

## A Biblical Theology of Work: The Doctrine of Vocation (Selected Scriptures)

You know, when men get together, when they meet for the first time, one of the questions that typically comes up pretty early in the conversation between men is, “What do you do for a living?” That’s a very common question among men. What do you do for a living?

And sometimes people are embarrassed about what they do for a living, and they may tend toward some embellishment to try to make it seem more significant, perhaps, than at least in their mind it is. And I can remember when I was in college, I worked pumping gas. That’s a long-lost art, but I worked pumping gas in a gas station. And so in an attempt to embellish the importance of that particular employment, I used to call it a petroleum transfer engineer. That I was a petroleum transfer engineer.

But there is no reason or need to be embarrassed about work because any legitimate work done well is pleasing in the sight of God. Is pleasing in the sight of God. Any legitimate work done well—so those are the two conditions—is pleasing in the sight of God, and thus it brings great honor to those who are so engaged.

Well, this morning—as soon as this thing wakes up. There we go. This morning, we’re going to ask and answer two questions. Ask and answer two questions regarding the doctrine of vocation so that we will have a sense of excitement and fulfillment as we participate in the God-glorifying activity of work. So, two questions regarding the doctrine of vocation. OK, so a lot to cover. Let’s dig in.

Question number one: what do you mean when you talk about vocation? The first question: what do you mean when you talk about vocation? The word *vocation* in most people’s thinking is just another way to say work or job. Vocation equals job in many people’s minds, and unfortunately, that is not anywhere near the full-orbed implication of that word.

We speak about vocational training; we speak about vocational education; we speak about bivocational pastors, meaning that at the church where they are, pastoring is unable to provide enough financial support to care for the needs of their family, and so they seek bread outside the church as well, so bivocational pastors. But actually, the English word “vocation” comes from a Latin word *vocare*, which means “calling.” Which

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means “calling.” And that is significant. Vocation comes from a Latin word which means “calling.”

And so when we speak about vocation, we are speaking about the idea of our calling. The idea of our calling. That is also significant because of this important reality, and that is that we cannot be self-called. In fact, implicit in the word *calling* is that it originates outside of us. It originates outside of us. You can't be self-called. Someone else must do the calling. And the one who does the calling is God Himself. Is God Himself.

We see this principle of the call of God in people's lives in Second Thessalonians chapter 2. So I will turn you there. Second Thessalonians chapter 2, and verses 13 and 14, where there we see the call of God to salvation. The call of God to salvation. This word translated “call,” by the way—*kaleō*—is the Greek verb, and it means “to call” or “to summon” or “to invite.” To call, to summon, or to invite. So here in Second Thessalonians chapter 2, verses 13 and 14, Paul writes, “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He [*kaleō*] called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Now, question: did you make a real and meaningful choice to follow Christ? Did you make a real and meaningful choice to follow Christ? And the answer to that is yes, you did. Yes, you did. You absolutely made a real and meaningful choice to rise up and follow the Lord Jesus Christ. But your choice was a result of His prior choice of you. That's what Paul is saying here. Your choice, real and meaningful, is a result of His prior choice of you. Now, that same reality applies to the situation in life. That same reality applies to our situation in life.

And so let me demonstrate that to you from First Corinthians chapter 7. First Corinthians chapter 7. And taking up the reading in verse 15. First Corinthians chapter 7, and beginning in verse 15, Paul writes:

<sup>15</sup>Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. <sup>16</sup>For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

<sup>17</sup>Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. <sup>18</sup>Was any man

called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.<sup>19</sup>Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.<sup>20</sup>Each man must remain in that condition [*klēsis*, which is related to the verb *kaleō*. You can look in your margin, perhaps, and see the word that's translated in the NASB "condition," "calling," which would be another valid translation there. "Each man must remain in that [calling or] condition"] in which he was called.

<sup>21</sup>Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. <sup>22</sup>For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is the Lord's slave. <sup>23</sup>You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. <sup>24</sup>Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called. (1 Cor. 7:15–24 NASB)

So Paul is instructing the believers here in Corinth that when they came to faith in Christ, they were not to abandon their station in life. They were not to abandon their station in life. If they were married, they're not to become unmarried. Verses 12 and 13: "But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any man has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away."

So when they came to Christ, when they were called to faith in Christ, Paul says if you're married, remain in that condition in which you were called, that station in which you were called. Married or, as he develops the argument, even unmarried.

If you were called as Jew or Gentile—verses 18 and 19—if you are called while a Gentile, don't seek circumcision, don't seek to change that situation. If you were called while circumcised, don't seek to become uncircumcised to change that situation. Again, don't try and change the situation in which you are. You cannot improve your standing by a change of situation. If they're called while a slave, they're not to worry about it (verse 21).

