

Called

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Scripture: Genesis 1

I was at a conference a week back where they were talking about purpose at work. One of the speakers used to be a pastor. He found that when his congregation came to ask him questions about challenges they faced, he wasn't able to answer them. So, he felt God leading him to go and do an MBA, so that he could be more relevant. After doing that, God opened doors and he joined Bank of Scotland, and today he is the CEO of a company. So, God led him from being a pastor to being a banker. And then there was another one who was the Managing Director of Standard Chartered, who God has now called to Bangalore to do goat farming.

Then I was sharing my story where I said that God called me to be a spare wheel. All of you have probably been reading about the testimony of Kanye West, and how he said that God spoke to him to be a pastor. The first person that I spoke about said something that has stayed with me. He said, "God took Joseph from the desert to the palace, and he took Moses from the palace to the desert." So clearly, there doesn't seem to be any set paradigm in the way that God calls us or places us in our respective places of influence.

Last Sunday, as Pastor was speaking, towards the close, he read from Romans 11:29 – *For God's gifts and His call are irrevocable*. I kept thinking that if God's call is firm on my life, then what if I am in the wrong place? Is there only one place for me? How does that match up as we look at Scripture, where God keeps moving people? So, clearly while there's a call, it doesn't mean that there aren't seasons in our life. but what does it really mean to be called? There's so much we read about spiritual gifts – tests to identify our gifts, but very little information as to how to find our calling.

First let me clarify that in Romans 11, Paul is writing to the church in Rome, telling them how God reached out to the Gentiles with the Gospel, and grafted them in. because of the disobedience of the Israelites, God had sidelined them. But he said that what He did, He can also undo. And at some point, in the future, God will bring Israel back and include them in that great grand scheme when God restores everything to Himself. He says, "The call and gifts are irrevocable. What God had promised to Abraham, He is going to do." That's in the big scheme of things. What God is telling them is that He is not yet done. But, in the meantime, because of their disobedience, it is put on hold. It can be that for us too. God has a plan for our life, and yet, God continues to walk through the circumstances in our life, our obedience and our disobedience, but it doesn't mean that He doesn't have more specifics for us.

Secondly, I also want to clarify, that calling is not the same as volunteering. Many times, we hear the song by Jesuit Dan Schutte, and popularized by John Michael Talbot:

Here am I Lord, is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.....

That is inspired by Isaiah 6:8-9, "*then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go and tell this people..."*" The thing that we need to address is that God was not addressing Isaiah. Isaiah overhears God speaking. The call was not just to Isaiah, but for everyone. As Oswald Chambers said, "Whether I hear God's call or not depends on the condition of my ears; and exactly what I hear depends upon my spiritual attitude."

Then, what exactly is our calling? What does it mean to find our calling? Os Guinness, in his book 'The Call' (and I recommend that you read that book if you really want to know more about calling) puts it this way: "for the followers of Christ, calling neutralizes the fundamental position of choice in

modern life. 'I have chosen you,' Jesus said. 'You have not chosen Me.' We are not our own; we have been bought with a price. We have no rights, only responsibilities. Following Christ is not our initiative, merely our response, in obedience. Once we have been called, we literally have no choice."

Michael Card says, "Behind every specific call, there is a deeper call that gives shape to the first; the call to give ourselves away – the call to die." Bonhoeffer says it most bluntly, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." At a very fundamental level, we are called to be disciples, to follow the Master where He leads us. Will Williamson says, "Vocation (another word for call) is not evoked by your bundle of need and desire. Vocation is what God wants from you."

So, if you were thinking that calling is only for those in full-time ministry, then I'm sorry to disappoint you. It applies to all of us. And if we've been bought with a price, and I trust that each one of us here knows and has taken to heart, then you and I are invited to be a follower of Christ. You and I have a calling, and that is to be His disciple. But what it may look like for each one of us may be different. So, when we say that God's calling is irrevocable, it means that He doesn't change His mind. But it doesn't mean that there cannot be different ways, times and seasons in our life.

So, you get the big picture. But I think the bigger challenge for all of us, myself included, is: how does that work out on a day to day basis? Am I in a place where He wants me to be today? How do I know what His call is on my life tomorrow? And a few months back, I myself asked the Lord: What is the purpose of my life? and I believe the Lord clearly said, "I want you and I need you to be a spare wheel – to a bi-vocational ministry." What is a spare wheel? It is one that is ready to go at a moment's notice. It needs to be as good as the other wheels on the car. It needs to be ready, have good tread, inflated. You don't want to find out when you have a flat, that your spare wheel doesn't fulfill its purpose. I believe God was saying, "I have designed and kept you in that place." I have seen that in my life, whether in the church or outside at work. "I want you to be ready to step in at a moment's notice. You need to be as good as what is happening there, though you may not always be on the main track. And you need to be okay with that."

