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CHAPTER

## CALLING:

# BUSINESSMAN, Plumber, or Minister—**SAME THING**

MEN WHO FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST are an occupation force “ordained” to serve in the markets of men. We should regard work not just as a platform for ministry—work *is* ministry, and we are stewards put in charge until Jesus comes back, a fifth column who infiltrate a world stained by sin, acting as salt that preserves the way of Christ and light that leads broken people out of darkness. We are liberators sent to free a world that labors under the groan of sin, ambassadors sent “into” the world (which at the same time we are not part “of”), taking risks to build Christ’s kingdom while not neglecting to tend earth’s culture. We are workers doing our part as God sovereignly orchestrates “the main thing”—to bring people into right relationship with Him and right relationship with each other.

### **Same Work, Two Results**

Picture two airline ticket agents. They do exactly the same job, but one views his work as something he does to earn money, so when he finishes his shift, he

can do what he really wants to do. He is easily irritated by customers complaining when their travel plans go awry.

The second agent views his work as a calling. Every time someone comes to him with a problem, he sees it as an opportunity to serve the customer and represent his great God. The agent does what he was called to do to the glory of God, even when facing resistance from a particular customer.

That second ticket agent understands the big idea that undergirds this chapter: Whether you're a businessman or a minister, your work is a calling. It has intrinsic value, and it has potential to bear eternal fruit that honors God.

### **To Work Is Part of God's Nature—and Ours**

Work is part of God's nature and character. John 5:17 portrays both the Father and Jesus as workers. Jesus said, "My father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

Psalms 8 offers a glimpse into how God incorporated work into our nature too. The psalmist writes, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (vv. 3–4).

The question gets answered two ways. First, he describes our *identity*—who God created us to be: "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor" (v. 5).

And then he describes our *purpose*—what God created us to do: "You made [man] ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet" (v. 6).

God has dominion over the whole earth and all of creation—a dominion that He has delegated to us.

Work, it turns out, is part of our nature and character too. We have been created to work, and you will never find complete peace on earth until you discover what God has called you to do. Sadly, many workers have not—some surveys have shown that up to 80 percent of people are not in jobs best suited for them.

### **Is Work a Blessing or a Curse?**

It's comforting to know we were created to work, but is work a blessing or a curse? Many assume that work is part of the curse that resulted from Adam

and Eve’s sin—what we commonly call “the fall.” As a result of that sin, God told Adam, “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” (Genesis 3:17–19).

Ouch! But work itself was created prior to the fall in Genesis 2 as a blessing from God, not in Genesis 3 where, because of the fall, work was made difficult.

From day one, man was commissioned to work. After creating the world, the earth became lush with vegetation—and there was a garden. When God created Adam, He gave him a task: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). And that was before the fall, so work has both a blessing and a curse.

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DOING WHAT GOD  
CREATED HIM TO DO.***

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Work has a blessing because we are created in such a way that a man will feel most alive, most useful, and most happy when he is doing what he was created to do.

A man who is happy in his work is happy indeed. But a man who is unhappy in his work will be unhappy everywhere. In fact, most men can be unhappy at home and still find happiness if their work is satisfying. That’s not so surprising given that almost half your time—and most of your intellectual energy—is devoted to work.

Work also has a curse on it because of the fall. In business, if you pick the wrong strategy, your effort is going to be . . . what? A lot of hard work. But if you pick the right strategy, your effort is going to be . . . what? A lot of hard work. Whether you pick the right or the wrong strategy, because of the fall your efforts are going to be a lot of hard work. Because of the fall, *we must do our work while feeling the prick of thorns.*

### **Is a Career in Ministry More Spiritual than a Career in Business?**

Once I visited a church in my hometown. For about forty minutes, the guest preacher said, in essence, that if you really love Jesus, you will go to the mission

field. When the service was over, I slinked out of the sanctuary. I felt that if I didn't become a full-time career missionary, I always would be a second-class citizen in God's kingdom.

That distorted view, severing our work life from our spiritual life, is biblically inaccurate. It's not at all in alignment with God's intention related to our work. From a scriptural viewpoint, it's utter fiction.

