



How many of you have jobs? Unfortunately, with the job market still struggling there are probably less of you raising your hands than there would have been five years ago. But whether you're working or looking for work, let me ask you a question, why do you work? There can be two extremes in answering that question:

First, there are those who see work as a necessary evil. They work because they have to. Work is a means to an end. "I work because I have to pay my bills." Or "I work because I want to be able to pay for the things I want out of life." Or "I work because some day I want to retire." For these people, work has little intrinsic value. It's something they do because of something else they want. Some of these people, of course, aren't neutral about their job; they **hate** their job. Like the David Allan Coe song from 1978, *Take This Job and Shove It*, they loathe their work. Tim J. McGuire, former editor of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* once said in a speech: "Work is brutal. Work is a four-letter word. Most people don't think that work could possibly have anything to do with spirituality. They assume that these two worlds cannot mesh."

The other extreme sees their jobs and their work as central to their worth and identity as a person. Not only do they love their work, their work is everything to them; it's their religion. One study showed that Americans work an average of 49½ weeks a year, more than any other developed nation. My oldest daughter used to work for Facebook. It was great because you could eat three very nice meals a day there; they would even do your dry-cleaning. All this for free! But after awhile she realized part of the deal was you never needed to go home! For some, work is an obsession.

It's interesting God is the One who invented work. When God created Adam and Eve, he gave them work to do. He told them to "*fill the earth and subdue it*" (Gen. 2:28). Before sin ever entered the world, there was work in paradise. The Bible also hints strongly there will be work in heaven. But work isn't everything. God also instituted the Sabbath; a day of rest. Life is to be lived in a sacred rhythm of rest and work.

How do we capture God's purpose for our work? How can work become more than a necessary evil, but not so much that it defines our lives? The answer lies in the whole idea of what the Bible calls "calling." We need to understand how our jobs relate

to our calling. When we understand our calling, our job will take on new meaning.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 7. We'll be looking at verses 17–24. Paul has been answering some questions about marriage. Some believers in Corinth had come to Christ while married. They wondered if somehow their marriages were a part of their non-Christian past that they should leave behind. Many of them had mates who weren't believers, so they wondered if that old relationship would contaminate their new relationship with God. Paul addresses this and says, "As far as it's up to you, stay in your marriage. Stay in the same marital condition you were in when you came to Christ."

But then, starting in v. 17, he applies that same principle to other areas of life where they might think they should try to make a change. He says, as a general rule, stay in whatever station in life you were in when you met Christ. He uses two examples; both of which were controversial and divided people of his day. The first example was circumcision, which divided Jews and Gentiles. The second issue had to do with slavery. Some of the Corinthians were slaves. Slavery as an institution is an evil thing. But the slavery of Paul's day was different than it was in this country. There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Slaves were part of the fabric of society. Some of them had good jobs and lived comfortable, secure lives. But you can understand why some of them thought that now that they were Christians they should become free. That's the issue Paul is addressing. We don't have slaves today, but in a broader sense this applies to whatever job we have. How does our occupation relate to our conversion? What impact does our call to Christ have on our work?

**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. 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. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren,**

**each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called (1 Corinthians 7:17–24).**

I want to make several observations about what Paul says here.

**We are all called.**

The first thing to notice is as followers of Jesus we're all called. In this passage Paul repeats the fact that we've all been called by God while we were in a particular occupation. When he talks about us being called he's speaking about conversion. He says, "Was any man called when he was already circumcised? Were you called while a slave?" He's asking, "When you became a Christian and heard the call of God to repent of your sins and you trusted in Christ, were you a slave?" He could just as well have asked, "When God called you into relationship with his Son, were you a school teacher, or a construction worker, or a policeman, or an accountant, or a stay-at-home mom?" The answer is yes. Unless we were converted as children, all of us were something when we were called. But the point is as believers we've all been called by God.

How do you know if you've been called? Have you put your faith in Christ? Are you following him? If the answer is yes, guess what, you've been called. You may not know this, but you wouldn't be doing that unless he called you first. He made the first move. He called your name. He said, "Come on, follow me!" And you said, "Yes, I will follow you." Peter wrote, "*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Pt. 2:9). God's people are called people.

