

The Place God Calls You To

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Today I want to focus particularly on God's calling, on understanding what it means to *live meaningfully* in the place God calls us to. *What does God think about what we do?* Not so much what we do here in this building on Sundays, important as that is, but what we do the rest of today, and the rest of the week. The *other* 166 hours. What about our jobs, our work, our families, our hobbies, the little things that bring us joy and make life interesting for us? What does God think about those things? How do those things fit in with God's calling on our lives? What does God think about our volunteer work, or our school work, our eating habits, our sleeping habits, how we take out the trash, and how we take care of our kids? What does God think about *those* things? The everyday, mundane, trivial things that fill our time and make up what it means just to be "human." Do those things matter to God? And how do they fit in with the calling of God? These questions have been burning a hole in my mind for a long time now. I'd like to explain why, because I think you might find some common ground in your own life.

I love developing software. Always have. I must have ridden hundreds of miles around the neighborhood on my bicycle when I was a teenager (and delivered thousands of pounds of junk mail and newspapers in the process) to save up enough money to buy my first PC. After high school I ended up with a graduate degree in computing science and then worked for 10 years as a software developer in Australia. By the end of the 90's I was travelling Australia and also the world as successful software consultant with a solid job and a bright future.

As I've said, I love my job and find it hard to see how I could feel close to fulfilled doing anything else. But I always got the impression from fellow Christians that doing *this* kind of work didn't matter to God as much as things like prayer, and church, and Bible reading, and mission trips, and other more "spiritual" pursuits. It seemed like the heroes of the faith that I heard about in church *weren't* software developers, or high school students, or elderly bed-ridden people, or bankers, or lawyers, or regular people like that. They were saints, monks, missionaries, pastors, and other types of people who had committed full-time to serving the Lord. So I always felt a little second-rate. That if I was really serious about God and his mission then I wouldn't be in a regular job. I even heard some Christians say that working a job was good for paying the bills, "but it was not going to count for *anything* in eternity."

I decided early on in life that I would never be satisfied with mediocrity, and have always desired to follow God's leading in my life. Every step I've taken has been with the confidence that God would lead and guide me. So in 1999 I went on a short-term mission trip to Papua New Guinea and visited a remote tribal group. I felt like my eyes were opened in a new way to what God was doing in missions around the world. He reached through my analytical mind and touched my heart with a desire to experience something more. I decided that I needed to become a missionary and devote myself fully to what I felt God wanted me to do. It made sense to me that if I wanted to be a success at cross-cultural missions work then I should train in a cross-cultural setting. So in a matter of months I quit my job, sold my company and just about everything I had, said goodbye to my family and friends, and moved to the USA to get training in missions.

I came to a little Bible College in Michigan. I did well at the classes, but gradually began to realize that I would make a lousy tribal missionary. As my wife Becky will attest, I am not a handyman type of guy, and would probably pay someone to mow the lawn if I felt like I could get away with it. So it became clear that while I was willing to do it, maybe living in the jungle, and everything that goes along with that, was not going to be a wise thing both for me and for the tribal people that would have been stuck with me.

The plus side of attending that particular Bible College is that I met Becky there, and it wasn't long before we knew that we were made for each other and married. When she met me, Becky was on staff at the Bible College and had already worked for over 10 years as a career missionary in both the USA and South America. Her parents were also missionaries and she had grown up in Bolivia as a missionary kid. When our son Jack was born, we decided what it would be best if I went back to work and continued my studies part time and Becky would stay home and look after our kids. This was a big change, and not an easy one. The lack of adult stimulation and an awareness that this is not her primary gifting has led Becky to struggle sometimes in finding meaning and purpose at this stage of her life. But I really admire the way she has embraced God's calling on her life to be a mother and continues to provide such wonderful love and guidance to our kids.

So I went back to working in software development, and ever since then I have been taking seminary courses part-time. I completed the bible college degree, a master of arts in theology, and now I am taking courses towards a masters degree at Denver Seminary. This whole time I have been working full-time in software development.

Because of this message that secular work is second best, and despite my confidence in God's leading, I have felt a great deal of guilt and confusion concerning my return to a secular job instead of following through and working as a missionary. I felt uncertainty about whether I should stay in software development, or move into a more "spiritual" and "significant" vocation. So a big part of my journey over the past year has been a quest to find some answers with that. To know what God thinks about my work. The same as knowing what God thinks about your work, whether it is taking care of kids, comforting your friends, doing your chores, or whatever it may be. And not *just* your work, but every seemingly insignificant part of your life that makes you - you.

So I started to read, and ask questions. And I think God has opened my eyes to some insights that show me I am on the right path here. I know that, because I am not only seeing my thinking slowly being transformed, but also my whole outlook on life. I feel that I am a better employee, husband and father as a result. And I would like to share a couple of these with you, in the hope that God will inspire you to join this quest to uncover the glory, sacredness, and significance of ordinary life.

At least once a week we pray the Lord's Prayer, yet have you ever stopped to think about your request for God to provide us with our daily bread? Matthew 6:11 says, "Give us today our daily bread" (NIV). So simple. So profound. But how does God answer that prayer? Because, he *does* – right? Every day we not only have the food we need and our basic necessities provided, but much more beyond.

God answers that simple prayer through the work of others. God is at work answering that prayer through the farmer, truck driver, granary employees, bakery staff, quality control people, packaging workers, and many unknown others long before you even pray that prayer. If you asked any of them, they would say they are just doing their job. And maybe just because they are trying to make ends meet. But the reality is that God is at work. Through the ordinary work that is done by people who may not even profess faith in him. God is at work to provide our needs. That giant interconnected network of business relationships and exchanges is how God answers that prayer. Every day. God is hidden behind everyday things, and ordinary people. Theologian Karl Barth said, "*The Christian knows that all work, even that of the non-Christian, has meaning and necessity as ordained by divine providence with a view to this goal [the coming of his Kingdom]. He regards the work of all men as their preparation for the service in which he is engaged as a Christian.*" So God answers our simple prayer for daily bread through the work of others.

