

# THE THISTLE

## **The Quest for a Calling: What Is Mine, and How Do I Find It?**

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“To do what we love for people we love” could be the motto for the ideal job. Musicians love to perform, bakers delight to make breads and pastries, and engineers yearn to solve problems. But how do we find jobs we’ll love? Is there a “perfect job” out there waiting for each of us—a job that God has specifically designed us individually to do? If so, how can we know what it is?

To answer these questions, we must first understand the biblical concept of calling. The Bible speaks of calling in no less than three ways, each of which is important in seeking to understand God’s will for our lives.

### **First Calling: The Call to Christ**

In centuries past, people did not switch jobs every few years. Farmers generally remained farmers for life. After the Reformation, pastors studied the biblical teaching on calling afresh and discovered that God calls His people to more than work. First and foremost He calls them to Himself. This is our “general call”; it is not unique for anyone. God calls all believers to the same faith, obedience, and godly character.

As Paul the apostle reminds us, we are “called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2). This point is essential. Whatever the differences between our gifts and work, God has the same basic purpose or “call” for every believer—to know God and be like Him.

God also issues a “particular call” to everyone. He has distributed singular gifts to each of us and designed a specific role for each of His children. This is unique for each person. For example, Paul says he was “called to be an apostle” (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1), to carry God’s name to the Gentiles.

### **Second Calling: The Call to Work**

God also called prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos to their positions (Isa. 6, Jer. 1, Ezek. 2–3, Amos 7). God calls national leaders as well: He chose Moses to lead His people out of Egypt (Exod. 3–4); and He called Saul (1 Sam. 9–10), David (1 Sam. 16), and Jehu to reign as kings (1 Kings 16) in Israel. He even appointed pagan kings such as Hazael, king of Aram (1 Kings 19); and Cyrus, king of Persia (2 Chron. 36; Isa. 44) to their posts.

We may observe that this list runs from spiritual callings (apostle, prophet) to noble ones (deliverer, king) but does not mention farmers, shepherds, merchants, or other less “exalted” positions. This is because the Bible primarily records the history of redemption in the events of which prophets and kings often loom large. Yet God certainly notices the work of those who are engaged in more humble

pursuits. This work matters to Him, as do all our deeds and words.

Unfortunately, our society—and sadly even many Christians—do not understand this. In our blindness, we tend to see various professions in light of their perceived value to the rest of us, counting some as more necessary or worthy than others. We believers are even guilty of making such artificial distinctions between different types of Christian work. Yet, if we think about it carefully—and biblically—we discover that we very much need the services of every legitimate vocation and that before God no honest calling is intrinsically superior to any other; all true vocations are equal. Cashiers and corporate leaders,

cabinetmakers and icemakers, are all one before God.

Some jobs may seem merely frivolous to most of us—like the selling of cotton candy, for instance—but may be legitimate ways of earning a living or supplementing an income for those who do them. Other jobs, however, not only fail to help others in any appreciable way, but also may actually hurt them—such as work in the gambling and abortion industries, for example.

At this point, we might be tempted to say, “If your work does not bless you and mankind, you should look for a new job.” But we must not be too quick to say this. Frivolous work and evil work are not the same thing. We are also inclined to doubt that “humble” work constitutes a calling the way “noble” work does. Is this the right way to think of such things? Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians helps us address such questions.

### **Third Calling: The Call to a Place**

#### **Life in Corinth**

To follow Paul’s thought, we must first learn something about the Corinthians. Some Christians in Corinth were dissatisfied with their places in life. They saw that people in the city practiced all sorts of sexual aberrations and wondered if it were best for them as believers to avoid sexual relations altogether. Abstinence is good, Paul replied, especially if one has self-control, but marriage and sexuality are good too (1 Cor. 7:1–9). Other Christians, who had married pagans before converting to Christianity, wondered if divorce was the best option. No, Paul says, marriage is permanent; believers should fulfill their marital duties (1 Cor. 7:10–11). They should take comfort, for God sets apart the whole family if just one spouse believes (1 Cor. 7:14–15).

#### **Life Assignments: Marriage, Heritage, and Work**

What does this have to do with work and calling? Paul’s conclusion is startling and has implications far beyond marriage alone. He says, “Each one should retain the place in life that the

Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him...” (1 Cor. 7:17). That is, we have no right to improve our lot by fleeing a hard marriage if God has called us while in it. We cannot compel a spouse to change either. Thus, even an unsatisfying marriage is a calling assigned by God.

The call to a place in life is different from the call to Christ. It is a “life assignment.” God posts us to relationships and tasks, beginning with those we had when we came to faith. Some people think a change of circumstances will cure their problems, but Paul says no man need change his place to please God. Next he addresses work directly, using the extreme case of slavery. He asks, “Were you a

slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (1 Cor. 7:21). In other words, Paul tells slaves, "Don't let that bother you," as if slavery were no problem. Given what we know about the mostly deplorable conditions of slaves in antiquity, this is astonishing. How can Paul say such a thing?

First, Paul is not endorsing slavery. He is telling believers how to live within a pervasive, entrenched institution. Second, Paul says everyone belongs to someone. Believers are "bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). As a result, even freeborn men are now "Christ's slaves" (1 Cor. 7:22). Yet slaves who belong to Christ are spiritually free. Our spiritual liberation is so radical that, by comparison, even enslavement matters little. God may summon us to new occupations, but even if He does not, He gives our old ones new meaning.

