoring God and developing people” (p. 138).

Role of Profit Conclusion. Proverbs 14:23 (NIV) tells us, “All hard work brings a profit.” Pollard (2017a) stated his belief that there is “a biblical injunction for us to create wealth. It is God’s intention that we cultivate and improve the world and harness its resources” (p. 5). Even though 1 Timothy 6:10 cautions that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” it is what is done with profit that is important. Matthew 19:23 tells us that it is “hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven;” therefore, to enter the kingdom and store treasure in heaven, it is necessary to use profit and wealth to further God’s Kingdom here on earth. The proper use of profits can allow for generosity and an expansion of the economic pie. When viewed as a means goal, the pursuit of profit can inspire individuals to use their God-given ability to produce goods and services that enable the world to flourish. Pollard (2006) recognized that “God has chosen people to accomplish his will” and greater worth is achieved when “we take our gifts and talents and multiply them in the lives of others” (p. 107). The next section will consider the long-term impact of Pollard and ServiceMaster and how their example was multiplied in the lives of others.

SERVICEMASTER AND POLLARD’S LEGACY

The ServiceMaster culture began under the leadership of its founder Marion Wade (1929-1957). ServiceMaster began as a franchise cleaning organization in the 1930s. Marion Wade’s view of long-term success is demonstrated with the following quote:

I was not asking for personal success as an individual or merely material success as a corporation. I do not equate this kind of success with Christianity. Whatever God wants is what I want. But I did try to build a business that would live longer than I would in the marketplace that would witness to Jesus Christ in the way the business was conducted. (as cited in Erisman, 2021, p. 34)

Marion Wade was successful. Under the leadership of the ServiceMaster's second CEO Ken Hansen (1957-1973) and third CEO Ken Wessner (1973-1983), the business grew into a management services company. During the leadership of the fourth CEO Bill Pollard (1983-1993 and 1999-2001) and the fifth CEO Carlos Cantu (1994-1999), ServiceMaster experienced explosive growth, primarily through acquisitions.

Eventually the new acquisitions became larger than the legacy divisions and diluted the values of the company culture. Today, ServiceMaster is no longer a publicly traded company and is a shell of what it once was at its stock market peak in 1998. There is more than one explanation for this change of fortune for ServiceMaster. The initial leadership transition from Bill Pollard to Carlos Cantu that began in 1993 was disrupted when Carlos Cantu developed cancer. ServiceMaster had become too large and diverse to manage effectively. The leadership transition to Jonathan Ward after Pollard's second term as CEO in 2001 had a hand in changing the corporate culture. Given that ServiceMaster considered people to be the soul of the firm, the selling off of a division was like selling a part its soul. When Aramark bought the management services division in 2001, the management services ethos and the essence of ServiceMaster went with it.

Yet, the legacy of ServiceMaster and Pollard continues. In academia, the oldest, and most prestigious award given by the Christian Business Faculty Association (CBFA) is the Chewning Award. The Chewning award is given to honor "passion for the integration of faith and business" (CBFA, 2024). According to Chewning (2010), the 1998 conference attendees "all knew an award was going to be named that night but surely it would be named for C. William Pollard, or someone of his stature. He is my standard and model of a Christian executive" (p. 77). As it turned out, although the award was funded by ServiceMaster, it was named in honor of Richard C. Chewning.

ServiceMaster's and Pollard's legacy lives on in the business world. Erisman (2021) describes several franchises within ServiceMaster that "continue to hold

onto the four objectives within their domain" and several leaders "who were shaped by their time with the company, who are now leading other organizations and guiding them by what they learned during their time with ServiceMaster" (p. 184).

Where can we find current publicly traded companies like ServiceMaster? Two resources can help investors identify companies that conduct business in ways that are consistent with their faith. Both resources provide screening tools that can help investors identify companies that conduct business practices congruent with, or contrary to, their beliefs. The two resources are the Inspire Investing dashboard (<https://inspireinsight.com/#/dashboard>) and the Biblically Responsible Investment Institute (<https://www.briinstitute.com/>). For additional information on biblically responsible investing, see Saunders (2021) and the book by Inspire Investing Founder Robert Netzly (2018).

Two publicly traded companies that explicitly mention honoring God as part of their mission are Tyson Foods, Inc. and Coca-Cola Consolidated, Inc.¹ Tyson Foods (ticker TSN), headquartered in Springdale, Arkansas, produces and distributes chicken, beef, pork, and prepared foods. Tyson Foods states that it "strive[s] to honor God and be respectful of each other, our customers, and other stakeholders" (Tyson Foods, 2024, "Our Core Values, How We Do It" section).

Coca-Cola Consolidated (ticker COKE), is the largest Coca-Cola bottler in the United States. Coca-Cola Consolidated states that its purpose is "to honor God in all we do, to serve others, to pursue excellence, and to grow profitably" (Coca-Cola Consolidated, 2024, "About Us, Our Purpose" section). Although Coca-Cola Consolidated traces its roots to 1902, the current purpose was formalized officially in 2009 under the leadership of current CEO J. Frank Harrison III (Dorminy, personal communication, September 4, 2024). In a recent book, Harrison III (2022) shares how he built the purpose-driven culture at Coca-Cola Consolidated.

The books of Erisman (2021), Pollard (2006 and 1996a), and Harrison III (2022) provide good examples of companies (i.e., ServiceMaster and Coca-Cola Consolidated) and business leaders who have been able to successfully integrate faith and business. For both ServiceMaster and Coca-Cola Consolidated, growing profitably was a necessary means goal that enabled the development of people, service to others, and honoring God.

CONCLUSION

Pollard's perspective that profit is a means to an end and not the end goal itself is a valuable takeaway and reminder for Christians in the business world. The end goal for a Christian should be to honor God. Earning a profit may be necessary for business to survive and thrive, but profit should not be the end goal. Methods and markets that produce a profit that are not God honoring should be avoided.

The life and legacy of Bill Pollard and ServiceMaster provide an example of how things can and should be done in the business world. The four pillars of honoring God, developing people, pursuing excellence, and growing profitably can successfully guide a business. Honoring God can serve as the primary end goal for a productive and fruitful business. Acknowledging that people are the soul of an enterprise is an effective guide for decision making. Adopting Pollard's management practices that focus on the development of people through faith-based servant leadership offers all of us a higher purpose in our work to serve as a steward in God's creation.

The current examples of Coca-Cola Consolidated (Harrison III, 2022) and Inspire Investing (Netzly, 2018) demonstrate it is possible to operate a profitable business with a spiritual purpose as the end goal in today's business environment. Profit or purpose is not an either-or choice. Suggestions for additional reading include Edmans (2021) and Taylor (2024), which provide current research and additional examples of businesses navigating the complexities involved between purpose, compliance, ethics, sustainability, and profitability.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NIV) tells us that there "is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." Pollard (2006) stated that ServiceMaster was not "in the business of building this firm to last, but to serve" (p. 29). The ServiceMaster story recalls 1 Peter 1:24-25: "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." ServiceMaster may no longer have the global standing and influence that it once had, but the influence of the word of the Lord stands forever.

Endnote

¹ It should be noted that both Tyson Foods and Coca-Cola Consolidated have dual-class share systems which give the Tyson family (for Tyson Foods) and the Harrison family (for Coca-Cola Consolidated) a controlling majority of the voting shares.

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