For those who live under this distortion, secular jobs have eternal value only when we use them as a "platform for ministry." These people go through the day counting the minutes till the next coffee break, so they can ask their coworkers about their spiritual lives. They can't wait for the workday to be over. They can't see that the work itself has inherent spiritual value.

Of course, God's kingdom does have a global mandate—a command to Jesus' followers to take the gospel throughout the world, and to grow His kingdom in every culture on earth. But that's hardly the only thing we are commanded to do.

*God calls us to "build the kingdom" and "tend the culture."* That's the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate. Building the kingdom is the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples . . ." (see Matthew 28:19–20). Tending the culture—which occupies the vast majority of our time—is the Cultural Mandate: God created mankind in His own image, blessed them, and sent them to fill and subdue the earth, and rule over the fish, the birds, and every living thing (Genesis 1:27–28).

The Cultural Mandate includes our roles in families, communities, government, education, health care, the arts, law, science, the trades, and commerce. Work is part of the Cultural Mandate.

Both the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate are high and holy callings.

Work, it turns out, can be a calling just like going into the ministry. Every vocation is holy to the Lord. God makes no distinction between sacred and secular. If you look up the word *secular* in your Bible concordance, what will you find? Nothing, because the word *secular* is not in the Bible. Twentieth-century evangelical theologian and philosopher Francis Schaeffer, in answering practical questions written to him by everyday people, noted, "One thing you should very definitely have in mind—that is that a ministry such as teaching the Bible in a

college is no higher calling intrinsically than being a businessman or doing something else.”<sup>1</sup>

God calls some people to be pastors or teachers or evangelists. And He calls some to work in businesses, hospitals, fire departments, or construction.

### **You Are an “Ordained” Worker**

I remember a man who once visited the Friday morning Man in the Mirror Bible study I lead, who told me, “All my life I wanted to be a high school math teacher. Finally, my dream came true. But I soon saw two problems. First, my students were coming to class with problems math can’t solve. Second, the Christian teachers in my school don’t know each other. God has put a vision in my mind about how to address those two issues. I am an ordained math teacher.”

He sure got that right. If you are a Christian in the marketplace—whether driving the truck, fixing the computers, or running the company—you are “ordained” to that position.

In his book *The Call*, Christian thinker Os Guinness quotes some poignant thoughts from great thinkers and saints about the holiness of all vocations. Here are some of them:

- Martin Luther, a German theologian credited with initiating the Protestant Reformation, wrote this: “The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous [they] may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks.”
- William Tyndale, a Protestant reformer and scholar of the sixteenth century who translated the Bible into the early modern English of his day, wrote, “If our desire is to please God, pouring water, washing dishes, cobbling shoes, and preaching the Word is all one.”
- Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian, journalist, statesman, and politician who served as prime minister of the Netherlands (1901–1905), said, “There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ would not cry out ‘This is mine, this belongs to me.’”

- William Perkins, a clergyman and Cambridge theologian who also was one of the foremost leaders of the Puritan movement in the Church of England, claimed, “Polishing shoes is a sanctified and holy act.” He added, “The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep performed as I have said it, is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge giving sentence. Or of a magistrate in ruling. Or a minister in preaching.”
- Bishop Thomas Beacon wrote, “Our Savior Christ was a carpenter, his apostles were fishermen. St. Paul was a tent maker.”<sup>2</sup>

These statements support our “big idea” for this chapter: Regardless of whether you’re a businessman or a minister, your work is a calling—a task given by God. When we see our daily work in that light, we understand that God assigns meaning and dignity to what we do at work.

### **Work *Is* Ministry**

As we noted in the first paragraph, work is *not* just a platform to do ministry—it *is* ministry. If you are a waiter, every couple sitting at your station is a divine appointment. They provide an opportunity for you to serve them in the name of Jesus Christ. “How may I help you?” “May I take your order?”

If you are a salesman, every appointment is holy, and every closing is sacred.