For each one of us to understand our specific calling or vocation, which comes from the Latin word 'vocare' or calling, we need to go back to the beginning. So, read with me:

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (The word rule in Hebrew is to reign or have dominion). So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (And that verse in Hebrew is really a poem – God created male, female, men and women as partners to work together as kings and queens ruling over the earth). God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (The word subdue in Hebrew is kabash, and it means 'to wrestle with the earth and wring profit out of it with your hands'). The blessing is human. Fill the earth, subdue, wrestle, wring profit from creation!

So why were we created? 'So that we may rule.' You and I were made to work. It's in our bones; it's in our DNA. It's central to who we are as humans. What's the first question that we ask each other – what do you do? Why? Because what we do matters. What we do is central to our role as an image-bearer of God. That's why when someone is unemployed, it is so gut-wrenching. That's why people who hate their jobs or don't enjoy their work are miserable even if it makes a load of cash. We feel that we are not doing what we should be doing. That's why people who retire early are often unhappy. Because when we stop working, it means that we are not doing what God has called us to do. And I don't mean a job; I mean working. When we stop, we stop creating shalom. And shalom means peace, but it is more than just the absence of discord – it's a sense of well-being. When God's favor rests on us, when we're doing all that we should be doing as God created. When we say 'bless', the Lord

blesses you and keeps you. We stop being fully human when we stop working. We stop being fully alive. You and I were made to work.

Notice that the first blessing in the story is WORK. We always think of work as a curse, as a result of the fall. If Adam hadn't sinned, we wouldn't have had to work. No! Work predates the fall. It's the first blessing that God gave Adam and Eve. And there are many blessings as we go through Scripture, which we remember so often. But this is the first one that God gave us. He said, "Get to work, subdue, wrestle, rule, reign, take care of the garden that I have placed you in." Work is a blessing, not a curse.

Perhaps some of you are thinking: "That it's easy for you to say; you don't have my job." No, I don't! but I've worked for enough number of years to have had my share of frustrating jobs. And part of the reason that we may have a lousy job is what happens later.

Genesis 3:17 You know the story. Adam and Eve did not listen to what God said. They listened to the serpent. And then God said, "*Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it.'*" Sin here is the by-product. "*Cursed is the ground because of you. Through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. it will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field, by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food, until you return to the ground. Since from it you were taken, for dust you are and to dust you will return.*" God curses the ground and God curses human's relationship with the earth.

The blessing is that humans were made in the image of God to rule over the earth, to subdue the earth, to take the creation project forward on God's behalf. But now, because of the curse, that role has become hard. There is now painful toil. There are thorns and thistles to deal with, there's sweat on our brow. Now there are blisters on our hands and we have sore backs, we have worker's compensation and Medicaid. This is the result of the fall, or in the language of Genesis 3, the 'painful toil' that results because of that. Now the blessing is cursed, and humans, like Adam, need to be saved. We need salvation in a broad sense, not just from sin and death, but to have Eden restored. We need to be put back into right relationship, both with the Creator and with creation. We need to get back to the Garden. Man is separated; he is outside the Garden. He is no longer in that place of flourishing, and he's lost the shalom he had in God's presence, and he needs to get it back

And that's what salvation is about. So often we think that salvation is God coming to save us so that when we die, we go to heaven. No! He restores the relationship with Himself, the Creator; but eventually one day restore the relationship with creation itself. You and I were made by God to rule, not sit around. Just as Adam was given rule over creation, we too were put there. Which is why Jesus came to earth. He came, not as fire, not as smoke, but He came as a human. He steps into history. So, He does again what Adam was supposed to do; what humanity was supposed to do. He takes back dominion and helps us. He rules the earth and He puts us back in the spot that God originally created us for.

Made for work (Redemption)

What did He create us for? What has He done through salvation for us?

Ephesians 2:8-9. Paul alludes to the Genesis story that we just read. "*For it is by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God; not by works so that no one can boast.*"

The problem is that we get so focused on verses 8 and 9, that we tend to stop there. Paul very clearly states that we are saved by grace, not by works. We don't really talk about works in the church. Paul is not talking about work in the generic sense; he's talking about how you and I are saved, how there's nothing that we can do for our salvation. He says, "Listen! It's a 110% gift of grace." There's no

merit, no earning. Not because you go to church, not because you pay any amount. No, God has given it to you completely.

