

The Sacred Calling of Work

Family Talk - Part 6

Titus 2:9-10

There is a Latin word which became an English word, while over time losing its meaning to the English world.

It is the Latin word, *vocatio*, which means, “a calling”. As early as the 1500’s, the word was used to refer to every work – every vocation – as a sacred calling from God.

In fact, Martin Luther, the reformer from the 16th century, used the word to refer to any and all occupations.

He wrote that God could populate the earth by creating each new generation of babies from the dust – but instead, He ordained the offices of husband and wife and parent as sacred vocations. He wrote further, “All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in government – these are the masks of God, behind which he is hidden and does all things.”ⁱ

He even wrote, “God Himself is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid.”ⁱⁱ

Every vocation was a sacred calling through which God fulfilled His divine purposes.

Behind that term – *vocatio* – was the idea that every legitimate kind of work or social function was a distinct calling from God – utilizing God-given skills and talents and gifts. God Himself was and is active in everyday human labor, responsibilities and interactions.

The Reformation leader and theologian John Calvin wrote around 450 years ago that the workplace was to be considered a place of worship.ⁱⁱⁱ

You see, what these Reformers did was wrestle the idea of a sacred calling away from the clergy alone and gave it equally to the tradesman, the

mother, and the milkmaid in the dairy barn where it belonged.

They were pointing out the fact that every Christian has a sacred calling from God; whether you’re a student or a teacher, an artist, a housewife or a farmer.

So it doesn’t matter if you’re the chief surgeon or chief of police or chief executive officer or the chief custodian – you happen to be carrying out a calling from God – a sacred duty.

And for the Christian, this was revolutionary application.

Any vocation – any status or occupation in life – is the work of God. Nothing’s wasted. Even the mundane act of milking a cow was touched with magnificent meaning.

Like the proverbial story of three men in the Middle Ages who were on the grounds of a building site, where for decades a cathedral had been under construction. All three men were chipping away at rock – squaring stones to be used. They were each asked, “What are you doing?” And he replied, “I’m chipping away at these stones.” The second man said, “I’m making a living as a stone mason.” The third man said, “I am building a magnificent cathedral.”

The Reformers were simply fleshing out what the Apostle Paul had already written nearly 2,000 years ago as he encouraged Christians *in whatever you do, work with all your heart as for the Lord and not for men . . . it is the Lord whom you serve (Colossians 3:23-24)*.

Unfortunately today, the word *vocatio* has become common place; we talk about our different

careers, our vocations, our vocational training independently of anything sacred.

Today the motive for work has been reduced to a paycheck and the incentive for work has become the weekend and the ultimate goal for work is retirement.

The average American dream is to be done with work, never having to serve anyone ever again.

The Apostle Paul is about to clarify the meaning of work for the church as he addresses a family member of the average household on the island of Crete – the ordinary household servant.

It will be to the slaves that Paul will clarify, that common everyday work happens to be worship – a platform upon which the glory of Christ can be seen and honored and exalted.

Even a servant was endowed with a sacred calling from God.

Would you take your copy of inspired scripture and turn to the Letter of *Paul to Titus, chapter 2 and verse 6. Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.*

Now when Paul wrote this letter to Titus, there were as many as 50 million slaves in the Roman Empire. In fact, estimates indicate that as many as 1/3rd of the population of the Roman world were occupying the place of servant or slave.^{iv}

In Paul's day, people became slaves when they were taken as prisoners of war, as punishment for certain crimes, because of debt, being kidnapped and sold into slavery, voluntarily becoming what we would call indentured servants, farm laborers, clerks, craftsmen, teachers, soldiers, even doctors.^v

They were human beings without personal rights – they could be treated with mercy or without mercy.

Aristotle called the slave a living tool . . . a kind of possession with a soul.^{vi}

It will be the gospel that will topple the tyranny of slavery. It is to this day the gospel that has every man treating each other with equal dignity and justice.

While Paul does not call for an end to slavery – nor an open rebellion of slaves – for which the liberals have made hay in discrediting Paul – what they miss is the patience of God's wisdom.

What Paul does do is lay the groundwork for the elimination of slavery. He plants the truth which

will eventually bear the fruit of freedom in any country and in every generation to this day.

He writes radical things like the fact that believing slaves and their Christian masters are actually brothers (*1 Timothy 6:2*); he writes that in the sight of God, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and freemen are one in Christ. (*Galatians 3:28*).