If you are a manager, every time you intervene between two employees who cannot see eye-to-eye, you have an opportunity to demonstrate the reconciling power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Obviously, some things are sinful. As Christians, we do not have freedom to participate in careers or jobs that require those activities. But everything else is spiritual. Schaeffer put it this way:

There are certain things which are given as absolutely sinful in the Scripture, and these things we as Christians should not do. . . . But then everything else is spiritual. The painting of a picture, the work of a good shoemaker, the doctor, the lawyer—all these things are spiritual if they are done within the circle of what is taught in Scripture, looking to the Lord day by day for His help.<sup>3</sup>

The landscape designer, the building contractor, the UPS deliveryman, the chief executive officer—all of these people have chosen employment that can be spiritual when accomplished within the circle drawn by Scripture. Every vocation can be holy to the Lord, if we look to Him day by day for His help. For the Christian, all of life is “spiritual.”

### **Work Should Bring Glory to God**

Your occupation is part of your call to service. Faith is not a private thing to be kept in a compartment. Instead, on the job your faith should season every action and word so that God will receive praise, glory, and honor. What does that look like in action? The apostle Paul gives us some key clues in 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12, writing, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.”

Not everything you do has to result in someone’s immediate salvation. Just working in a way that wins the respect of other people is valuable to God’s kingdom. And furthermore, it is valuable to work in such a way that you limit your dependence on other people (e.g., not going into debt). Those simple aspects of living out your calling will enhance God’s reputation in our culture.

The New Testament has a lot to say about the nature and value of work. Paul wrote, “For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat’” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). That’s easy to understand. Some people resist working—it can be uncomfortable and tiring and demanding, especially now that we feel the prick of the thorns described in Genesis 3:18. But Paul said if a capable person doesn’t work, then you shouldn’t give him anything to eat. Work is a scriptural mandate—a commandment.

The Scripture tells us, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Most of us can accept that

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work is a command. But this verse implies that, no matter what your job is, you can do it for God's glory.

Simply put, your work is a summons to follow Jesus. Your work enables you to go where Jesus would go, to be what Jesus would be, and to do what Jesus would do. That is a calling. We will experience resistance—that's part of the curse. But when we see work as a calling, we know we can do it for God's glory.

Work is a noble and holy vocation. That's the "big idea" for this chapter: Regardless of whether you're a businessman or a minister, your work is a calling. It has intrinsic value, and it has potential to bear eternal fruit.

### **Staying Where You Are**

Many men who sense the desire to serve God welling up within them assume they must now do something else. This is rarely the case. Instead, God wants them to use their talents where they are, reaching others with the gospel and influencing the culture in the process. That's what Norm Miller, chairman of Interstate Batteries, did.

Norm Miller went to work at Interstate Batteries more than four decades ago, at the age of twenty-four. Eight years later Norm received Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Norm prayed, "God, I will do anything You want me to do." But he didn't sense a calling to leave his job. He said, "I didn't know anything but batteries, so I just decided to stay in batteries."

He began rising in that growing company and eventually became the CEO. In 1976, for the first time in its history, Interstate Batteries sold one million batteries in a single year. Today, his company now sells fourteen million batteries per year. Would that have happened if Norm had left? Maybe, but we know for sure it did happen, at least partly, because he was willing to stay right where God had called him. And because he stayed, he has had tremendous opportunity to use the platform God gave him to influence our culture. He's made a profound difference, because he answered God's call and understood his purpose in business.

You might think that going from a million batteries to fourteen million batteries is some kind of overnight, superstar performance. But I ran the math, and what it comes down to is an annualized growth rate of 8.5 percent. That requires the perseverance of steady plodding over the long haul.

For most of us, our calling probably is to stay right where we are, but to change the way we see our jobs. The apostle Paul said, “Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him.” And a few verses later he reiterated, “Each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to” (1 Corinthians 7:17, 24). Many of us will find we can increase our impact simply by staying where we are with a new perspective that our vocation is holy to the Lord.

### **Going Into Ministry Is No Panacea**

When I stepped away from day-to-day business to devote myself “full time” to the ministry of helping men think more deeply about their lives, I thought I would wake up the next day feeling more spiritual—somehow “holier.” It never happened.

Then I supposed that when I looked into the mirror, I would see the faint outline of a halo. Oh, I didn’t think anyone else would ever see it, but I thought for sure that I would. It never happened.

