

My Vocation in Christ

• Lesson One •

My Vocation Is the Role in Life to Which God Has Called Me

1. God calls me to my vocation
2. Through the gospel, God gives me joy in my vocation

Worship

Have you ever looked down at a row of ants scurrying across your driveway? Did you find yourself overwhelmed with compassion for them? Did you worry about whether each had enough to eat, a comfortable place to live, and meaningful work to do? Probably not.

Our God is exalted far higher above us than we are above the ants in our driveways. Yet he is overwhelmed with compassion for each of us, and he stoops down to help. It's an awesome thought expressed in Psalm 113:5-9. Let's read it responsively.

Leader: Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,

Group: Who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?

Leader: He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap;

Group: He seats them with princes, with the princes of their people.

Leader: He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children.

Group: Praise the LORD!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you proved your love for us once and for all by sending your Son to be our Savior. Open our eyes to see further proof of your love in the simple and ordinary things we see every day. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

What would you say to these people?

- A wife and mother of three small children is inspired by a presentation on the work of the Central Africa Medical Mission. She says she feels very strongly that the Lord is calling her to go and help.
- A congregation president expresses his frustration over how difficult it is to get people to fill positions in the church. "What's wrong with these people?" he asks. "Don't they care about serving the Lord?"

Note: These questions for reflection introduce this entire Bible study, not just the first lesson. It might be best to limit the discussion at this point. If necessary, explain briefly that (1) the fact that the woman has three small children is a much better indicator of her calling than are her own “strong feelings”; and (2) a person does not need to hold a formal church office in order to serve the Lord.

A better understanding of the doctrine of vocation as drawn from the Scriptures would be helpful for the wife and mother, the congregation president, and all the rest of us. This study will focus on that doctrine.

Studying God's Word

God calls me to my vocation

A once-popular song went like this: “And you may say to yourself/‘How did I get here?’” The answer according to the song was “Letting the days go by.” The idea was that we land in a certain place in life more or less by accident. Time goes by, our life story moves along, and we don't give it much thought. Then one day we wake up—startled to find that we have a home, a job, and a place in a community.

How *did* we get where we are? Was it all just an accident? Or did we choose it ourselves?

What does the Bible say?

- Read 1 Corinthians 7:17-24.

1. Some of the early readers of this letter might have thought that their place in life resulted from their skill or intelligence or perhaps because of bad luck or bad birth. What answer did Paul's words give to such thinking?

“The Lord assigned” (verse 17); “God has called” (verses 17,24). Note: Verse 20 really refers to God's calling a person to faith, not to a particular place in life.

2. List some of the different places in life in which Paul's readers could be found. (Look also at verses 27,28 and at Ephesians 5:22–6:9.)

Paul had Jewish readers (“circumcision”) and gentile readers (verse 19). Some were slaves; some, freemen (verses 21-23). Some were married, and some were single (verses 27,28).

3. List some of the different places in life that the members of your Bible study group occupy right now.

Each person holds several vocations at once. One of Paul's original readers could have been a married-gentile-freeman. In the same way, a member of your group might be a wife-mother-registered nurse-Sunday school teacher.

These places in life where we find ourselves are our vocations.

4. Someone objects: “I chose my own career path. I decided to move to this community. I picked my own marriage partner. I, not God, chose my vocation.” Respond:

- a. from Scripture (use Proverbs 16:9).

We make plans in our hearts, but the outcome is up to God. God can thwart our plans, or he can work through them to place us where he wants us. In either case, our station in life comes ultimately from God.

- b. from your own practical experience.

We have less control over the direction our lives take than we may realize. External circumstances—which are under God's control—often influence the course of our lives. A man may choose a marriage partner and propose to her. Whether or not she accepts is up to her. People may decide to train for their dream jobs, but they will never get them unless someone else chooses to hire them. (Gene Edward Veith Jr., in his book *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002], discusses this at length. See especially page 50 and following.)

- Read Colossians 3:22-24.

5. With what attitude does a Christian pursue his or her calling?

“With sincerity of heart,” “reverence for the Lord” (verse 22), and “with all your heart” (verse 23).

6. Why?

We are “working for the Lord, not for men” (verse 23); we “know that [we] will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward” (verse 24).

God's Word in My Life

As they clean up together after dinner, a husband and wife are discussing how their day went. “You wouldn't believe it,” one says. “I spent the last three weeks on that report, and suddenly my boss tells me he doesn't need it anymore. Sometimes this job seems so meaningless!”

“Tell me about it,” the other says. “I spend all day cleaning the house. Then the kids come home, and within ten minutes it's messier than when I started! What's the point?”

What would you say to them?

When our work seems meaningless, it can be hard to continue serving faithfully in our vocations (more on this in Lesson Three). But if our vocations are assignments from the Lord, they are never meaningless. Ultimately we are not doing our work for the sake of our own feelings of satisfaction, but for the Lord. That fills every task with meaning, no matter how boring or pointless it may appear.

Thus every person surely has a calling [Latin: vocatio]. While attending to it he serves God. A king serves God when he is at pains to look after and govern his people. So do the mother of a household when she tends her baby, the father of a household when he gains a livelihood by working, and a pupil when he applies himself diligently to his studies.

—Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 3:128)

Through the gospel, God gives me joy in my vocation

“It would be easy to find joy in my calling if I were a restaurant critic or a stunt pilot. But I'm not. Or if I lived on a tropical island, or had a picture-perfect marriage and family. But I don't!”

It doesn't matter. Joy in fulfilling our callings doesn't come from living our dreams but from something else entirely. Let's see what that is.

- Read 1 Corinthians 7:19,24.

1. God urges us to keep his commands as they apply to our situations, knowing we are responsible to God. What does that mean for

- a. an employer?

