

Your Work and Your Calling

For many years, especially in the Dark Ages and Middle Ages, Christians were taught that there was really only one calling, and that was a call to give up secular living to serve as a monk, priest, or nun. Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea, wrote that there are two ways of life for a Christian: the perfect life and the permitted life. The perfect life was spiritual and was reserved for priests, monks, and nuns. They gave up “normal” life – marriage, family, working for money, trading, doing business. Only this life was a calling. On the other hand, the permitted life was secular and was reserved for maids, soldiers, and kings. This wasn't sin, but it wasn't the best or ideal. And it wasn't a calling.

The Protestant Reformation recovered the Biblical idea that all honest work can be worship. Martin Luther taught the doctrine of vocation. Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, meaning to call. Luther taught that every honest and honourable form of work, no matter how low, was part of God's call to Christians. He wrote, “Every occupation has its own honor before God. Ordinary work is a divine vocation or calling. In our daily work, no matter how important or mundane, we serve God by serving the neighbor and we also participate in God's on-going providence for the human race.” If someone performed a task which was a form of love to one's neighbour, that person's job was as sacred as the work of a preacher.

William Wilberforce was a Member of Parliament and worked for the abolition of the slave trade. Immediately after his conversion many years earlier, he desired to leave politics and enter the ministry. It seemed so much more important than secular work. John Newton, his pastor, persuaded Wilberforce otherwise. In 1788 Wilberforce wrote in his own journal: “My walk is a public one. My business is in the world; and I must mix in the assemblies of men, or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.” Because of his willingness to work in politics, he almost singlehandedly ended the slave trade in the British Empire.

William Tyndale wrote “that if our desire is to please God, pouring water, washing dishes, cobbling shoes, and preaching the Word ‘is all one.’ And Luther—in his typical earthy style—once wrote “God and the angels smile when a man changes a diaper.”

What does the Bible say about our callings? Is every work a calling? Are some jobs more pleasing to God than others? Can I really serve God in my job as faithfully as if I'd become a missionary? To understand what the Bible teaches about work and calling, we need to understand three key ideas about calling.

I. God Calls You To Several Callings

17 But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. 18 Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised.

19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*. 20 Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.

21 Were you called *while* a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use *it*. 22 For he who is called in the Lord *while* a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called *while* free is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brethren, let each one remain with God in that *state* in which he was called. 25 Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. 26 I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress-- that *it is* good for a man to remain as he is: 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 B (1 Cor. 7:17-28)

This text reveals that people have multiple callings. He mentions slaves and freemen. He mentions singles, married, and divorced or widowed. God calls us to many things. What does He call us to?

Let's start at the very top.

When God *calls* us in Scripture, He is firstly calling us to salvation. We see this in verse 21 – Were you called while a slave? In other words, did you get saved while being a slave? Romans 8:30, “Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

2Ti 1:9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began,

At least forty times in the New Testament, the word *called* is used for salvation. This is our primary calling: to be saved out of sin and darkness and become worshippers and disciples of the Lord Jesus. God called you to Himself.

But why didn't He just take you to Heaven immediately? Why does God call us to salvation, but then leave us on earth? Because besides your primary calling, God also calls you to some secondary callings.

God calls you to serve him in every arena of life. Each arena he places us in is one of our secondary callings. That's why, in our text, Paul not only talks about being called, *he talks about the calling you were in when called.* 20 Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.

What are your secondary callings? *They're the places and situations God has called you to by virtue of his commands in Scripture or his providential working of your circumstances.*

So let me list out the three main secondary callings.

Your calling in the church. 15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. (Col. 3:15)

Yes, our *primary* calling is to individual salvation and discipleship. But the Lord has organized those who are called into his church. God calls believers to join and be a part of the local church, and serve in it. How you serve and where you serve will differ from person to person. But everyone who is called to salvation is called to serve in the local church.

18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. (1 Cor. 12:18)

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. (1 Cor. 12:27)

If you are saved and have joined a church, then God has called you to active service and membership in that church.