Thus, the Bible instructs us not to think first of changing locations to new jobs, cities, or social circles when we are in distress. Rather, it says, think of your call to Christ. If we belong to Him, our circumstances almost fade into irrelevance. And if this is true of slavery, then it is true as well of every boring, dead-end job, every foolish boss, and every impossible task. There is room to serve God even in cramped places. We can remain in our places if we remain with God because He provides for us there (1 Cor. 7:24).

Our impatient generation, quick to flee unsought burdens, would do well to ponder this. Yet, if Paul had said no more, he could be accused of Stoicism, even fatalism. But remember, he also told slaves: "If you can gain your freedom, do so."

### **Improving One's Calling**

This statement seems to contradict Paul's command that everyone remain in his or her place. Yet a second look shows Paul's flexibility. The unmarried and the widowed should not marry—unless they find celibacy unmanageable (1 Cor. 7:8–9). The married should not divorce—unless the partner is an unbeliever who insists on leaving (1 Cor. 7:10–16). Slaves should remain in their places—unless they can gain their freedom by legal means (such as manumission or by purchasing it).

The principle here is that we may not leave a position if leaving violates a law, abandons a duty, or breaks a promise. Promises are sacred, even if we later regret making them. We have no right to question bedrock duties to family, friends, or employers, however painful the discharge of those duties may be.

But we may also work for someone new if we violate no God-given duties in the process. But how do we know when it is time to make such a change? How can we be sure God is calling us to something new? Basically, how can we be confident that we have found our true calling?

### **Finding Our Particular Calling**

#### **Law and Experience**

As we mentioned earlier, this problem of "finding a calling" was less visible in past centuries when most people had fewer options. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bible does not contain a text that tells one exactly how to find his or her particular calling. Still, there are two principles that can lead us to the right occupations.

First, the law of God limits our options. God commands us to serve others in our work. Therefore, we cannot earn a living through immoral acts—such as prostitution, being an assassin, or selling dangerous and addictive drugs. Second, a proper respect for experience leads us to choose work that we know something about. We also need to know ourselves in order to choose well. A few people seem to know their gifts and callings from the very beginning and never waver. But for others, self-knowledge often unfolds slowly, by trial and error. An awareness of one’s true calling may not dawn on that person until halfway through life— or even later. It takes experience to recognize it when it arrives.

### **Desire, Fruit, and Employment**

To the two prerequisites of obedience to God’s will and the self- knowledge that comes through experience, we can add three other elements that will help us as we seek our callings. These three— desire, fruit, and employment—form a sturdy triangle in which each leg strengthens the others.

“Desire” is the thrill an engineer feels as he solves a problem, the satisfaction a diagnostician knows as she labels a disease and prescribes the remedy, the elation a performer has when he gets it exactly right for an attentive audience. Desire declares, “I would do this job for free if money were no object.” The Bible says it this way: “Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God” (Eccl. 5:19).

By “fruit” I mean that the engineer’s solution works, the doctor’s patient improves, and the entertainer’s crowd goes home enriched. When there is fruit, recipients often thank the worker and say, “This was just what I needed.” The Bible encourages us to seek this kind of productivity and to pray for fruit: “May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands” (Ps. 90:17).

By “employment” I mean that someone asks the worker to perform his service again, commonly (but not always) in a paying

job. Employment means someone believes that you can bear fruit continually and wants to secure your services. As Proverbs says, “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men” (Prov. 22:29).

These three elements fortify each other. Desire for a task improves the quality of our work, making it more fruitful. If desire flags, it is rekindled when we see the fruit of our labors. Fruit also leads to employment as employers think, “We could use his or her talents here.” Employment multiplies fruit as the worker hones and practices his craft through the guidance of mentors. Finally, employment reinforces desire as a worker sees his gifts confirmed.

### **Gathered Wisdom**

As a further aid to our quest for the perfect calling, we can also gather wisdom from past Christians. They often counseled fathers to take unsettled sons to visit men at work in various trades: to the sea for sailing, to the garrison for soldiering, to the market for trading. Fathers would watch their sons for sparks of interest, then let them explore their chosen fields—perhaps as apprentices—before they settled on a calling.

This is wise, for however much we may change over the years, the child is still father to the man. What interests us at age 15 or 20 is connected to what interests us at age 30 or 50. It is also wise to recall

that parents and friends often know us better than we know ourselves. They may occasionally misdirect us, of course, especially when their own desires cloud their judgment, but even the self-interest of others can be illuminating for us. People ask us to do what they need and expect from experience that we will do well. If we know what discerning people habitually ask us to do, we can be fairly certain that we are in the neighborhood of our callings.

### **Living Our Callings**

Ideally, then, we get paid for work we love, our gifts deepen, we

help many, and the hours fly by. When we “do what we are,” our spirits flourish. When we use our highest gifts, our community grows stronger. Then we hold the highest position—the one for which God has gifted and called us.

In the midst of our searching, let us remember that the summons to Christ is the most blessed calling of all. No matter what our current circumstances, we are to seek contentment in the place where God has assigned us, understanding that there is no hierarchy of callings. If we use our gifts to serve our neighbors and honor God, He is pleased, whether we are carpenters or kings.

Contentment lets us pursue our dreams with calmness, not desperation. Then, drawing on the wisdom of others, we can search for the place where desire, fruit, and employment meet. In that place, we work best doing what we love for people we love. And, Lord willing, though we may sometimes grow tired in our work, we will never grow weary of it.

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