

You Need a Calling

In my experience, most of the content out there about faith and work tends to focus on being a missionary at work, how to handle frustrations and endure, and how to have character at work. All of which are really important. In fact, we're going to bring up each of those at some point in our series. However, there isn't enough teaching on how our work itself is part of God's call on our lives. Our work itself, the tasks themselves, matter to God and are things he set into the fabric of creation.

So, last week Kent said that your work is part of God's good intentions for the world - that our work is partnering to take the world someplace - most of you all stared at Kent blankly. Like, the words did not compute with your lived existence. So, we're going to talk a bit more about this today and I want to start by discussing why we often feel that disconnect and how we attempt to answer it. We are going to talk about God's calling on your life. Turn with me to Genesis 3:17

Gen 3. 17 And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Curse. pain, Thorns and Thistles, sweat. Curse doesn't mean spell or witchcraft. It means the consequences of sin are far reaching and bring irreversible changes to the experience of life. In other words, creation now pushes back against us when we try to cultivate it. What was once all joy is now a mixed bag. Still lots of good, but also lots of frustrations.

Work is not only meaningful, it's also sometimes empty. That's the curse. Thorns and thistles.

Maybe you enjoy your work but the people there are disagreeable or difficult and create a bad work environment. Maybe your boss is awful. Sometimes work is not as fruitful as we'd like for it to be. Sometimes we don't accomplish all we'd like in the way we'd like. Work is not just satisfying, it is also frustrating. There are thorns and thorns are annoying. Sometimes work is monotonous and repetitive and seems to not be going anywhere. The work that we are given does not always fit with our interests, our specific wirings and passions, or our particular dreams.

All of us experience some amount of problems with our work. Some of us over work. Some of us underwork. How many of you toggle back and forth? Some of us overly find our identity in our work, and some of us abdicate responsibility. We approach work with wrong attitudes and motives.

The primary way, at least in my opinion, that our society tries to deal with this problem is to “find the right job.” We have this similar approach to dating and marriage. I just need to find the right one, the soul mate, and all of my problems and sin will go away, as well as theirs! How many of you have ever heard this: “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” We think if we can just find work that we love, like really love, then work won't feel like work. the burden of it will be gone, the frustration of it will be gone, the monotony of it will be gone.

Google search history affirms the trend: Since 2010, internet searches for “passion at work” have more than doubled, with workers in the United States the most likely to be interested in the topic.

But here's the problem, according to the bible, there is no such thing as uncursed work. If you're looking for a job that won't be frustrating, where people don't sin, where you don't sin, and where you never dread doing things about your job, you are going to be looking for a very long time. So then, what's the solution? If there's no such thing as uncursed work, are we just doomed to always hate what we do? Not exactly.

Now I'm about to say something that most of you will not agree with and will really need to wrestle with. It is not going to fit with how you've been taught to see the world and see yourself. The teaching of the bible is that it is possible for you to put love into your work, even if you don't love your work. Your ability to do your work faithfully, heartily, dare I say happily and with a smile on your face, actually has very little to do with what you do. Let's look at Colossians 3:22

Colossians 3:22-24 22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

This is a word to bondservants, who were normally people indebted to someone else and working for that person in order to pay off the debt. Now real briefly, Paul's not condoning slavery here. Ancient Mediterranean system was different than African American slave trade. It wasn't based on ethnicity and usually wasn't for life. Most servants could accrue wealth for themselves. But still...it's not exactly glamorous work. Filled with mundane tasks, cleaning the floor, washing dishes, weeding around the house, working in the field, with very little if any control over what you do or don't do every day.

And Paul said to them work heartily. The Greek word heartily = 'Psyche' - our current connotation is about our mind. Where we get our word psychology, obviously. But that's not what the Greek word means. The Greek word is an all encompassing word. In fact, it's elsewhere translated as life and as soul. It's about the essence of who you are. It can mean the breath of life in you. As in, when you're breathing you have life. It can mean the seat of the feelings, desires, affections, and fears. It's not your feelings, it's where

your feelings come from. It's not your desires, it's where your desires come from. It's not your fears, it's where your fears come from. It's your total essence, your whole self. Whatever you do, work heartily, work in a way that you put all of yourself and essence into it.