Your calling in marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7, as Paul speaks about callings, marriage, singleness is included. God calls us all to singleness in our youth, and again often in our latter years. Some He calls to singleness all through life. Some He calls to marriage for the better part of their lives. Marriage is a calling that becomes part of your identity: a wife is now fundamentally her husband's helper. A husband is fundamentally incomplete in his life's work without his wife. A single person, as Paul points out can be entirely devoted to the Lord's work without any other consideration. If you are single right now, then God has called you to singleness, and may call you to marriage. If you are married right now, God has called you to marriage.

Your calling in the workplace. Paul mentions here those who are slave and free. Understandably, he doesn't call slavery a calling, but his point is that your state of life as far as your work and labour is

also an area God controls and selects for you.

Where God places you as far as your main task in life: whether it be working a paid job, or working in the home, or taking care of grandchildren, or studying, that is your calling. For example, if you are studying to be an engineer, then God has called you to be a student, and may one day call you to be an engineer. If you are a cashier to help fund your studies, He has called you to be a cashier until He calls you to the job that your other studies open up.

Now it may be that you are in a job which is not going to be your ultimate calling. Your ultimate calling matches your talents, gifts, and strengths. Jesus worked with wood and stone, and Paul made tents, but they had other God-given callings. You might work as a waitress or a nanny to pay the bills, but your gifts and talents lie elsewhere. Nevertheless, what enables you to provide for yourself and for others can be called your calling in the workplace.

Each of us is called to love God with all our heart soul, mind and strength. This is our primary calling. But God arranges for you to work that out in a certain home life, a certain church life and a certain work life.

That leads to the next truth about calling.

II. Your Secondary Callings Support Your Main Calling

29 But this I say, brethren, the time *is* short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, 30 those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, 31 and those who use this world as not misusing *it*. For the form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29-31)

Paul is not here discouraging marriage. He is pointing out that these are secondary callings- being single or married, bond or free, circumcised or uncircumcised, are not the most important things in the world. Changing our state in these secondary callings is not as important as pleasing the Lord. Why? The form of this world is passing away. Don't treat these secondary callings as ends in themselves. Each of them must be used to serve the primary calling: a born-again worshipper of Christ.

Your church calling, your marital or singleness calling, and your work calling all support your primary calling of worshipping and loving God. To put it another way, every one of your other callings is an assignment, a stewardship from God, a way of honouring and worshiping Him.

The first commandment always remains the first commandment. If you do not pursue your primary calling, your secondary callings will become fruitless, tasteless, and aimless. To pursue marriage above all things will be to set yourself up for a crushing disappointment when you find out your spouse is not the source of perfect joy. A marriage without God becomes slow and steady resentment or cold tolerance.

The man who pursues selfish ambition to merely build his career or build his finances might look like he is doing well on the outside. But from God's perspective, he was building that which he could never keep, sand castles on the beach. Decades given to careerism without God will have been decades wasted.

And it's even possible to be busy in your church calling, and do so without and apart from God. Doing your time, being there when you are on the roster, but no worship, no sense of privilege, no dependence.

No, each of our secondary callings is for the glory of God. The parable of the talents reminds us that

all that God entrusts you with: your church, marriage, children, work, is to be put to use to return glory to God with interest. Whether you are a student, or retired, a stay at home mom, a full-time employee, or even unemployed, you must maximise your calling for the glory of God.

17 And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Col. 3:17)

23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23-24)

Pro 3:6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.

Now that's a great way of evaluating your job, to find out if it really is the task God has called you to. Can you glorify God in it? Not all work is honourable, and God won't call you to dishonour Him. Does your work glorify God? That might sound vague, so let's break it down into smaller questions.

First, does this work line up with God's law? Does it break any of the Ten Commandments? In other words, does it steal from anyone? Does it harm human life? Does it destroy marriage, family and morality? Does it cause and grow covetousness? Is it a form of false witness? Does it create idols?

Second, does it improve the world in ways that please God: by promoting the good of your neighbour and the restraint of evil? Work that is aimless or harmful to the world does not glorify God. Harm of our neighbour does not please God. Encouraging evil does not please God.