When Paul meets and leads to faith a runaway slave named Onesimus, he writes to Philemon, the master of Onesimus – who happens also to be a believer in the church in Colossi and he tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, not as your servant but as your beloved brother (*Philemon 1:16*).

When the Roman Empire disintegrated and eventually collapsed, the system of slavery collapsed with it – due in great measure to the influence of Christianity.

In fact, before its collapse, so many slaves were being set free that the Roman Emperor introduced legal restrictions to curb the trend.^{vii}

The gospel would make the difference.

You need to understand, the New Testament didn't write about how to rebel against or even how to reform human institutions – it introduced all that was necessary to reform the human heart.^{viii}

It is a matter of the heart.

And the reformed, spiritually redeemed human heart will impact and reform human institutions.

Now what I find fascinating in the paragraph from Paul to Titus that I just read is that Paul is challenging a change of heart, not in the master, but in the servant.

Paul will effectively tell the servant that his station in life is a divinely ordained *vocatio* – a sacred vocation – through which he will influence his world for the glory of God.

And from this text – for us who live in a free world – come six distinguishing characteristics that will revolutionize your own personal vocation.

In fact, embedded in this exhortation to Titus, are six observations for every modern day employee – and I'm going to apply this text within the context of our world today.

Just how should you approach Monday morning and a world system driven by 9 to 5 knowing that you're heading off to the place of your sacred calling.

First of all, we are all to work with the characteristic of humility.

1. The characteristic of humility

Notice again verse 9. Urge bondslaves to be subject to their masters in everything.

The word translated “subject” (υποτασσω) was used by the military to designate a soldier’s relationship to his superior officers.^{ix}

It carried the idea of lining up in rank in file.

In other words, urge bondslaves to make sure they are in order.

But that sounds rather redundant doesn’t it? Why tell a bondsman to line up behind his master?

He already was!

But Paul is using the passive voice, indicating that servants then and employees today, are to willingly, voluntarily come under the authority of their employer.

It isn’t a matter of being bullied into submission; it’s a matter of being willing.

No matter how difficult . . . no matter how unfair . . . no matter how oppressive. The faithful believer perseveres with humility and self-sacrifice as long as he is employed at that job.

While the others at your job roast the management and talk about the boss and run down the company, the Christian stays in his place – willingly and graciously doing the hard task even if he’s never thanked by his supervisor or paid what he believes he’s worth.

In fact, the word Paul uses for the word “master” or employer here in *verse 9 is the Greek word despotes* – which gives us our word, despot. A despot is a tyrannical, arbitrary ruler with absolute authority, who often acts unkind and unreasonable and overbearing.

Paul paints the worst picture possible. He isn’t saying; submit to your job and your supervisor because he has your best interests at heart – because they love you at that company – because they care about you – because they show their appreciation for you.

No, it’s just the opposite . . . willingly submit even when you’re working for a despot.

Why would anybody willingly and graciously work for someone like that?

Nobody submits to a boss like that. And that’s his point. That’s how the Christian stands out – like a candle in a dark room.

Believers who understand that their supervisor really isn’t their final authority – that their job is a

sacred calling from a living God who will work through them to fulfill His purposes and reflect His glory through their humble and gracious perseverance, is able to carry on.

That’s why Paul begins with the categorical characteristic that makes this employee unique and outstanding – the characteristic of humility.

Secondly, Paul refers to the distinction of reliability.

There’s another way to show up for work. We’ll call this the distinction of reliability.

2. The distinction of reliability

Paul adds in verse, 9, to be well-pleasing.

The word well-pleasing was almost always used in the New Testament for being well pleasing to God.^x

And Paul again is hinting at the greater vision for any employee.

Paul wrote, *It was his ambition to be pleasing to Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9)*

He is our ultimate supervisor.

Being an employee has to do with your status . . . being well-pleasing has to do with your spirit.

So a Christian employee has no excuse for half-hearted work, for cutting corners . . . for laziness . . . for a lack of initiative or carelessness. That person will never please his boss . . . what Paul wants us to know is that we’re not pleasing the Lord either.^{xi}

Martin Luther again was once approached by a cobbler who wanted to know how he could best please his Savior now that he was a Christian. So he asked Luther, “How can I serve God?” Luther asked him, “What is your work now?” The man said, “I am a shoemaker.” Much to the cobbler’s surprise, Luther replied, “Then make good shoes and sell them at a fair price.”^{xii}

What Paul is doing is what the Reformation attempted to reignite. A higher motive for work. A standard of excellence because of the person you ultimately represent.