But he doesn't stop at verse 9. There's no paragraph between verses 9 and 10. He's building up to a climax. *"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, not of works. Nobody boast."* Vs.10 *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do."* That's the end of his thought process there. If we stop at vs. 9, we miss his climax which is coming in vs.10. He says, "You are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God set out in front of you, way in advance for you and me to walk in."

What is Paul doing in vs.10? he is retelling the Genesis story. The word in Greek that he uses is *poema* from which we get 'poem'. He's alluding back to Genesis chapter 1, where God made man in the Garden and put him to work. He says, "Listen, Jesus has saved you and He's brought you into a right relationship with God, the Creator, so you can be put back to work." There's a purpose in that. Then he makes the statement: there are good works that God has prepared in advance for you to do. God has it all planned. He doesn't leave us idle. He's got work for us to do as part of His great plan.

Good works.

So, what are these good works? One definition is: *Work is the gracious expression of Yahweh's creative energy in service of others to create shalom.*

John Stott says: *The expenditure of energy, manual or mental or both, in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God.*

Dorothy Sayers says: *Work should in fact be thought of as a creative activity, undertaken for the love of the work itself. And that man, made in God's image, should make things as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.*

Why? Because God works. You and I are made in the image of God. And so, it stands to reason, that anything that God gives is good. Of course, if there is such a thing as good work, there are also works that are not good. We know that there are people who are involved in trafficking, immoral activities, and so on. God has not called us to that; He's called us to work that does good. There is work that, when we do, gently restores us in the Garden of Eden. And Paul asks us to walk in that.

But how do we find that? What are those works?

Vocation.

I mentioned that theologians use the idea of work as vocation. We talk of vocational training, and unfortunately, it's lost its value because we always look at it as opposed to a university education. But that is not the idea behind it. Vocation is really to find your calling. So, vocational training should be helping us to find our calling. It's a word that we need to recapture. Down through church history, theologians have talked about the difference between an occupation and a vocation. An occupation is what we do to make a living. It's our job. It's what we do to make ends meet.

- A vocation, on the other hand, is a calling from God. Vocation and calling are synonyms. It's work, an expenditure of energy (in John Stott's language) in the service of others. The Bible is one of the only books that celebrates work, celebrates labor, both mental and physical. It's work that fits you, work that, as you look at yourself, you were designed for. It's something that you should enjoy. It's not heaven on earth; remember that there are thorns and thistles that we have to deal with. But it's in those places that we see that we are doing what God made us for. Remember in 'Chariots of Fire' when Eric Liddell runs, he senses God's pleasure on him. He was made to run. You and I have those spheres where we know that this is what God made us to do. It could be designing, baking, bringing up kids, whatever! God has put us uniquely in that way. And when we do that well, whether it's a beautiful pastry, or a piece of art, or music, or just a great piece of software, something that we do, we know that God's working through us. There's that sense of beauty that comes out at that time. There's a

sense of restoration of creation that God had in His mind. For that second, we get a sense of heaven as it were coming together. It goes with our DNA.

- It's work that helps others – in the service of others. Work that creates shalom, that creates a world where humans can thrive and humans can live in God's presence. Notice how broad this is. You don't have to be a doctor or a lawyer or a judge. But you could work as a travel agent, or at Starbucks, whatever it is. As long as we're doing it well and helping others thrive. We're doing good works.

Luther gave the example of the milkmaids. When they are doing that and doing it well, that's what God has called them for, they are finding their calling. They've found their vocation. This does not mean that if you're a dentist, you go around etching John 3:16 on somebody's tooth. But the fact is that we get the chance to reshape the world and we bring God's presence and beauty into our workplace. When we function like that, we are functioning as God wanted us to function. We then see God's glory coming through at that time.

A vocation is not always the same as your job. Paul was a tentmaker, but he wasn't called to be a tentmaker. Nevertheless, tentmaking put food on the table for Paul, so he did what he had to do and he did it well. My prayer for each one of us is that our job and vocation would overlap, but it's not always the case. Students, for example, if you're in school or college, that is your vocation right now. That is the work that God has given you, and whatever you are studying, you need to study and you need to do it well, because you need to see learning as your vocation, as your calling. Everything that we learn today, we can put to use later to create shalom in the world. That includes all of us. It's not just for the church. For the vast majority of us, our vocation and our calling is outside that door and it happens outside the walls of the church.

But you are called. Remember when Jesus preached the sermon on the Mount, he said that we are salt and light. Light is only good when it is spread out and scattered all over. As we go out, we are scattered all over the city and all over the world. We take our saltiness and we take it out of the church. I don't know what God's calling on your life is; I don't know where God has placed you – whether it's digital marketing, baking, or in a restaurant. But if you are doing work that fits you and benefits others, then you need to see that work as God's calling on your life.