Third, does it build character or wound character? When people do this work, does the nature of the work itself deform their character?

By these standards, you can have work that is skillful, legal, financially profitable, but still dishonourable.

If you make trinkets and sweets that are a waste of space and toxic to the human body, if you produce some kind of content that wastes time, consumes people's money with no helpful return. If you devote yourself to producing aimless or even morally questionable entertainment. If you develop schemes that exploit people, prey on ignorance, siphon off cash from the elderly, unwitting, uneducated. If you produce books or movies or music or computer games or apps that wound and misshape people's characters, it is not God-glorifying work. It is not supporting your primary calling. If you sell and distribute what is immoral and damaging to people, it is not honourable. If you make things people don't need for them to impress people they don't like purchased with money they don't have, you aren't helping the world to head in God's direction.

We should ask ourselves these kinds of questions:

Dan Doriani: "Does my job advance the common good?"

Do I help people or exploit them?

Am I glad to tell people what I do?

Do I please the Lord as I earn my bread, or do I merely earn my bread?

Can I joyfully present my work to the Lord? If we can't answer these questions properly and with a clear conscience, we should probably seek different work."

This is how we find out if our job glorifies God. It doesn't have to be complex. It might be driving people around. It might be typing and filing and printing. It might be changing diapers, buying groceries and picking up children. It might be helping a company with its technology or its

processes, or designing clothes or systems or structures. But if it loves our neighbour and brings some more of God's order into the world, then it glorifies Him.

All work ultimately come back to these two commands: Love your God; love your neighbor. If you can do that with your work, it is honourable, honest work is sacred. God calls every disciple to full-time service. The medieval distinction was false. There is no division between sacred and secular work. Farmers, manufacturers, pilots, programmers, homemakers, and drivers can please God as much as faithful pastors and missionaries.

No honest calling is morally superior to another. You can serve God in any honest and honourable job. God could evaluate a pastor, a plumber and a housewife with the same questions: Did you honour Me with the gifts I gave you? Did you use it to provide for your family or others? Were your neighbours better off because of your work? Did you reward the investment that others put into you? Did My people get answers to their legitimate prayers through you?"

Now this doesn't mean that all jobs are equally valuable, or bring equal good into the world. No, some have far more influence than others. Some are far more highly skilled and require far more preparation and training. Some are highly valuable to society and highly paid, others are not. Some have great social esteem; some are frowned upon. Some carry heavy burdens, some are trivial. Some have massive effects on millions of lives, others have relatively little.

But each can be lived out for the glory of God.

That brings us to the third truth about our callings.

III. The Goal of Every Calling is Faithfulness

Our goal in all of our callings is to be counted as faithful. We are to do what we do with God in mind, and perform them with trust and dependence on Him. We are to fulfil that area of life with actions and attitudes and thoughts and words and deeds pleasing to God.

People today speak about fulfillment at work. But this tends to create a self-focus. The Bible is far more interested in faithfulness, not fulfillment. God said of Moses, "He is faithful in all my house" (Num. 12:7; cf. Ezek. 48:11). The precious words of Jesus on the last day are "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21, 23). And Paul teaches, "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2; cf. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:12).

Faithfulness is more important than success, than promotion, than a raise. Faithfulness is more important to God than climbing the corporate ladder, or marrying the dream guy or dream girl. Faithfulness is more important than prominence, being well known, or recognised, or a leader.

So what does it look like to be faithful in your calling?

1. Faithfulness at work is working to provide.

But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; 11 that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, 12 that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and *that* you may lack nothing. (1 Thess. 4:10-12)

To be faithful is to work steadily so as to be worthy of remuneration. In this way you can provide for your needs, and your family's, if you have one, so that you are not dependent on anyone else. The very young, the aged, the sick or disabled can expect and hope for outside support, without

being considered unfaithful. But if you are of age, able-bodied, you should be able to provide for your own needs, and as Paul adds in Ephesians 4:28, you might be generous to others. If your work is a paid one, then faithfulness is doing it and being paid so as to provide for others. In some cases, it is even providing many jobs for others.