So let's make some application. In other words, if you come to faith while working as a janitor, you are not to think that you must quit your position as a janitor because of your new allegiance to Christ. Instead, you are to be the best janitor possible. The best janitor

possible. Colossians chapter 3 and verse 23: “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.”

If you were called to faith in Christ while a janitor, don't quit your job. Become the best janitor possible. The best janitor possible. Now, the implications of all of this for our understanding of vocation is huge. It's huge because it means whatever our station in life, it has no effect upon our relationship with Christ. No matter what our station in life, it has no effect upon our relationship to Christ. In other words, we are not closer to Christ because of our work. We are not further from Christ because of our work. We can neither improve nor diminish our standing with Christ because of our work, what we do.

Because we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, without regard to works, therefore, all vocations are equal before God. This is the big idea. All vocations are thus equal in the sight of God. All vocations that are legitimate work done well are equal in the sight of God.

That means—listen to this—that means that all vocations are thus sacred callings. All vocations are thus sacred callings. Pastors and plumbers, missionaries and maids are both sacred callings of God. Neither are in favor with God, nor are either inherently superior to the other with regard to our standing before God.

Now, another way to get at this profound truth is through what is known as the priesthood of the believer. The priesthood of the believer. The idea taught in the New Testament that through the shed blood of Christ all Christians enjoy equal access to God the Father and are thus spiritually equal and have equal potential to minister for God. OK, the priesthood of the believer.

Galatians chapter 3, verse 28, I'll just read it to you. Paul says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ.” In other words, there is not a hierarchy before the Lord. Now, this understanding destroys the clergy-laity distinction. And the sooner it's destroyed, the better off the church of Jesus Christ will be.

So let that truth sink in. There are men called, gifted by God to positions of leadership within a church. But they're standing before God is not one wit better than yours. Their vocation is not in the slightest bit superior to yours in the sight of God. As I've said before, we do not have to have an official pray-er at public events.

Now, the reality that God calls us to our vocation means that He sets the terms by which we fulfill it. He sets the terms by which we shall fulfill it. It is His calling. So we understand this readily enough when it comes to the vocations found within the family; we don't struggle with that, right? The means by which the vocation to be a husband is fulfilled, we would look to the Scriptures. The means by which the vocation of a wife is to be fulfilled, we would look to the Scriptures. The means by which the vocation of a parent and a child is fulfilled, we would look to the Scriptures. The Scripture defines and bounds these things for us. Even being a grandparent, we would look to the Scriptures.

This is also true of our employment situations. This reality is also true of our employment situations. When we work to glorify God by expressing our humanity, we also work to love and serve others. All legitimate work done well expresses our humanity. It brings pleasure and glory to God, expresses our humanity in the way He has originally created us, and it provides for us the opportunity, yea, the obligation to love and serve others. To love and serve others through our vocation.

This is what God has called us to. This is what God has called us to. In Matthew 22 verses 37–39. Pick it up in 36: “Teacher, what is the great commandment in the Law?” 37: “And He [that is, Jesus] said to him, ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” The Law and the Prophets. Their teaching can be summarized in two loves: love to God and love to fellow man.

So the first great commandment: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second: to love your neighbor as yourself. It is through vocation that one of the means of fulfilling that second commandment occurs. In other words, we must understand that one of the purposes of our vocation is to love and serve our neighbor. To love and serve our neighbor and thus fulfill the second great commandment. It is in this sense that this second commandment is a test of the legitimacy of our work. A test of the legitimacy of our work. In other words, a question to ask is, “How does my present work love and serve my neighbor?” How does my present employment love and serve my neighbor? That is a very important question to ask and to take the time to think about.

Let me suggest some for you, OK? Just to get the juices flowing. If your vocation is law enforcement? How does a vocation of law enforcement love and serve others? Well,

you are being called, first and foremost, to protect the innocent and the helpless. To protect the innocent and the helpless. That is how you love and serve. What about teaching? What about a teacher? It is to educate the ignorant. You love and serve by educating the ignorant. What about a healthcare worker? You love and serve by easing the suffering of others. What about a trash collector? You are beautifying the creation. You love and serve by beautifying the creation. In other words, stopping when half the trash doesn't go in and scooping it up and putting it in.

What about a drill press operator on an assembly line? What about a drill press operator on an assembly line? How do they love and serve others? They love and serve others by doing their work with excellence and precision and thus providing ease of use for the next person who has to work with that part. They work with precision and excellence so the next one down the line, they're able to use and utilize that part. What about an insurance claim helpline operator? They love and serve by providing timely, quality, friendly, compassionate service when interfacing with someone who is in need of help. That's how they love and serve.

