



Central Peninsula Church

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1 Cor. 7:17-24

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God's Calling and Your Career

It's been years since most of us have seen Disney's classic movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but few of us have forgotten the sight of the seven dwarfs as they marched off to work singing, "Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's off to work we go." There was a look of determination and joy on their faces as they whistled that tune with picks and shovels in hand on their way to the mines. It's no mistake that film was made just after the Great Depression when so many people had been out of work. With the economy recovering people were thrilled just to be working. Those dwarfs reflected a mood that swept the country.

Today there is a variation of that song that may reflect a different mood, "I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go." The change is hardly subtle. For many today, the joy of work has become tainted with a sense of drudgery. Any sense of joy has often been replaced with brute necessity. Studs Terkel wrote a book called, *Working*. After scores of interviews with a variety of people in the workplace, he wrote, "This book, being about work, is by its very nature about violence - to the spirit as well as the body. It's about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fist fights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all, about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us."

For some, the problem isn't drudgery, but drivenness. A recent study showed that Americans work an average of forty-nine and one-half weeks a year, more than any other developed nation. Our passion for work might be called an obsession. Perhaps we've ceased to think about whether or not we enjoy it, we're just driven by the piles on our desk or the inner compulsion to get to the top. When we finally do stop for long enough to think about why, we wonder what it has to do with things that really matter. It's like the writer of Ecclesiastes said, "**What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief, even at night his mind doesn't rest**" (Ecc. 2:22-23).

So why do we work? Some people just see work as a necessary evil. We do it because we have to make a living, or because of what it allows us to do on the weekend or vacation. We Americans are very serious about our leisure. We place high expectations on what

our time off can do for us. Half the time we end up more exhausted after the vacation than we were before! Plus we have to pay it off. Another version of this kind of thinking is to live for retirement. If we are serious about vacations, we are dead serious about retirement. We dream about it. We save for it. We concoct ways to make it come earlier. But, once again, expectations are rarely met. Either the money is not there, or the energy is not there, or the one we planned to spend it with is not there. For many people, retirement is so traumatic they just find new ways to work.

Each of these solutions work off the same assumption - real life is to be found in those times when we don't have to work. Work is only of value as a means to an end. It's only good in so far as it finances all the other things we need to do to be really fulfilled. Certainly there are times when NOT working is a good thing. God instituted the Sabbath because life is more than work. But God is also the One who invented work. When God created Adam and Eve, he gave them meaningful work to do. He told them to "**fill the earth and subdue it**" (Gen. 2:28). Before sin ever entered the world, there was work in paradise.

So what's the answer? How do we capture God's purpose for our work? How can work become for us more than just a necessary evil? How can our work take on its rightful place in our lives? It's Labor Day and this is what I want to focus on today. I want to suggest that the answer to that question lies in the whole concept of what the Bible calls our calling. We need to understand how our jobs connect with our calling. When we understand our calling, our job will take on a whole new meaning.

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 7. We'll be looking at vv. 17-24.

I. Understanding our calling 1 Cor. 7:17-24

A. Background: Let me start by giving you some background to this chapter. In chapter 7 Paul began by answering some questions about marriage. Some of the believers at Corinth had made a commitment to Christ while married. Since they were now new creatures in Christ, they wondered if somehow their marriages were a part of their non-Christian past they should leave behind.

Many of them probably had mates who had not decided to follow Christ, so they wondered if somehow that old relationship would contaminate their new relationship with God. Paul is addressing that issue and basically says, "As far as it's up to you, stay in your marriage. The best thing to do is remain in same marital condition you were in when you came to Christ."

But then, starting in v. 17, Paul applies that same principle to other areas of life where they might think they should try to make a change. He says, as a general rule, we should stay in whatever station in life we were in when we met Christ. He uses two examples; both of which were controversial and tended to divide people of his day. The first example was that of circumcision, which divided Jews and Gentiles. The second issue has to do with slavery. Some of the Corinthians were slaves. Of course, slavery as an institution is an evil thing. But the slavery of Paul's day was different than it was in this country 150 years ago. There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Slaves were part of the fabric of society. Some of them had good jobs and lived comfortable, secure lives. But you can understand why some of them thought that now that they were Christians they should become free. That's the issue Paul is addressing. We don't have slaves today, but in a broader sense this applies to whatever occupation or job we have. How does our occupation relate to our conversion? What impact does our call to Christ have on our need to work?

"Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches. Was any man called already circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called."

I want to make several observations about what Paul says here.