Indeed, when you work well, you may end up providing for many others, feeding many families.

2. Faithfulness at work is reflecting God's character in your calling.

Most people can work hard enough to earn. But it's another thing to work in a way that reflects your God. To work like God works is faithfulness.

What does God do in His work? God brought order out of chaos. Whenever we organise, shape, pattern, structure, plan to bring order and beauty and efficiency, we are reflecting God's character faithfully. A better management strategy, a more effective way of doing sales, a better way to save money on the grocery budget, a more logical management structure: this is bringing order out of chaos.

God, when He works, also exercised authority wisely. God is the perfect leader: just and gentle, fair but demanding, forgiving but not partial, understanding but not sentimental, exacting but sympathetic, easy to please and hard to satisfy. When we lead like Christ, we are being faithful, because we are letting God's character shine on others.

3 The God of Israel said, The Rock of Israel spoke to me: 'He who rules over men *must be* just, Ruling in the fear of God. 4 And *he shall be* like the light of the morning *when* the sun rises, A morning without clouds, Like the tender grass *springing* out of the earth, By clear shining after rain.' (2 Sam. 23:3-4)

God was creative in His work. We reflect God's character by being creative, thinking of new and better ways, being original, imaginative, innovative to solve problems, develop new products, come up with new programs, ministries, plans.

Orderly, just authority and creative.

3. Faithfulness at work is remaining stable and reliable through difficult circumstances.

Three times in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul tells his people to stay where they are and fulfill their duties (1 Cor. 7:17, 20, 24). They serve Christ there.

Paul repeats the idea, "Stay, unless, because". Paul repeatedly tells disciples in difficult circumstances, "Stay where you are, unless there is strong reason to change." By enduring, believers will usually do more good than if they keep hopping from one calling to another, desperately trying to change their life circumstance.

In verses 8-9 "**Stay** single, **unless** your desires are unmanageable, **because** it is better to marry than to burn" (vv. 8-9). In verses 12-16 he instructs people to **stay** married, **unless** an unbelieving spouse resolves to leave, **because** no one knows if a pagan spouse will believe or not. Next, Paul addresses slavery. Each Corinthian "should **remain** in the condition in which he was called" (v. 20). If someone is a slave, "Don't be concerned about it." That is, **stay**, "**unless** you can gain your freedom." In that case, "do so" (v. 21 NIV). The reasoning, the because, follows. When we belong to Christ, other questions of status become secondary.

What does this tell us? God assigns you to specific roles and callings. Usually, you are expected to

spend at least some time in that calling. You will usually learn more, and be shaped more when you embrace the difficulty of that calling, than if you just jump ship. But the other side of the coin is that God permits us to move if there is good reason.

But what glorifies God is believers who are rooted and stable enough to not place all their hope in a wishful thinking that the grass is always greener in another job, and another church, and another family state. There are times to leave your job. There are times to leave a church. There are times to pursue marriage vigorously. But consistency, reliability, faithfulness, loyalty – these are the marks of faithfulness.

Paul says that the servant who shows loyalty adorns the doctrine of God” 9 *Exhort* bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all *things*, not answering back, 10 not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things. (Tit. 2:9-10)

When we focus on faithfulness, it also helps us when there appears to be a conflict between our callings: late hours at work affect marriage or church, extra studies affect marriage and church, church meetings affect family time and so on. The question you should ask is not “Is it okay for me to skip church to study for my Maths final?” or “Is it okay to have a family day and not go to work?” The question to ask is, “Will I be more faithful if I skip church to do this? Will I be a more faithful Christian, a more faithful homemaker, a more faithful worker if I choose this over this?” Faithfulness, not pragmatism is what must guide us.

Providing like God provides. Reflecting God's character: order, wise leadership, creativity. Reliability and stability. This is faithfulness. It is what is needed in all your secondary callings: church, family, and work. Those are there for your primary calling: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.