So this is the question. How on earth can Paul say this about a servant's job?! Is there any work that could possibly be easier for the worker to hate? Is there any work that could feel more like a curse and unfilling than the work of a servant?

Notice why. Because it's ultimately not about the work you do, but instead it's about who you do that work for. Paul says whatever you do, give it your very best because you're actually not working for your human master, you're working for Jesus himself.

What Paul just said is, so long as your work is done as an act of worship to God and service to others, is able to be done with your full heart. - even if it's work that we don't necessarily like. (Repeat this) Here is a quote from Tim Keller a pastor up in NY.

Tim Keller - "We must recover the idea that all human work is not merely a job but a calling. [...] Our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests. In fact, thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person and undermines society itself."

"Something can be a calling only if some other party calls you to do it, and you do it for their sake rather than for your own. Our daily work can be a calling only if it is reconceived as God's assignment to serve others. And that is exactly how the bible teaches us to view work."

Part of the good news of Jesus' rescue and redemption of your life is that he rescues you from having to have the weight of your hope rest in your career. The truest thing about you is not the job you have, or don't have or even the one you ideally want. The truest thing about you is not the tasks that you do. That's not what makes you who you are. The truest thing about you is that you belong to Him and long after your days of work have come and gone, you will still be His.

This means that our work can stop being about what it provides for us, and instead becomes about how God is providing for others through it.

Way too many of us go to work to serve ourselves.

We are not looking to give and contribute something in our work, we are only looking to get something out of our work.

It is possible, in Christ, for you to give yourself fully to your work - with your whole heart - if you actually believe that God and your neighbor are the ones you are serving. Giving yourself fully to your work - whatever that work may be - is ultimately a faith issue, not a job issue. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

What you need is not necessarily a work that you love, but work that you can put love into. You need to reimagine your work as a calling.

You don't have to be passionate about your work for you to put love into it.
You don't have to gain a sense of fulfillment from your work for you to put love into it.
You don't have to always have upward mobility in your work for you to put love into it.
You don't have to be appreciated or noticed in your work for you to put love into it.

Those are blessings not requirements.

Here is another way to think about this: God intends to fulfill some of his promises and prayers through your work.

In Lord's Prayer, Jesus says we should pray for our daily bread. So think about literal bread. Think of all the people that means you are praying for God to work through.

- The wheat farmer.
- The baker.
- The packaging and delivery company.
- The grocery store worker who places it on the shelf.
- The car mechanic who just fixed my car so that I can drive to the store.
- The gas station owner who helps me have gas to drive my car.
- The people who work on the roads so that I can drive on them.
- The Department of Transportation workers who arrange stop lights so that traffic isn't just mass chaos. We could probably go on for a while at this. You see that God is using all of these people. It all matters.

All of these people, in their work, are God's appointed means of answering prayer. And when you see your work as a calling, a ministry of service to others, you will be able to put love into it. As you do your work, God is working through you to fulfill his promises and be an answer to people's prayers.

How amazing is that?! When you go into your office each day, when you sit at that same old computer punching in another string of numbers, as you make your child's lunches, and cart them to school, as you unclog plumbing and prescribe medicine, and manage the technology of your company. God is working through you to love, serve and care for the world He made.

Foundation crack story.

Callie and I are in the middle of selling our house and through inspections, we found out there's a crack in the foundation wall that needs to be fixed. Yes I am still sad about it. Now, that is terrible news indeed but you know what is even worse? I have no clue when it comes to how to fix a crack in the foundation wall. I don't even trust myself to hang up curtains. But here is the good news, there are people out there who know how to do this, the structural engineer that can determine the problem and come up with a solution that will fix the problem, the contractor that is trained to follow through with the plan set out by

the engineer. So as I pray for God to help us sell the house and get this fixed, he is working through those very people in accomplishing answering my prayer. Without them, I won't be able to fix the house, I won't be able to sell the house, in fact I have to live in it until it falls down.