Two Lies.

Before closing, I want to address two lies that so often take away the joy from our work and we miss God's purpose for us.

1. This comes from outside the church and it is that **work is just a means to an end**. You see the bumper sticker that reads, "I owe, I owe; it's off to work I go!" We go to work because we need, or want, a paycheck. Even though we don't like what we are doing, or we work more than we have to because we want a bigger paycheck. A lot of us think that work is just so that we can pay the bills or get more holiday time, or eventually retire and play golf. Work is just a means to an end and the end is money, or fame, or success.

I would like to ask a question: if, God forbid, one of your relatives were to die and leave you a 10 crore legacy, would you still go to work after that? If your answer is 'No', then it means that you've bought into this lie because you think that work is a means to make money. It's not. Money is the by-product; it should not be the end. It's the by-product of working well.

The truth is that you and I were made to live to work. We were made by God to work, to create shalom. If one had money, then some of us might change our work because we have the freedom to select other things. But we should still be working. We should be still looking for those places where God can use us and where we turn the place into the world that God created it to be.

2. This lie comes from within the church and it's what a lot of people call **the secular-sacred divide**. It's the idea that some work is spiritual and matters to God and has eternal consequences, and other work doesn't. something spiritual, something sacred. For example, what I'm doing right now, sharing God's word is spiritual. And what I do tomorrow when I go into office and start looking at a real estate development, that's not spiritual. That's wrong! Whatever we do, whether you're making lattes, or preaching the Gospel, it's part of what God has called you to do. Billy Graham's work mattered; your work matters too. So, whether you're a dentist, or a mom, or a teacher (I leave you to fill in the blank), your work matters to God. Don't ever buy into the lie that what you do doesn't matter, that it doesn't have eternal consequences. That idea goes back to a time before Christ; it goes back to the time of Plato who divided the world into spiritual and secular. It's a lie!

Do you know that there is no word for 'spiritual' in the Hebrew language? Look in the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, and you will not find the concept of spiritual there. Why? Because in the Hebrew Bible, everything, life itself, was spiritual. There was no separation between the two. Look at the breadth of topics covered in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Leviticus – you've got all the instructions for the sacrifices in the temple, the decoration, the rituals, the priestly duties. But you also have all kinds of details of what kind of seeds were to be planted, what kind of fabric their clothes should be made of, details of the border of the roofs, what to do if there was mold in the house, about government, about taxes, about slaves, about compensation. Scripture dealt with everything – didn't differentiate between the temple and the rest. It was all part of the life that God had for His people. It was all spiritual; there was no secular-spiritual divide.

So, when you read the Bible and pray, it matters. But when you work in the kitchen, cut your plants, whatever, it also matters. The problem is that you and I want to compartmentalize. It allows us to leave God here and leave Him out of the other part of our life. So, we say, prayer, Bible study on one side and job, marriage, children on the other side. It doesn't work that way and God doesn't see it that way. All of our life matters. When we separate it, we eject God from a large part of our life because most of our time goes in the 'other' stuff. But He wants to be Lord of everything. He wants to use all of that for His purpose. He wants to be involved in that, whether we are grocery shopping, picking up the kids from school, out for a run, in the shower, go to bed at night, watching TV – it's all part of what God has for us. He's there with us in those moments. What you and I do matters.

As I bring this to a close, I want you to think that God has work going right from the Garden of Eden to the very end. The whole story of salvation is a 4-act story.

- Act I – in the Garden, creation
- Act II – the fall
- Act III – Redemption, and that's the season that we live in.
- Act IV – the Restoration, when we'll have the new heaven and the new earth, and Eden is restored.

If you go to Isaiah 66, Isaiah looks forward to that new city which is coming, what do you see over there? There's trade, there's commerce, the ships of Tarshish are going to bring their stuff into the city. We're not going to be sitting on clouds and playing harps. There's going to be work. As I say, my experience in Lavasa is going to have relevance in eternity – it's going to be a city there. But whatever it is, God has work for us. And we're going to be busy over there. One day, that work will be restored. There won't be thorns and thistles. But till then, my prayer is for each one of us, we would be able to go out of this room and go into whatever God has called us to, and wherever we are tomorrow, with the assurance that God's call is on our life, that we would thrive in the places that He has placed us. And if by chance we've confused our job with our vocation and made choices that were driven perhaps by the wrong motivation, we would pray and allow God to redeem that situation for His praise and glory. May each one of us have a blessed week at work, finding and bringing shalom wherever we are.