**Our job is a calling too.**

You might be wondering, "Okay, I get that. I'm called by God. But what about my job? Should I just forget about that?" But in this passage Paul tells us our job is a calling too. This is the second observation. Notice how Paul spells this out. In v. 17 he calls our job the place "*the Lord has assigned to each one.*" He says, "Wherever you were at when Christ called you, that's your assignment." (There are exceptions to this, of course, like the woman who came up to me at church and said she was a drug dealer when she met Christ!) Then in v. 20 he says something surprising. The word the NASB translates "condition" and the NIV translates "situation" is actually the same word he uses in the rest of the passage for "calling." It should read like this: "Each man must remain in that **calling** in which he was called." You see, our jobs are a calling too. You might say, there is Calling with a big C and calling with a small c. Calling with a big C is the same for every believer; we're called into a relationship with Christ. Calling with a small c is a little different for every believer. Our different jobs are a calling; they're our specific assignment from God.

Martin Luther was approached by a working man who wanted to know how he could serve God. Luther asked him, "What is

your work now?" The man said, "I'm a shoemaker." Much to his surprise, Luther replied, "Then make good shoes and sell them at a fair price." He didn't tell the man to make "Christian shoes" or to leave his shoe business and become a monk. We can serve God in almost any job. By the way, that doesn't mean we can never change jobs. Notice how Paul says to slaves, "*But if you are able also to become free, rather do that*" (v. 21b). That means if we have the freedom to somehow better our situation, that's fine.

**Our calling takes precedence over our job.**

This leads to the third observation. The assumption of this passage is our big C calling takes precedence over our job. If you look carefully at this passage it's clear that our jobs (small c) aren't the most important thing about us; our calling (big C) is. That's why throughout the passage Paul tells them not to stress about changing the circumstances of their job. If they can change, if they can become free, then go ahead and do it, but the bottom line is, it doesn't matter all that much. What matters is your big C calling. Look at verses 20–21, "*Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it.*" Some of us read that and say, "Don't worry about it? How can I not worry about it? This is my life. This is my identity." The only reason he could say that is because our big C calling is so much more important than our small c job.

Now let's face it, not all of us think and live this way. We get our identity and our significance from our jobs, and we tend to view our calling as incidental. Paul says your calling defines who you are, not your job. Verses 22–23 really bring this home. He says to slaves, "*he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman.*" The Lord purchased us; he bought our freedom; he paid the redemption price, so we're all not to think of ourselves as slaves of men but of God. But that's not all. This works both ways. He says to their masters, "*he who was called free, is Christ's slave.*" Some of us, because of our particular jobs, tend to think too little of ourselves and need to remember our high calling in Christ. Others, because of our particular jobs, tend to think too high of ourselves, and need to remember we're just slaves of Christ.

I had this lesson brought home to me as a young man. After I served as a Youth Pastor for four years in another church Lynn and I decided to move to Colorado so I could finish seminary. We were already in our late twenties and had a four-year-old daughter. I became a full-time student and a part-time waiter. Now in my warped way of thinking, that just wasn't as significant a job as being a pastor. It wasn't long before my sense of significance began to fade. Here I was, almost 30 years old, trying to get through school, waiting tables at a two-bit hamburger joint. To make matters worse, Lynn became the primary breadwinner and worked as the assistant to the president of a large Savings

and Loan. I'd take her to work in the morning and see all these guys she worked with greet her in their \$3,000 suits while I still had my slippers on. It was humbling. I wanted to scream, "I'm not really what you think. I'm really an important person. I was a pastor. This is all just temporary." I wasn't really deriving my significance from my calling to Christ. Now I'm a pastor. At times I think I'm a big shot. I need to remember, I am just a slave. My significance doesn't come from my job, but from my calling.

What does your big C calling say about who you are? God says through Isaiah, "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine*" (Is 43:1). Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world*" (Mt 5:13-14). Paul says we have been "*blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*" (Eph 1:3). We were chosen in him before the foundation of the world, adopted as beloved children, redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, and we have a glorious inheritance waiting for us in heaven. That's our identity! That's who we are by virtue of our big C calling. No job can give you any of those things. These are still tough days in the Bay Area. You might even be out of a job. But all these things are still true of you. That's who you really are. That's what really matters.