I was hanging out with a buddy of mine not too long ago who makes tires. My friend said he struggles to see any real meaning in his work. I told him, imagine your family is driving down the road and a poorly made tire blows out and then crashes and dies. Now do you think your work is meaningless? Of course not! It matters. And of course, this guy who works in a factory that makes tires immediately goes, Oh, my gosh, my job is really important. It really matters. And all it took was realizing his work wasn't for him. It was for other people, that he's serving God by blessing his neighbor.

So here's how an author named Lester de Koster talks about all this, it's a book called "Work the Meaning of Your Life." He says work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others, and in which others make themselves useful to us. He uses this example I think, is brilliant. He says, Okay, let's imagine that you get no help from anyone else in their work, and you have to make a chair. Now, you know, right now you just go find a chair buy a chair, it can be a very quick process. But imagine you get no help from anyone and you got to get a chair, what do you do?

Well, I guess, I don't know, you go find a tree. That's where you start, you find a tree, and you gotta cut it down. But first, you have to make a tool that will let you cut down a tree. I don't know how long that would take, take me at least like three weeks probably, to make a tool that I could cut a tree down with, then you have to cut the tree down. Then you gotta haul the tree somewhere, but I don't know how you're gonna do that you're gonna have to build some sort of machine that allows you to transport a tree to where it needs to. You got to fashion other tools. How long would it take you to just make a chair, your life. Like maybe on your deathbed. It's like, I did it. My friends and family can all sit in that one chair next to my death bed. Think about how much we need each other.

Imagine that everyone quits working, right now! What happens? Civilized life quickly melts away. Food vanishes from the shelves, gas dries up at the pumps, streets are no longer patrolled, and fires burn themselves out. Communication and transportation services end, utilities go dead. Those who survive at all are soon huddled around campfires, sleeping in caves, clothed in raw animal hides. The difference between a wilderness and culture is simply, work.

You pass God's blessing on to people who know him and to others who don't. In your work, you're called to your work. Your work is part of your ministry. The word ministry just means service. Your ministry is your service, it is the part you play in creation. For a garden like world, we are all in ministry. We can do it inside the church building or outside the church building, it's irrelevant. It's all ministry. It's all work that God intends for

his people to do. You need to reimagine your work as a calling as a mission of service to other people to take the world somewhere and bless them.

So my simple point is that even if you absolutely despise what you do—even if you don't have much inherent passion for your work—it is still possible to put love and hard work and passion into it anyway. We have that ability as followers of Jesus.

Now that being said, that doesn't mean it's wrong to occasionally look for work that is a little more of a natural fit for you. That can be an okay thing to pursue, so long as you're not convincing yourself that your ability to be joyful in life depends on it.

So what I want to do next is help you in discerning what a good fit might be for you in regards to work. I know some of you are currently trying to figure out what to do with your life. The truth is you do live in a society that offers you choices. If you lived a thousand or so years ago you'd be pretty locked in on what you did for work - whatever your parents did that's what you do, but as a 21st century American you get afforded the luxury of having options. So, as you're trying to figure these things out or thinking through a job change, let me just help you here a little bit. Think of this as a sort of prayer guide as you think through choosing your work.

Passions.

Most people start here and make it most important, if not the only question. That's wrong. But it does matter...some. Asking this question is a luxury that most of the world doesn't have. If you're born in certain parts of the world you don't think about doing what you love, you think about doing whatever you have to do to survive. If you lived during the Great Depression, you wouldn't find anyone talking about finding a job they were passionate about. You would've skipped to work while you whistled thinking "My family gets to live because God gave me a job!" The ability to factor in passion in picking your job is a privilege. Most people in human history didn't get to think like that. If you lived thousands of years ago, you'd have been a hunter or a gatherer. That's it. And if you're good at it, you live, if you're not you die,

But in the West, because some of us have access to unbelievable levels of wealth and quality of life compared to other parts of the world, some of us have the chance to consider our personal passions and potentially make a living through them. It's worth considering. What are you passionate about? What energizes you? What makes you angry? What keeps you up at night? What do you love to talk about? If you didn't need the money, what would you do? And I don't mean laying around watching TV. I mean after you're totally bored with that.