What about a doorman at the hotel? Right? The invisible people. By providing friendly, courteous service and caring for the well-being of the hotel guests, they love and serve others and thus have a calling to a legitimate work done well. Pleasing to God.

One of the main ways we love others through our work is to work with a high level of competence. Is to work with a high level of competence. That is one way to love and serve. We serve God best when we work with excellence. We serve God best when we work with excellence. So a couple of quotes here from Dorothy Sayers. I introduced her a few sessions back in a 1942 article entitled "Why Work?" And she writes,

The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare say, came out of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made Heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself. For any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie.

Those are powerful words. Powerful words. The article was so good, I cannot resist one more.

Let the church remember this: that every maker and worker is called to serve God in his profession or trade, not outside of it. The Apostles complained rightly when they said it was not meet or proper that they should leave the word of God and serve tables [Acts 6]; their vocation was to preach the word, but the person whose vocation it is to prepare the meals beautifully might with equal justice protest: It is not meet or proper for us to leave the service of our tables to preach the word.

In other words, before the Lord, in the sight of God, the vocation of waiting tables and the vocation of preaching the Word are of equal value. Equal value. The bottom line in all of this is that Christ desires us to see our work through a whole new lens. That it is not so much about providing financially for our families, although it does do that, as it is about fulfilling the purposes for which we were created. In fact, to approach our work without understanding and applying these truths is to work in the manner of a pagan. It is to work in the manner of a pagan.

So now we know what vocation is, we have a second question to address: how do I find my vocation? You have painted it as noble. How do I find it? In any discussion of a vocation, there is an associated and unavoidable topic called providence. Providence is the continuing action of God by which He preserves in existence the creation which He has brought into being and guides it to His intended purposes for it. The continuing action of God by which He preserves in existence the creation which He has brought into existence and guides it to His intended purposes for it. Providence.

Let me give you some—I'll just read them to you—some verses that speak of such things. Act 17:26—this is in the NIV: “From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”

In other words, God determines where and how long you will live. God ultimately determines where you will live and how long you will live. You living here is not the result of an accident; it is the outworking of the providence of God.

First Samuel chapter 2, verses 6 and 7: “The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts.”

God determines your socioeconomic condition. God determines, ultimately, your socioeconomic condition.

Proverbs 16, in verse 9: “The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.” “The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.” In other words, God directs your every decision. Do you make a decision out of your own volition? Yes. Just as surely as you did when you repented of your sin and entrusted yourself entirely and fully to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, beloved, contrary to most self-help books and seminars, you cannot choose to be whatever you want. If you are a young person this morning, listening to me here, I have good and bad news, depending on how you want to receive it. I'll just give you the bad news. We'll develop the good. The bad news is you can't be whatever you want. All right? So when you stand at graduation and they get somebody up there to blivate and talk about how you are the greatest and most intelligent class that has ever graduated and you can be whatever you want, you just put your fingers in your ears, because that is absolute nonsense. Absolute nonsense.

In God's providence, He has made you in a certain way with specific gifts, specific talents, specific capacities, and specific limitations. He has made you with specific gifts, talents, capacities, and limitations. God has made you that way.

Now, let me give you an obvious example. As a young man, through high school and foolishly hanging on to it far longer than I should have even into college, I wanted to be a professional hockey player, ice hockey player. That was my desire. But no matter how hard I practiced, guess what? I was never going to be a professional ice hockey player. I'm too slow. I'm too—too slow. I'm too...a lot of things.

It's never going to happen. Never going to happen. And the sooner I would have been disabused of that ridiculous notion, the better off I would have been. I could have just enjoyed ice hockey for the fun of it.

Now, you might be thinking, well, what about people who have no choice? No choice. I mean, there are some obvious examples of individuals who, quote, have “no choice” in their vocation, their particular occupation. For example, a subsistence farmer in rural China. When they become twelve, thirteen years old, they don't sit down with mom and dad and say, OK, you can be whatever you want, son. No, no. Get back out there and harvest that rice, because we have to eat tonight. That's all you'll ever be. But here in



the West, we are presented with what on the surface looks like such a range of choices that we can become paralyzed and restless and even indecisive with regard to vocation.

On the surface, there is such an array of choices. Many jobs, by the way, today were unheard of just a couple of decades ago. There are new careers blossoming all the time. Here's a few. Ten jobs that did not exist fifteen years ago: App developer and designer, driverless car engineer, podcast producer, telemedicine physician, cloud architect, drone operator, blogger, search engine optimization expert, Uber or Lyft driver, cryptocurrency expert—I would have phrased it differently, but we'll go with it. Ten jobs that didn't exist fifteen years ago.