Treat your employees with respect, recognizing that they too have been redeemed by Christ. Pay them fairly. Be concerned for their well-being. Be honest in your business dealings as one who is an ambassador of Christ.

- b. an employee?

Work to the best of your ability as if you are working for the Lord. Don't steal from your employer. Speak well of him or her. Be considerate of your coworkers.

- c. a husband?

Love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it. Lead your family as a servant leader. Work to provide for your family, especially for their spiritual well-being. Train your children, preparing them for lives lived to God's glory.

- d. a wife?

Respect your husband. Be a blessing to your spouse. Support and encourage your husband as the spiritual leader of the family. Train your children so their lives are lived to God's glory.

- e. a child?

Love and obey your parents. Grow in the knowledge and grace of God. Use your God-given gifts to glorify him and for the good of his kingdom.

2. Can we do these things? See Isaiah 64:6.

In an absolute sense, certainly not. Even our best efforts are stained with sin and have no intrinsic value to God.

- Read 1 Peter 2:4,5.

3. Why does Peter call our good works spiritual sacrifices?

Sacrifices are gifts offered to God. Our good works are gifts, acceptable to God, which we offer to him.

4. How can God accept these works if they're stained with sin?

"Through Jesus Christ" (verse 5). Jesus' blood and righteousness not only cover our sins before God; they also cover the flaws in our good works. God views us and our works through Christ. Thus, he finds both us and our works acceptable in his sight.

5. Evaluate this statement: Knowing that God views my work “through Jesus Christ” changes the way I look at my work.

If we know in advance that God will accept what we do for him because of Christ, we can serve him joyfully and eagerly in whatever we do.

6. Discuss how the following people are offering spiritual sacrifices to God:

- a. A father who sits on the edge of his child's bed to pray with the child.

He is using his time and abilities to lead his child to God's throne.

- b. A mother who works faithfully at her job, soldering circuit boards in a factory.

She is offering God a sacrifice if she isn't working with the selfish desire to enrich her own life, but rather to care for her family, if she works to the best of her ability and allows the light of the gospel to shine in her life.

God's Word in My Life

Your 16-year-old son has been complaining that his job is boring. After talking to him about the way Christians view their vocations, he responds: “But there's nothing especially Christian about this, is there? Non-Christians have jobs too, and they have roles to play in their families and communities. Many of them find joy and satisfaction in what they do, and many of them are quite dedicated. What advantage do Christians have?” How would you answer?

Certainly non-Christians also have their stations in life. But without faith in Christ, they cannot see their vocations as opportunities to thank God for his gift of salvation. They cannot have the confidence that their station in life is a calling from a loving God or that through Christ, God will accept their works as “spiritual sacrifices.” A Christian approaches his or her calling with these incomparable advantages.

[A Christian says]: “I know that everything I do in the name of Christ must please God, even though it vexes the devil. Therefore I will go my way and perform all the tasks I can and must in my calling, no matter how lowly this calling may be. I know that God places His stamp of approval on them and that they please Him just as much as do the most beautiful, most arduous, and most precious works performed in the highest vocation.”

—Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 24:240)

The real chief points of godliness and of true religion are these: faith toward God, through which we receive remission of sins; invocation; thanksgiving; and confession; next, the works of our calling with reference to our neighbor, that you rule, prescribe, teach, comfort, exhort, make a living by working, etc.

—Martin Luther (*Luther's Works* 3:118)

What clues do you see from our lesson that Martin Luther considered the doctrine of vocation an important teaching?

Luther spoke and wrote about this teaching often and at length. According to the quotation above, few things are more important.

In our church today, we probably don't give the doctrine of vocation as much attention as Luther did. Why do you think this is so?

There may be many reasons:

- We aren't as familiar with Luther's writings as we could be.
- The idea of serving God in our everyday calling may seem mundane and unglamorous.
- Americans prize personal freedom and social mobility and have difficulty with the idea of God assigning them to a certain place in life.
- The church's emphasis on personal evangelism, while very proper (see Lesson Five), can sometimes create the impression that evangelism work is the ultimate way, or even the only way, to serve God.
- A lay Christian serving God at home or at work doesn't help the church advance its program in a direct or obvious way.

Therefore the church may seem to have less incentive to stress this doctrine than it does others. Whatever the reason, the biblical truth about our vocations is an extremely rich and edifying truth—a truth we pray we will come to treasure through our study of these lessons.

Life with God

- Day 1: Read Ephesians 5:22-32. Across the top of a piece of paper, list several of the vocations you hold (for example: employee, husband, father, church elder, citizen). Then think about each one. In order to be faithful to each calling, what will you need to do this week? (Be specific—"Watch Sarah's softball game" could go under *father*; "Finish church financial report," under *elder*.) List tasks under each vocation in order of importance. Next, find a spot for each task in your schedule, beginning with the most important tasks. (Many people find this a helpful way to plan their week.)
- Day 2: Read Ephesians 6:1-9. Pray for your employers by name. Pray for those whom you employ.
- Day 3: Read Philippians 4:4-9. Look again at verse 8. Mentally list something "true," something "noble," and so on. In your prayer, thank God for each.
- Day 4: Read Colossians 3:18-4:1. Note that scholars have long observed many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. Compare this section with the section you read on Day 2. What is the same? What is different?
- Day 5: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. Pay special attention to Paul's tone, especially in verses 1, 9, and 10. What does he imply about the Thessalonians? Encourage yourself with these same words.
- Day 6: Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14. Note how seriously Paul takes this matter. Use his remarks to examine your own conscience. Confess to God in prayer whatever you find, and trust God's promise of forgiveness.
- Day 7: Read James 1:16-18. List several of God's "good and perfect" gifts to you, and thank him for each. Don't forget his greatest gift (verse 18).