B. We are all called: The first thing to notice is that as followers of Jesus Christ we are all called. Throughout this passage Paul repeats the fact that we have all been called by God while we were in a particular occupation. When he talks about us being called he is speaking about our conversion experience. In verse 21 he asks, "Were you called while a slave?" What he is asking is this: "When you became a Christian, when you heard the call of God to repent of your sins and you trusted in Christ, were you a slave?" He could have just as well asked, "When God called you into relationship with His Son, were you a school teacher, or a construction worker, or a policeman, or an accountant, or a stay-at-home mom, or even a retiree?" The answer to this question is yes. Unless we were converted as children, all of us were something when we were called. But the point is as believers we have all been called by God.

How do you know if you've been called? Are you following Jesus Christ? If the answer is yes, congratulations, you've been called. You may not know this, but you wouldn't be doing that unless he called you first. He made the first move. He called your name. He said, "Come on, follow me!" And you said, "Yes, I will follow you." Peter put it this way, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pt. 2:9). God's people are called people.

C. Our calling takes precedence over our job: This leads to the second observation. The assumption of this passage is that our calling takes precedence over our job. If you look carefully at this passage it's very clear that our jobs are NOT the most important thing about us, our calling is. Our jobs do not have any ultimate value in themselves, but our calling does. That's why throughout the passage Paul tells them not to stress about changing the circumstances of their job. If they can change, if they can become free, then they should go ahead and do it, but the bottom line is, it doesn't matter all that much. What matters is your calling. Look at vv. 20-21, "**Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it.**" We read that and say, "Don't worry about it? How can you not worry about it?" The only reason he could say that is because their calling was so much more important.

Now let's face it, not all of us think and live this way. We get our identity and our significance from our jobs, and we tend to view our calling as incidental. Paul says your calling defines who you are, not your job. Verses 22-23 really bring this home. He says to slaves that in the Lord they are free, and he says to their masters that in the Lord they are slaves (of Christ). He says the Lord has purchased

them; he has bought their freedom; he has paid the redemption price, and so they are all not to think of themselves as slaves of men but of God. You see, this works both ways. Some of us, because of our particular jobs, tend to think too little of ourselves and need to remember our high calling in Christ. Others, because of our particular jobs, tend to think too high of ourselves, and need to remember we are just slaves of Christ.

I had this lesson brought home to me as a young man. After I served as a Youth Pastor for four years in another church Lynn and I decided to move to Colorado so I could finish seminary. We were already in our late twenties and had a four-year-old daughter. I became a full-time student and a part-time waiter. Now in my warped way of thinking, that just wasn't as significant a job as being a pastor. It wasn't long before my sense of significance began to fade. Here I was, almost 30 years old, trying to get through school, waiting tables at a two-bit hamburger joint. To make matters worse, Lynn became the primary breadwinner and worked as the assistant to the President of a large Savings and Loan. I'd take her to work in the morning and see all these guys she worked with greet her in their \$3,000 suits while I still had my slippers on. It was humbling. I wanted to scream, "I'm not really what you think. I'm really an important person. I was a pastor. This is all just temporary." You see, I wasn't really deriving my significance from my calling. Now I'm a pastor. At times I think I'm a big shot. Nobody else does, but I do! Unfortunately, I still can fall into the trap of not deriving my significance from my calling.

What does your calling say about who you are? God says through Isaiah, "**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine**" (Is. 43:1). Jesus said, "**You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world**" (Mt. 5:13-14). Paul says we have been "**blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ**" (Ephesians 1:3). He says we were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, we were adopted as beloved children, we were purchased (redeemed) with the precious blood of Christ, and we have a glorious inheritance waiting for us in heaven. That's our identity! That's who we are by virtue of our calling. No job can give you any of those things! These are tough days in the Bay Area. You might even be out of a job. But all these things are still true of you, and that's who you really are, and that's what really matters.

So you might just wonder, if my calling is everything, why bother with work? Why should I even care that much about my work? This leads to my final observation.

D. Our calling will transform our job: Our calling

will ultimately transform our job. Even though our calling is more important than our job, our job is still important. Our job is the place we live out the implications of our call.

Notice how Paul spells this out. In v. 17 he calls our job "**the place the Lord has assigned to each one.**" He says, "Wherever you were at when Christ called you, that's your assignment." (There are exceptions to this, of course, like the woman who came up to me after the first service and said she was a drug dealer when she met Christ!) And then in v. 20 he says something very surprising. The word the NASB translates "condition" and the NIV translates "situation" is actually the same word he uses in the rest of the passage for "calling." It should read like this: "Each man must remain in that calling in which he was called." You see, our jobs are a calling. You might say, there is Calling with a big "C" and calling with a small "c." Calling with a big "C" is the same for every believer; we are called into a relationship with Christ. Calling with a small "c" is a little different for every believer. Our different jobs are a kind of calling; they are an assignment from God.