One author put it this way: it is then possible for the housewife to cook a meal as if Jesus Christ were going to eat it, or to clean the house as if Jesus Christ were to be the honored guest. It is possible then for teachers to educate children, for doctors to treat patients and nurses to care for them, for salesmen to help clients, shop assistants to serve customers, accountants to audit books and

secretaries to type letters as if in each case they were serving Jesus Christ.^{xiii}

That's why the Christian does the hard task; volunteers to go the extra mile; he works extra to help someone out.

Christianity makes that cubicle, that desk, that home, that shop, that office nothing less than a holy of holies where God touches earth.

Paul says, if you want to revolutionize the Island of Crete, it won't be a series of sermons no one comes to hear – it will be a reliable employee people happen to see . . . in action.

They will distinguish themselves by a characteristic of humility; the distinction of reliability – thirdly;

3. An attitude of complicity

This might be the hardest one yet – he adds in *verse 9. To be well-pleasing, not argumentative . .*

Paul actually puts together a string of participles that actually describe what it means to be well-pleasing. But for the sake of our study, I'll separate them individually.

Paul refers to complicity – *not argumentative*.

Paul keeps raising the bar, doesn't he? The slave in Paul's day had to be submissive – that was just the way it was. But now he's told to be reliable – that's even harder. And now he's told not to grumble or voice displeasure over what he's told to do.

This effectively shuts down most of the interoffice conversation, doesn't it? I mean, what in the world are you going to talk about at the water cooler if you can't talk about your supervisor, or the company, or the low wages, or the unfair treatment, or whatever.

Work won't be nearly as fun.

Paul actually uses a verb that means *to speak against* . . . or, in our vocabulary – to talk back.

It carries the idea of mouthing off.^{xiv}

So the issue isn't that you agree to fulfill a task – or that you plan to do it with excellence, but that you don't complain about it in the process.

Paul is getting under the skin of work to the very spirit of work.

I'll never forget when our children were young – they had their chores. My wife decided that she would deal with our children's hearts and not just their hands. So she informed them that from now on they not only had to do their chores in order to get

their allowance, but they had to do their chores with a good spirit.

It was 6 months before I got my allowance.

Taking out the trash had a new dimension to it.

Now in case you're wondering, this characteristic doesn't mean you can't express a grievance through legitimate means. It doesn't mean that management is to be complied with if it means you commit some sin by obeying.

This doesn't involve doing something unethical or immoral just because your boss demanded it. You might need to find another job in order to keep your conscience clean.

Paul is referring here to an employee being asked to do something they don't want to do because they really don't want to do it. And "Okay, I'll do it, but I'm going to let you know I don't like it one bit."

That Christian employee has forgotten he is actually on a sacred mission – designated by Christ as His representative on earth and through whom the living God fulfills His purposes.

There's another characteristic.

Paul deals with the will – as it relates to humility He deals with the heart – as it relates to reliability He deals with the spirit – as it relates to complicity

And now he deals with hands – the fourth characteristic of a godly employee is the mark of honesty.

4. A mark of Honesty

Paul adds at the beginning of *verse 10, not pilfering*

It's a word used in the Greek world for embezzlement – literally, laying on one's side.^{xv}

In other words, putting something aside for yourself that doesn't belong to you.

The Greek word also refers to someone being "light fingered".^{xvi}

He's stealing from his employer.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, employee dishonesty costs American businesses over \$50 billion a year. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce reports that one of every three business failures are the direct result of employee theft.

And it isn't necessarily big stuff . . . it's a lot of little stuff.

Theft of resources, personal use of office equipment, false expense reports . . . and it all adds up.

What could happen in our world if everyone began living honest lives?!

Let me read you one description of a Revival that swept through the tiny country of Wales during the early 1900's. Over 100,000 people responded to the gospel and came to faith and began making restitution; which unexpectedly created severe problems for the shipyards along the coast of Wales. Over the years workers had pilfered all kinds of things. Everything from wheelbarrows to hammers had been stolen. However, as people sought to be right with God, they started to return what they had taken, with the result that soon the shipyards of Wales were overwhelmed with returned property. There were such huge amounts of tools and machinery being returned that several of the yards actually put up signs asking the men to stop. One sign read, "If you have been led by God to return what you have stolen, please know that the management forgives you and wishes you to keep what you took."