But you need to make sure you realize that they are not necessary conditions for you to be content or to put your heart and love into your work. Paul was in jail when he said he had learned the secret to contentment, regardless of circumstance. He was put in jail because he was doing his work. Through Christ who gives us strength. At some point, we just need to be thankful for a job. Jesus is with us no matter what we do and what he

called life to the full quote is not dependent on us having our dream job. At all. Which is great, since billions of people go to work simply as a way to survive.

Abilities.

I was brought up in a culture that essentially said, Jeff you can do anything you put your mind to. If you work hard enough, if you believe in yourself, if you're patient, you can do anything. This is such a middle-class American way to think. Nobody in the developing world would ever talk like that. Because it's not true.

Look I can believe in myself all I want, work as hard as humanly possible, I am 5ft 10" 250lbs, a vertical of maybe 18" no NBA team is going to call me up. God did not make me to be Yao Ming, he made me to be Jeff.

I can't be anything I want to be, no matter how hard I work or how much I believe in myself. God makes us. He has wired us and given us all different capacities for different things. Don't buck against that. To do so is to buck against God. If empathy and listening skills are something you struggle with, being a clinical counselor is not in the cards for you. If you have no rhythm you cannot be a drummer. You simply cannot, I don't care how hard you try. Side note, if you do have rhythm and can play drums, we are looking for drummers to serve our church family on Sundays.

So learning what you're good at is a valuable pursuit. And it's something to be considered, I would invite you to get other people's feedback on it, not just your mom, she thinks you're awesome at everything. Get other people to give you input on it, your identity is not in your ability. So you should be able to receive positive affirmation and criticism when you try new things. If not, that's an identity problem. So failure is fine. Try something, give it a shot, see if you're good at it. See if other people respond in a way where they affirm it and say, You know what, I think God has actually given you some strengths here.

Needs. Next, we want to consider needs. If God intended our work to be a service to others, then a logical question we need to ask is there a need in what I want to do. You might really want to start a traveling cotton candy food truck. But Knoxville may not have a deep, incessant need for portable cotton candy. And that needs to be considered, because work is not all about you, it's also about others. Are there people needing what I want to do where they will pay real American dollars? Which of my abilities would afford me the opportunity to earn a living? What am I good enough at that someone would pay me to do it? There's a difference between hobbies and jobs, right? The hobby is something that you enjoy, but other people don't enjoy enough to pay you for it. What does the world need? What do the people around me need? Answering this question truthfully will help you guard against making work all about you and what you can get out of it instead of what God intended work to be: a service to Him and others.

Wisdom.

Now as you consider what are your passions, your ability, and the needs of others, you will need to look at all 3 of those through the lens of wisdom. That's the thing in my experience as a pastor that is most often overlooked. And when I say wisdom, I mean are you seeking God's wisdom through his word, his Spirit, and his people. God gave us his word the Bible to help us know who He is and how He designed life to work, He gives us His Spirit to help us interact with Him and discern our motivations, and He gives us His people (who is also filled with His Spirit) to have a view into our lives, to encourage, to ask questions, to help us discern our motivations, and to join us in prayer. Those are the tools God has given us to help us navigate through this.

So we want to run our passion through God's wisdom. Is the work you want to do good work or is it bad work. Our whole sermon last week said that God wants us to cultivate the earth to take what's potential, make it actual, that God wants us to subdue the earth, to take care of it. So you need to consider with your work does it fit in with God's concerns for the world? Does it contribute to human flourishing? Is it good for you? Is it good for other people? Is it good for the earth?

Some work is bad work, and you should not participate in it. Some work objectifies other people. Some work manipulates people, some work coerces people. Some work takes advantage of people, especially some work takes advantage of poor people. Some work is not good work. Some work contributes to materialism and catalyzes wastefulness or sexual objectification and it leads people to gratify disordered desires. You need to figure out is the work that I'm considering good work? Does it move the world where God intends for it to go? That's mandatory.