So you might just wonder, if my calling takes precedence over my job, why should I even care that much about my work? This leads to my final observation.

### **Our calling will transform our job.**

Our calling will ultimately transform our job. Even though our calling is more important than our job, our job is still important. As I said, it's a calling too. Our job is the place we live out the implications of our call.

Paul gives us a very strong hint of what that might mean in v. 24. Notice he says, "*Each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.*" Underline those words, "with God." These two words make all the difference in the world. The NIV translates this, "as responsible to God." The idea seems to be, whatever our work is, God is not only right there with us, but we do our work for him; he's the One we're to please. In Colossians, Paul puts it this way, "*Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men*" (Col. 3:23-24). Do your work as if it were an act of worship. What difference would it make if you did your job every day as an act of worship before an audience of One?

It would make a difference in how we work. When we're doing our work for God we strive for excellence in all we do. Sweeping floors, studying for an exam, pounding nails, pulling teeth, fixing computers will be done with diligence and care. It should never be said of us as workers that we're halfhearted, chronically late, irresponsible, whiny. We know Jesus was a carpenter. As a carpenter, he spent many long hours doing manual work in a wood

shop. Do you think he put out an excellent product? People who lived 100 years later said they saw farmers still using plows made by Jesus. Os Guinness writes: "How intriguing to think of Jesus' plow rather than his Cross—to wonder what it was that made his plows and yokes last and stand out." I know. He did it before an audience of One.

Working for God should also make a difference in who we are. This goes beyond just being good workers. The idea here is being people of Christ-like character in the marketplace. We should be marked by integrity. We should be known as people who don't shade the truth to make the deal. Expense accounts are not padded. Petty cash is not pilfered. Company time is not wasted.

Years ago there was a young woman who was a maid. She had come to Christ and was applying for membership at the Baptist church in London where Charles Spurgeon was pastor. The church had a committee that examined all potential members. During the interview, Spurgeon asked her if there was any evidence that she had truly repented of her sins. She looked at him and said, "Well, I no longer sweep the dirt under the rugs in the house where I am employed." Spurgeon turned to the committee and said, "That's all I need to hear. We'll receive her as a member." That woman's big C calling made her a more honest small c worker.

But that's only the start. We should actually model a lifestyle that's directly opposed to the typical standard. The typical mentality centers on the bottom line: profits, quotas, sales balance sheets, getting ahead of our coworkers. Yet, we should be people marked by compassion, servanthood, and putting people above the bottom line. When you go to work tomorrow, who do you need to reach out to? Who needs your encouragement? Who needs you to listen?

Being Christ-like also means being vulnerable—admitting when you make a mistake. We're going to blow it at times. We lose our tempers, say something unkind, fall into gossip, or just fail to do a good job. We should be known as people who refuse to shift blame or rationalize but who say, "I'm sorry. I blew it. I shouldn't have said that. I was wrong." We can also be vulnerable by just being honest when we're struggling with something. We don't have to be "Joe Christian" with a plastic smile. We need to be human, sincere, honest, transparent.

Finally, working before an audience of One should make a difference in what we say. Once we earn credibility in how we work and who we are, then we've earned the right to share Christ with our coworkers. I like what Bill Hybels says about this, "Jesus never commanded us to engage in theological debates with strangers, flaunt four-inch crosses and Jesus stickers, or throw our Christian catch phrases. But he did tell us to work in such a way that when the Spirit orchestrates opportunities to speak about God, we will have earned the right."

## **Conclusion**

We're all called. Our calling takes priority over our job, but it also transforms our job. Work becomes an act of worship for an audience of One. That transforms how we work, who we are, and what we say. Instead of singing "Take this job and shove it" we can sing "Take this job and bless it."

Brother Lawrence lived in the 17th century. He was a lay brother in the Catholic church. Because he was clumsy and not very bright, he got the job of working in the monastery kitchen, a work he said he didn't like. But Brother Lawrence learned to do

that job as an act of praise. Someone who knew him said of him, "having accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of God, and with prayer on all occasions for grace to do his work well, he found everything easy during the 15 years he worked there." For Lawrence, every action was an act of worship.

Would that he could say that to each of us. When you do your work before an audience of One, your work no longer becomes an act of drudgery or drivenness but an act of worship.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*