The world didn't really know how to handle the spiritual awakening in people's lives.

Titus, you want to impact the island of Crete? Start by having all the employees who have stolen things that don't belong to them, return them and then steal no more.

Do we work with the characteristic of humility; the distinction of reliability; the attitude of complicity and the mark of honesty?

Paul adds to the list – we'll call this:

5. The demeanor of loyalty

He writes, But showing all good faith . . .

You could translate this, "but showing yourself completely faithful in goodness."

This is another show and tell. The word "showing" here means "to show for the purpose of demonstrating or proving something."

In other words, you prove to your employer that you have the best of intentions for the place where you work.

One commentator wrote, "The Christian employee is not to leave his loyalty in doubt but is to give ample evidence of it. Tragically, good faith loyalty to one's employer, and to one's fellow employees, is a common casualty of the modern work ethic, even among Christians.

By the way, this mark of loyalty is the very characteristic that raised Daniel from middle

management to taking the senior role in the kingdom of Babylon.

The king appointed Daniel over all these political leaders so that, the Bible reads, *he would not suffer loss. (Daniel 6:2)*

That's a nice way of saying, "So that he wouldn't be robbed blind."

He needed an honest man who would be loyal to the crown and the kingdom and the king himself.

You can't help but wonder, why would Daniel even care? What did he care about the kingdom and the king?

He had been abducted as a teenager – taken effectively as a prisoner of war. Against his will he is made a eunuch which would keep him single the rest of his life; he's put him through the royal academy for political and business training because of how he distinguished himself early on.

And eventually Darius, Daniel's new Persian King, promotes him.

Why? Because for some strange reason, this exiled Jewish man did his best at whatever job he had, even if it meant the advancement and betterment of a kingdom to which he didn't really belong.

Daniel never went back home!

But it was because of Daniel's loyalty to the King and the King's assignment that God was glorified.

In fact, Daniel's legacy of integrity would so set him apart that he would eventually become the leader over all the other Magi who served with him in office.

And Daniel would use his position to teach the gospel through the Old Testament prophecies so effectively that 600 years later, his spiritual legacy was seen in that entourage of Magi who had traveled from Persia with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and arriving in Jerusalem, they posed the question of King Herod, "*Where is He who has been born, King of the Jews?*" (Matthew 2:2)

Before you tell your world what the gospel means, make sure they can see the difference the gospel makes in your life.

6. With the perspective of eternity

Not only should we work with humility and complicity and reliability and honesty and loyalty, but lastly, we turn work into worship when we work with the perspective of eternity.

Paul adds that final purpose statement . . . *so that – in other words, do all the above – so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.*

The word “*adorn*” is *cosmeo* which gives us our word, cosmetics.^{xvii}

Their lives serve as a beautiful cosmetic for the truth about God our Savior.

It was used by the ancient world to describe setting jewels in such a way so as to highlight their beauty.

One commentator writes, “So live a life that adds luster to the gospel of God our Savior.”^{xviii}

Why? Because your boss needs a Savior.

You work for your employer with the thought that your boss and your coworkers and your friends and all those in your world are going to live somewhere forever.

And there are only two options – heaven or hell. And you can’t get into heaven without *the doctrine of God our Savior*.

Justin Martyr wrote in the second century that those around believers should be ready to hear about Christ by either watching the Christians lives or by doing business with them.^{xix}

I wonder how many people would be receptive to our gospel after having done business with us.

No wonder Jonathan Edwards, the father of the Great Awakening and faithful pastor prayed that God would stamp eternity on his eyes so that all that he viewed would be seen in the context of its eternal consequences.^{xx}

And that doesn’t mean you have to go out and do something big – or amazing – or great.

Paul basically tells us all in this family talk, “Just do your job.”

- show up . . .
- work hard . . .
- smile often . . .
- stay out of trouble and stay away from troublemakers . . .
- don’t talk back . . .
- tell the truth . . .
- live for something greater than the weekend . . .
- point people to your Savior whenever you get the chance.

There are a lot of Christians willing to do great things for God – not as many willing to do little things for God.