In Matthew 22:37-38 Jesus answered the question, “*What is the greatest commandment in the law?*” with the statement, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”*”

Let’s start with the second commandment to love our neighbor.

I used to think that loving my neighbor meant doing some kind of physical act for someone I meet, like raking someone’s leaves, or shoveling their drive, or the other kinds of things that boy scouts seem to do so well. I’m horrible at those kinds of things and, while I still try to do them because they are good ways to love one’s neighbor, they just don’t do it for me. So how am *I* supposed to fulfill that commandment? How do *I* love my neighbor?

I now know that my work is a key way, in fact *the* chief way, in which I can fulfill the commandment to love my neighbor. The beauty of this is that I can love my neighbor by employing my professional skills, experience and passion by doing the very things I enjoy most. When I do a good job at work, when I pursue excellence in what I do, I am loving not only my coworkers, but the customers, the shareholders, and the clients. Most of whom I will never meet. Also, in my calling as a husband, when I serve my wife by making her coffee and emptying the dishwasher every morning, I am obeying that commandment. And in my calling as a father, chasing my son Jack around the back yard, or playing toy cars with him in the basement, *that* fulfills the commandment. And changing my daughter’s diaper, while *not* glamorous, is also a practical way of living out the commandment. God can use any good thing I do to create value. So it all matters. *All* of it.

When I serve, as Nancy Ortberg has stated, I am most accurately reflecting the character and nature of God. So whatever you do, whether it is pouring coffee, or visiting someone in hospital, or helping another student with their study, or caring for someone who is sick, or teaching third graders, or playing guitar in a coffee shop, playing well on a sports team, or just spending good time with friends. All of these human activities are ways of serving others, and thus loving them. That gives each activity a unique sacredness, because God partners *with us* to serve and to love them *through us*. When we do this, we are putting the same value on things that God is.

But what about loving God? (the first and greater commandment). How does *this* fit into what we are saying?

In the very beginning in Genesis 1:28 the first man and woman are together commanded by God to work creatively in relationship with each other to fill the earth and subdue it. They are to rule over God's creation and shape it as they best see fit. It says just after this in verse 31 that "God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*." The creation of humanity as imitators of God in creating new relationships and cultures and work environments was a *good thing*. Work is *not* the result of sin, though our sin can sometimes make work, or school, or whatever we do, *harsh* and *unproductive* and *unfulfilling*. But the image of God is still there in people. And creation, despite being corrupted by sin, is *still good*. One day God will, through the resurrected Christ, complete the healing and restoration of what he has made. Romans 8:21 says that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage of decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." Then our relationships, our work environments and our cultures will truly be right - the way God originally intended them to be.

So one way we can love God is to pour our heart and soul and mind into whatever things that God gives us a passion and ability to do in his creation. Not something that would take the place of God and become an idol in our life, but rather something we *delight in doing that brings us closer to God*. It might be running or some other kind of exercise, it might be art, or music, or some hobby or sport that we can excel at, it might be reading great books, or even showing hospitality to others. When we imitate the creativity and excellence of God in enjoying creation, we are most truly what God made us to be. As Nancy Ortberg says, "Work is another way in which you and I can work out the image of God that resides in us." And it doesn't even have to be what we would normally think of as a "spiritual" activity. This is because when we are in Christ, which we are as His followers, then *all* of life is spiritual and sacred because it *all* belongs to him. Colossians 3:23-24 says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

So, *what does God think about what we do?* The everyday, mundane, trivial things that fill our time and make up what it means just to be "human?" Those things *do* matter to God, so they should matter to us too. In the place God calls us to, we *can* feel God's pleasure in what we do, even when those things seem so ordinary to us.

I like how Michael Wilkins emphasizes that, “*all of our service in the kingdom is inherently valuable, whether it is in sacred or secular realms, whether it receives a greater or lesser return. Our responsibility is to plan for the long haul and use our giftedness to advance to kingdom of God.*” (p. 819). Thus those of us who are followers of Christ, every part of our life is infused with the presence and power of God. We just need eyes to see it.

Every workday around noon I go to a quiet room and pray the Lord’s Prayer. I think about my role in bringing the reality of the Kingdom of God on earth in my workplace. I ask for God’s will to be done in my work and in the lives of my workmates. I pray for just and fair dealings with people. And honest and open communication with them. I ask that God would use me in his desire to create a work environment where there is a “nobility of service.” That he would remind me that *it is a noble thing to serve*, even in the menial tasks. I want to have the same mindset in my family life too. In fact, *all of my life*.

Working through these thoughts in the last year has been both a very liberating and energizing experience for me. I still am passionate about missions - that hasn’t changed. But even though I still have so many unanswered questions, I now see a bigger picture. I am part of God’s activity all over the world, we all are. And in as much as we participate in that divine activity through finding and following our spiritual callings, I think we will more and more, as Paul said to the Ephesians, have the eyes of our heart enlightened to know the hope to which he has called us and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

In my many interrelated callings as husband, father, employee, student, etc I sense a deepening awareness of the working of God in the everyday things of my life; an awareness of the sacredness of the everyday. We can be confident that we are able to participate as coworkers in his mission to restore all of creation back to himself in Christ. Why? Because God is hidden, yet active, behind everyday work, mundane things, and ordinary people. People like you and me. Last year I read a quote by Frederick Beuchner (“*Beekner*”) that said, “*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.*” Have you found that place?