By the way, this is where the word "vocation" comes in. We use that to speak of our careers, but the word comes from the Latin root which means "to call." We each have a vocational calling. Our vocation is the unique place God has called us to live out the implications of our big "C" calling.

Paul gives us a very strong hint of what that might mean in 24. Notice he says, "**Each one is to remain *with God* in that condition in which he was called.**" Underline those words, "with God." These two words make all the difference in the world. The NIV translates this, "as responsible to God." The idea seems to be that, whatever our work is, God is not only right there with us, but we do our work for Him; he is the One we are please. In Colossians, Paul puts it this way, "**Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men**" (Col. 3:23-24). Paul says do your work as if it were an act of worship. Let me ask you, what difference would it make if you did your job every day before an audience of One?

It would make a difference in how we work. When we are doing our work for God we strive for excellence in all that we do. Sweeping floors, studying for an exam, pounding nails, pulling teeth, fixing computers will be done with diligence and conscientiousness. It should never be said of Christian workers that they are halfhearted, chronically late, irresponsible, whiny, and "too heavenly minded to be

any earthly good.”

Years ago there was a young woman who was a maid. She had come into a relationship with Christ and was applying for membership at the Baptist church in London where Charles Spurgeon was pastor. The church had a committee that examined all potential members. During the interview, Spurgeon asked her if there was any evidence that she had truly repented of her sins. She looked at him and said, “Well, I no longer sweep the dirt under the rugs in the house where I am employed.” Spurgeon turned to the committee and said, “That’s all I need to hear. We will receive her as a member.” That woman’s big “C” calling made her a better small “c” worker.

Working for God should also make a difference in who we are. This goes beyond just being good workers. The idea here is being people of Christlike character in the marketplace. We should be marked by integrity. We should be known as people who don’t shade the truth to make the deal. Expense accounts are not padded. Petty cash is not pilfered. Company time is not wasted.

But that’s only the start. We should actually model a lifestyle that is directly opposed to the typical standard. The typical marketplace mentality, especially in the Bay Area, centers on the bottom line: profits, quotas, sales reports, balance sheets, and getting ahead of our co-workers. Yet, we should be people marked by compassion, servanthood, and putting people above the bottom line. It’s so easy to slip into self-centeredness. I do it all the time. I become so consumed with my own list of things to do that I pass someone in the hallway who is obviously hurting, and walk on telling myself, “Someone else can deal with that. I’m too busy.” When you go to work tomorrow, who do you need to reach out to? Who needs your encouragement? Who needs you to listen?

Being Christlike also means being vulnerable - admitting when you make a mistake. As followers of Christ we are going to blow it at times. We will lose our tempers, say something unkind, fall into gossip, or just fail to do a good job. We should be known as people who refuse to blame shift or rationalize, but who say, “I’m sorry. I blew it. I shouldn’t have said that. I was wrong.” We can also be vulnerable by just being honest when we’re struggling with something. We don’t have to be “Joe Christian” with a plastic

smile. We need to be human, sincere, honest, and transparent.

Finally, working before an audience of One should make a difference in what we say. Once we earn credibility in how we work and who we are, then we’ve earned the right to share Christ with our co-workers. I like what Bill Hybels says about this, “Jesus never commanded us to engage in theological debates with strangers, flaunt four-inch crosses and Jesus stickers, or throw our Christian catch phrases. But he did tell us to live and work in such a way that when the Holy Spirit orchestrates opportunities to speak about God, we will have earned the right.”

We are all called. Our calling takes priority over our job, but it also transforms our job. Work becomes an act of worship for an audience of One. That transforms how we work, who we are, and what we say.

Brother Lawrence lived in the 17th century. He was a lay brother in the Catholic church. Because he was clumsy and not very bright, he was given the job of working in the monastery kitchen, a work he said he had a natural aversion for. But Brother Lawrence learned to do that job as an act of praise. Someone who knew him said this of him, “having accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of God, and with prayer on all occasions for grace to do his work well, he found everything easy during the 15 years he worked there.” For Lawrence, every action was an act of worship.

Would that he could say that to each of us. When you do your work before an audience of One, your work no longer becomes an act of drudgery or driveness; it’s not even a necessary evil, it’s an act of worship.

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