

The Christian At Work, I Gen. 3:17-10; Ex. 35:30-35; I Cor. 12:1,4-7  
10/3/21

As I prepared this sermon on the Christian at work, I thought about some popular songs that talk about work. Let me name a few and see if you can come up with who performed them:

- “Taking Care of Business” Bachman-Turner Overdrive
- “Nine to Five” Dolly Parton
- “Workin’ for a Livin’” Huey Lewis and the News
- “Car Wash” Rose Royce
- “Take This Job and Shove It” Johnny Paycheck
- “16 Tons” Tennessee Ernie Ford

It’s interesting to me that most of these songs aren’t celebrating work and the fulfillment that comes from it, or the good it does for society, rather most of them are complaining about its drudgery and injustice. That sort of flies in the face of what most churches teach about work these days- that it’s a special calling, and that finding the right match between your abilities and passions and a particular job will lead to a sense of excitement, fulfillment, and joy. But is that really true? Or, are these songs a more accurate reflection of reality?

In his book, Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits, Christian ethicist Gil Meilaender outlines several Christian views of work, of which work as a calling is just one view. And we'll get to that one in a minute. But I'd like to start with a different one. Meilaender cites biblical texts and Christian thinkers who assert that work (rather than being a holy calling) is "Dignified, but Irksome." I like that phrase! "Dignified, but Irksome." Going back to Genesis 3, we read that one effect of our fall from grace was an impact on work. Listen to these words from the creation story. <sup>17</sup>*And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;* <sup>18</sup>*thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.* <sup>19</sup>*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* (Gen. 3:17-19)

That doesn't sound much like work as a joyful calling, does it? It sounds more like the back-breaking drudgery that many people find work to be! I think of assembly line workers, or garbage collectors, coal miners, or fast food servers. Or, all of those "dirty jobs" that Mike Rowe featured on his show. These jobs are certainly necessary- we all benefit tremendously from them- but they are difficult, often monotonous, and sometimes

physically demanding. It seems a stretch to identify them as a “calling,” doesn’t it? Few of us aspire to these jobs or point our kids toward them. They are necessary, but irksome. Christian faith does have something important to say about doing such jobs, and we’ll talk about that next Sunday, but it seems unlikely that most of us will find such work is able to fulfill our deepest longings.

On the other hand, some Christians do see all work as a calling. This way of thinking began during the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers were bothered by the fact that only those who worked in the church- priests, monks, and nuns- were considered to have a calling. That left everyone else as kind of spiritual second-class citizens. And that struck the Reformers as unbiblical. Listen to this passage from Ex. 35. The context is the building of the first tabernacle- a kind of portable meeting space for worship that was built as the Israelites left Egypt for the Promised Land of Canaan. <sup>30</sup>*Then Moses said to the Israelites: See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; <sup>31</sup>he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, <sup>32</sup>to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, <sup>33</sup>in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. (Ex. 35:30-33)*

Did you catch that? This working-with-his-hands craftsman was given his ability by the Spirit! He was clearly called to use the abilities God had given him to serve God and the community. Here, work as a calling clearly goes beyond just those who are ordained for ministry. Or teachers and doctors, for that matter. Here, a craftsman is called, and later in the passage, other craftsmen are called, too.

Paul expands on this way of thinking in I Cor. 12. *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>4</sup>Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Cor. 12:1,4-7)*

Paul goes on to use his favorite metaphor for the church, the body of Christ. And he says that each member of that body has been given special abilities and functions, just like different parts of the human body have distinct functions. Therefore, every member's contribution is vitally important to the healthy functioning of the whole body. That includes your contribution!

So Luther and the other Reformers taught that not just pastors are specially gifted by God, but that every member of Christ's body is gifted.

They believed that carries over to life outside the church, too. As an act of loving our neighbor, we are called to live out our vocation for the common good. Luther put it like this, “How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station; you have always been a husband or wife, a boy or a girl, a servant. Are you a son or daughter, and don’t think you have enough work with yourself, to continue chaste, pure, and temperate during your youth, to obey your parents, and offend no one by word or deed? Are you a prince or lord? Who has more to do than you, in order that your subjects may do right, preserve peace, and wrong no one? As it is now, *no one is without some commission or calling*, no one is without some kind of work, if he desires to do what is right. Everyone, therefore is to take heed to continue in his calling...” He goes on to say that the maid sweeping the steps does a work as pleasing to God as a monk at his prayers! This view of work as a calling promises to give dignity and purpose to every kind of work, doesn’t it?

So, we have two very different views of work, don’t we? Work as necessary, but irksome, and work as a divine calling or vocation. Which is right? I think there is some truth in both views, and there is biblical support for each of them! Perhaps one way to resolve the tension between the two views is to acknowledge that our calling may not coincide with the work we do to support ourselves.

Last weekend I attended my 50<sup>th</sup> high school reunion! I know, many of you are thinking, “Dave, you don’t look nearly old enough to attend a 50<sup>th</sup> reunion!” Be that as it may, I did attend! And, I met a guy there named Mike. I had a number of classes with Mike, a bright guy who also played defensive end for our awful football team, but I didn’t know him very well. Anyway, Mike had heard that I was a pastor, so he sought me out to talk with me about his church in South Carolina. It’s a large church with five different campuses. Mike helps out with ushering, but his real passion is training leaders of small groups how to be effective leaders! He has done this for years, and I think that’s what he lives for; It’s what gets him up in the morning!

I would go so far as to say that it’s his calling. It’s not how he supported himself financially for all those years after high school! He was an executive with Duke Power. But his calling was something he did when he wasn’t at work.

Darrell Green, regarded as one of the greatest cornerbacks in the history of the NFL, once said that although he enjoyed his time playing football, it wasn’t his calling. Playing in the NFL gave him the platform from which to launch a ministry to help young people, the Youth Life Foundation. It teaches leadership skills to kids in poverty, so they can help their families and communities. He says that is his calling, not playing football!

So, I would say that if you can find a way to use your passion, to use your calling in your job, you are very fortunate, and you should thank God for that! That could be a job in the trades, in education, in medicine, in business, in public service, or even in the church. But not everyone can find a way to get paid for pursuing their calling! And, that's OK, too. You shouldn't feel bad about it. Sometimes we work just to pay the bills!

But, no matter what your motivation for work is, Christian faith has something to say about the kind of work we do and how we do it. And, that's where we're headed next Sunday! In the meantime, I'd love to hear from you about how your faith has impacted your work. You can call or email me with your thoughts!