So what do we do? I'm thinking now a lot about kind of the young among us. What do we do? Under the umbrella of providence, how do I make meaningful choices with regard to my vocation? How, under the umbrella of providence—OK, so I'm living under the umbrella of providence. I embrace it, not begrudgingly but joyfully and willingly. How do I go about making meaningful choices with regard to my vocation?

You need wisdom. You need wisdom in assessing your interests and abilities in order to help determine your field of endeavor. You need wisdom in assessing your interests and abilities in order to help determine your field of endeavor. Proverbs 13:20: “He who walks with wise men will be wise.”

Now, the process of finding your calling, your vocation, has two aspects. It has internal desire and external confirmation. Internal desire, external confirmation.

So let's kind of tease that out a bit. What are my interests? What are my interests? Am I more of an indoor or an outdoor person? Indoor or outdoor person? Am I more oriented toward my hands or my head? Do I find joy in working with my hands or with my head? Am I more oriented toward people or projects? People—projects? Structured or unstructured work environment? Structured or unstructured work environment? Which am I more drawn toward? Employer versus self-employed? Employer versus self-employed. Which am I more inclined toward? Which am I more suited for?

This is where if you're a young person here, this is where mom and dad can really help you get a good view of yourself. But it's true for all of us. A good friend who knows us, a spouse, or even a friend outside of that relationship who really knows us can help us to really hone in on this. So what are my interests?

Secondly, what do I like and find joy in doing? What do I like and find joy in doing? I'm going to be doing this for a long time. I don't really want to do it like a prison sentence. So money is—and you've heard me say this—if money is your determining factor, you may well be consigned to a highly paid prison sentence.

Third, what am I good at? What am I good at? Proverbs 22:29: “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; He will not stand before obscure men.” You see a man good at his work; he'll stand before kings. What am I good at? Help me assess myself. I may like building model airplanes, but that does not make me suited to be an aeronautical engineer. OK, I might like to build model airplanes. It does not necessarily say I am suited to be an aeronautical engineer. So having just a good, grounded, open-eyed view of yourself.

Fourth question: is this work God-honoring? Is this work God-honoring work? Can you articulate how? Again, back to legitimate work done well, right, brings honor to God, is pleasing in the sight of God. Another way to ask this question is how does this work love and serve other people? Can you articulate that?

Fifth, how will this work love and serve my neighbor? How will this work love and serve my neighbor?

Sixth, do I have an elitist attitude toward work? Do I have an elitist attitude toward work? In other words, do I think some jobs are beneath me? Some jobs are just beneath me. Elitist attitude toward work.

Seventh, am I giving myself to the opportunities to work that God has already provided to me? Am I giving myself to the opportunities for work that God has already provided for me? Or do I always have my eye on the horizon, looking for the next thing? If I'm wasting what God has already entrusted to me, why would He entrust anything more? If I'm wasting the opportunities that He has given to me to love and serve, to honor Him by producing good work at whatever it is that I'm doing, why in the world would He entrust anything greater to me? Answer: He won't. He won't.

Now, in all of this, it should be noted that vocation can and often will change throughout our working lifetime. Say it again. Our vocation can change and will often change throughout our working lifetime. In other words, we can have multiple vocations throughout a working lifetime, and we can have multiple vocations simultaneously. And in fact, we do have multiple vocations simultaneously.

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Provide some illustration here just from personal experience. When I was in college, I had a vocation as a student. Vocation as a student. In other words, study hard, learn the material, do well. That is a vocation. Legitimate work done well. And I had a vocation as a petroleum transfer engineer simultaneously.

And by the way, there's a right way and a wrong way to do this. Check the air tire pressure, check the oil, check the antifreeze, check the windshield washing fluid, and put seven gallons in the tank and don't run over. You have to think about the order you're going to do these things to get it all done. Well, then I moved on while in college to a vocation as a security guard, to love and to serve, to protect the property of the particular company that I was working for.

After graduation, my vocation transferred, I guess you'd say, to banking, into banking. And so, sixteen years later, it changed again. I was called by the congregation of our former church in Southern California to pastoral ministry and served in that vocation for twenty-five years.

And then I was called from Southern California to North Idaho to live and to work and to serve among you here at KCC. This is now my vocation. Notice I haven't said anything about money because money is not part of the equation. From college on, in addition to all of those vocations, I have had the vocation as a husband, a father, and a grandfather. I'm a busy guy. There's plenty to do. Plenty to do.

Here's the big idea. Here's the big idea. We work to love and serve others. Any legitimate work well done is pleasing in God's sight. I trust this whole discussion of vocation will be used of the Lord to renew your passion for your present employment situation and that you might find great joy tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning. As you put these truths to work by faith, walking in dependence upon Christ and in the power of His spirit.