

CALLED TO OUR WORK

We don't choose our vocations; God chooses us for them.

(Fourth in a series)

by Gene Edward Veith

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When God blesses us, He almost always does it through other people. The ability to read God's Word is an inexpressibly precious blessing, but reading is an ability that did not spring fully-formed in our young minds. It required the vocation of teachers.

God protects us through the cop on the beat and the whole panoply of the legal system. He gives us beauty and meaning through artists. He lets us travel through the ministry of auto workers, mechanics, road crews and car dealers. He keeps us clean through the work of trash collectors, plumbers, sanitation workers and the sometimes-undocumented aliens who clean our hotel rooms. He heals through doctors, nurses and pharmacists. He brings people to salvation through pastors and through anyone else who proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost.

The fast-food worker, the inventor, the clerical assistant, the scientist, the accountant, the musician—they are all high callings, used by God to bless and serve His people and his creation.

Not that they always seem that way from the point of view of the people in those vocations. It is easy to see how all of these kinds of work are blessings to the rest of us who receive their benefits. But from the perspective of the people slaving away in these vocations, their work is often a daily grind—a hard, boring, thankless task.

Those in any particular line of work are usually doing it not from some high ideal, but because they have to make a living. There may be some professions that are innately satisfying, but even high-paid and high-status jobs can wear down the spirit.

Work can seem meaningless

Work often seems only a means to an end—survival, but it seems we survive only to work. It consumes our time, our emotions, our after-hours preoccupations. It takes away the time we would like to spend with our families—though the vocation of family life is often a frustrating struggle as well. And, as current technology puts us on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, our work consumes our lives.

Though work is a blessing, enjoyed even by Adam and Eve who were employed in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15) after the fall into sin, we labor in frustration and sweat: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of 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” (Gen. 3:17-19).

Charged with meaning

We live out our vocations—in the family, in the community, in the church and in the workplace—under the cross. Indeed, our vocations are part of the cross that we are called to bear. But the Christian can understand the ordinary labors of life to be charged with meaning. Through our labor, no matter how humble, God is at work.

Young people today are under intense pressure to “choose” their vocation, to decide what they want to do when they grow up, to pick a major in college, to pursue that perfect job. Indeed, there are many decisions to be made in regard to our life’s work. But in our choice-obsessed culture, the true meaning of “vocation” is often lost, even as we still use the word. Strictly speaking, our vocation is not something we choose for ourselves. It is something to which we are called by God.

We did not choose the family we were born into, nor did we choose the society of which we are citizens. God placed us in these relationships, in these vocations of family life and citizenship. They are “given,” in the here and now.

When we started a family of our own, we might think that we chose our spouse, but the spouse also had to choose us, and looming behind all of our apparent decisions lies the providential workings of God. When it comes to our employment, our “vocation” in both the secular and the theological sense, we do not have as much choice as we think.

Personal gifts from God

Sometimes my college students, pressured as they are to find a good job so they can make lots of money, choose majors for which they have no vocation. They may do research and find that there is a good job market for accountants and decide that this is the field that can open up the life of prosperity they dream of. But if they are not good at math, they may flunk their accounting courses.

Tragically, they may tough out the math and actually get the degree, only to find themselves in a job they hate. And if they hate it, they probably are not very good at it. They may not find an employer willing to call them to that line of work.

Finding one’s vocation involves recognizing one’s God-given talents and abilities. It also involves recognizing one’s God-given interests. It also involves recognizing God-given opportunities. Calling comes from outside ourselves—a company offering us a job, a marriage proposal made or accepted, doors closing in our face and doors opening elsewhere.

Each person’s calling is unique, a part of the way God created each individual whom He loves. Not everyone is called to go to college, and not everyone can work with their hands, or play a musical instrument, or teach in a classroom, or work the land. Those who have those abilities, interests and opportunities should see them as the personal gifts of God—part of their unique callings.

Callings often change

A young man working his way through college may get a job in a fast-food restaurant. For the time being, that's his vocation, and he is to love and serve his customers and his shift manager by flipping hamburgers. If he is fortunate enough to be going to college, he also has the vocation of being a student, which has specific obligations of its own (study!).

Eventually, he may get his computer degree and go into his life's work. That will be his vocation then. And if his "dot-com" company goes bankrupt, and he goes from vast wealth back to flipping burgers, he has a new vocation. At every stage, whether his work is humble or exalted in the world's eyes, he is serving his neighbor in a holy office.

Next month, Dr. Veith will write about our vocation as citizens.—Ed.

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