According to Paul’s letters, even little things are events where God touches earth and moves His hand to perform His will.

I close with the willingness of a young girl to serve in whatever useful, simple way she could – for God’s glory.

And she would understand that whatever brings God glory is an honor to be involved in.

A Pediatrician by the name of David Cerqueira wrote about his encounter with Sarah. It all started with his wife’s Sunday school class. She had prepared a lesson on being useful to the Lord. She taught the children that everyone can be useful and that usefulness was actually serving God. He writes, “The kids quietly listened to my wife’s words, and as the lesson ended, there was a short moment of silence. A little girl named Sarah spoke up. “Teacher, what can I do? I don’t know how to do many useful things.” Not anticipating that kind of ready response, my wife quickly looked around and spotted an empty flower vase on the windowsill. “Sarah, you can bring in a flower and put it in that vase. That would be a useful thing - and God would be pleased with the difference that would make in this room for everyone who sees it.” Sarah frowned, “But that’s not important.” My wife replied, “Well it is, if you end up helping someone – even in some small way.”

Sure enough, the next Sunday Sarah brought in a dandelion she had picked and placed it in the vase. In fact, she continued to do so each week. Without reminders or help, she made sure the vase was filled with some bright flower, Sunday after Sunday. When my wife told our pastor about Sarah’s faithfulness to this small task, he took the vase upstairs in the main sanctuary next to the pulpit and used it as an illustration for serving others.

That next week, David (the Pediatrician) got a call from Sarah’s mother. She worried that Sarah seemed to have less energy than usual and didn’t have an appetite. David writes, “I made room in my schedule to see Sarah the following day. After Sarah had been put through a battery of tests and then several days of examinations, I sat numbly in my office with Sarah’s paperwork on my lap. The results were in – Sarah had leukemia.

On my way home, I stopped to see Sarah’s parents so that I could personally give them the news. Sarah’s genetics and the leukemia that was attacking her small body were a horrible mix. Sitting at their kitchen table, I explained that nothing could

be done to save her life. I don't think I have ever had a more difficult conversation than the one that night.

Time pressed on. Sarah became confined to bed and to the visits that many people gave her. And then it came; another telephone call from Sarah's mother asking me to come see her. I dropped everything and rushed to their house. After a short examination I knew that Sarah did not have long to live.

That was Friday afternoon. On Sunday morning church started as usual. The singing, the sermon – and for me – sadness. Near the end of the sermon, the pastor suddenly stopped speaking as he stared at the back of the auditorium. Everyone in our church turned to see what he was looking at – it was Sarah. Her parents had brought her for one last visit. She was bundled in a blanket with a bright flower in her hand. They walked to the front of the church where her vase was still perched by the pulpit. She put her flower in the vase and placed a piece of paper beside it. Afterward everyone gathered around trying to offer as much encouragement and support as they could.

This doctor writes, the following Thursday Sarah passed away. The pastor asked me to stay behind after the funeral service. We stood together at the cemetery as everyone walked to their cars. He said, "Dave, I've got something you ought to see." He pulled from his pocket the piece of paper that Sarah had left by the vase. Holding it out to me he said, "I

want you to keep it." I opened the folded paper to read, in pink crayon, what Sarah had written – it was simply this:

Dear God,

This vase has been the biggest honor of my life. Sarah

She got it . . . a simple task was the greatest honor of her life.

What accomplishment is your greatest honor?

I am convinced that there will be surprised 1st century servants standing before God – receiving honor and reward for the simplest of tasks.

There will be surprised 21st century Christians as well.

I am convinced there are a thousand things and a thousand more we never imagined would be considered an honorable thing.

This is the way we are to live and work – and in so doing, we display the beauty of the gospel – and the treasure found in God our Savior.

We have far too many Christians waiting to do something great for God; we need more Christians willing to do something little for God . . . something simple . . . something mundane . . . something ordinary.

Like putting a bright flower in a flower vase on a window sill in a classroom – for someone to see.

Something useful, where the glory of God through a willing servant touches earth.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/17/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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vi R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians* (Crossway Books, 1990), p. 205

vii Hughes, p. 206

viii Black & McClung, p. 241

ix John MacArthur, *Titus* (Moody Press, 1996), p. 98

x MacArthur, p. 100

xi Campbell, p. 70

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