We want to run our abilities through God's wisdom. We want to pray and ask can I actually do what I want to do. Do I have the means to do it? And this is where seeking God's Spirit through His people will be super helpful. Talk to other followers of Jesus that knows you and have a view into your life. If you just had a kid that's going to factor into how you think about career pursuits, if you can't go six months without an income, then I don't know the entrepreneur lane is going to be for you right now.

We want to run "Is there a need?" through God's wisdom. Am I actually meeting a need to serve others or am I looking to meet a need that I have in what I want to do. Am I making this more about my self fulfillment or am I really doing this to love and serve my neighbor. If I never get thanked or recognized for my work, will I still do it? Am I making my work about me? Is there a need in others that I am meeting?

Notice I said needs and not opportunities. Some reason in the Christian circle, we sometimes have this belief that only God can open and close doors. I hate to debunk

that but you know Satan can also open doors too. Just because a door is open, just because there's an opportunity, it does not mean you should automatically take it. It can mean God opened it, it can mean Satan opened it, it can mean it is just an open door. We need to rely on God's wisdom through his word, his Spirit, and his people.

Let in on a secret. There are aspects of my job I don't enjoy. Maintaining this building. Don't take that the wrong way. I am incredibly thankful for the gift of this building. I much prefer other parts of ministry and would happily never to never have to call a contractor again.

I told God when I graduated college that I'd go anywhere he wanted me to, just not Columbia, SC where I grew up. And he had a different idea. I ended up in Columbia for 10 years being a part of a church plant where I got trained up to eventually plant City Church. So all of this is to hold open handed allowing God to change your plans and lead you whether you like it or not. Sometimes we don't analyze it and we follow God as an act of obedience.

In light of those categories, ask "how can I be of greatest service to other people." As long as your job is primarily about your money or fulfillment, you will always sputter. But when you begin to ask about how you can uniquely best serve others, you are onto how you are wired to think. And ideally, we want to find something that fits perfectly in the venn diagram of all 3 circles, but the reality is that most of us will not, and that's totally fine. It still means you can give yourself fully, you can still put love into your work.

"Just because you cannot realize your highest aspirations in work does not mean you have chosen wrongly, or are not called to your profession, or that you should spend your life looking for the perfect career that is devoid of frustration. That would be a fruitless search for anyone. You should expect to be regularly frustrated in your work even though you may be in exactly the right vocation." - Tim Keller

As you do this, put love into your work because you start to see this is a calling God has for you in serving him and others, in a small way you are reflecting the heart of Jesus. As you do this for others, serving others, that's a reflection of the cross, Jesus went to the cross on my behalf, on your behalf, for our good. So as we follow after Jesus, the arena of life that is our work, should start to look a lot more like the heart of Jesus, that is to see our work is to serve God and others and not ourselves.

And here is the application for all of us.

Put your heart into your work. See your work as a calling...a calling to serve God by serving your neighbor...and do good work.

One of the saddest realizations of my adult life is how many people are terrible at their jobs. I was counting on you to do a decent job.

“The church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him to not be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours and to come to church on Sunday's. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.” - Dorothy sayers

Martin Luther King Jr. said something similar and he put it like this:

“If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep the streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth with have to pause and say “Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well.” - Martin Luther King Jr

Your work, whatever it is, is a calling...to serve God by serving your neighbor. And we need you. We need the work that you have to offer. We're all counting on you out there. So see your work as a calling, and put your heart into it.

If all of us only did jobs that were perfectly personally fulfilling to us, all of us would starve to death. If we only did work that made us feel significant, nobody would have the resources they needed. Not to mention all of us would quit our jobs every two weeks because that's how long it would take for us to become dissatisfied with what we do. So in order for the world to flourish and thrive, we're going to all need to figure out a way to put love into our work, regardless of how much we inherently love our work

When you see your work as a calling, as a way of glorifying God by serving your neighbor, you're able to put love into. When you work for God and others and not just yourself, there's a motive there to get good at your job. So whatever you do, put your whole heart into it. You are serving Jesus himself.