I thought my walk with Christ would soar to new heights since I was now working “directly” for Him all day. It never happened.

Actually, I feel no more “called” to writing, speaking, and teaching than I did to developing buildings. I am no more passionate about what I do now than about what I did before. Don’t get me wrong—I’m very passionate. But I was also very passionate about developing real estate.

### **Climbing the Ladder**

Do you have to be a superstar? Do you have to have five talents? Do you have to have the big bucks? Most of us will never be in that category. But we all can increase our impact, even while we stay right where God has planted us. Stay focused on God’s mandate: “You’re in charge until I get back.”

In his book *Business as a Calling*, Michael Novak explains,

Being a middle manager is not primarily a way station on the way to the top. Probably everyone at first wants to test themselves against that possibility, but realistically most middle managers expect some advancement over a lifetime,

higher salaries and bonuses, and most of all, the ever-higher respect of their peers; while remaining middle managers until retirement. Middle management, many know early, is their calling; they want to be super good at it. They want to make a contribution. Most of all, they need to know in their own minds that they have done so.<sup>4</sup>

God tells us, “You’re in charge until I get back.” But that doesn’t necessarily mean we’re supposed to strive to be the top guy. We can’t all be CEOs.

### **Changing Jobs**

But what if, like many men, you just don’t like your work?

Viktor Frankl, who survived the horrors of Auschwitz to become a famous psychotherapist, is best known for saying, “A man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation of his life.”<sup>5</sup>

Once in Vienna, a diplomat came to see him. The man was depressed about his work. Frankl discovered the man did not like his job with the U.S. government. The man had been in psychotherapy for five years, and his therapist had convinced him that his difficulties would end if he could reconcile his relationship with his authoritarian father. The therapist said the U.S. government was a father figure, so the man’s current dissatisfaction resulted from unresolved issues from the past with his own dad.

After a few interviews, Frankl said, “It seems to me that you don’t like what you do, and there is no reason to keep doing it. Why don’t you get another job?” So the man did. Five years later, he reported he was a really happy person because he found something he loved to do.<sup>6</sup>

### **Practical Ideas If You Don’t Know Your Calling**

What if you are called to the marketplace but haven’t found your niche? Or what if you’re ready for a career change?

Many of us will not hold the same job for our entire career. We may even discover we missed our calling altogether, and we may change the entire focus of our work. That’s certainly a valid response to a sense of dissatisfaction. To find your calling, consider four things: your natural motivated interests, natural abilities,

acquired abilities, and spiritual gifts. Here are a few thoughts to get you started.

### ***1. Where do your natural interests lie?***

Edward Crosby Johnson first observed his grandfather, a missionary doctor. Then he watched his father, who worked in a family retailing business. He noticed that his father loved his hobbies but found no pleasure in his work. Johnson decided to find something he liked to do *and* was good at. He started out as a lawyer, but that didn't quite work out. In the 1940s he got a management contract for a small, start-up mutual fund called Fidelity, headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts.

Johnson loved his company, and over the years he built up Fidelity Investments to be a premier mutual fund company. According to Michael Novak's book *Business as a Calling*, Johnson wrote this to his Harvard classmates: "It is a real thrill to try to give the small investor, by which our company is mainly comprised, as good a job of investing as the big man gets." That thought gave his life meaning and purpose throughout his life as he increased the range of funds available to small investors.

What types of tasks interest and motivate you? Is it innovating, designing, selling, organizing, planning, working with your hands? What kinds of tasks do you enjoy?

What types of jobs interest you? Computer programmer, manager, accountant, salesman, owner? What kinds of jobs do you enjoy?

### ***2. What are your natural abilities?***

Another investor, John Templeton, started life wanting to be a missionary. Then, while he was at Oxford, he met some missionaries and realized he didn't have the right stuff to be a missionary. "But," he said, "I do have the ability to make money." So he devoted his life to making money to support missionaries.

What are your natural aptitudes and abilities? How has God designed your body and your brain? If you're five-foot-six-inches tall and can't dribble, you're not going to play for the Los Angeles Lakers, right? Similar principles apply to all types of employment. God made you in a certain way. So look at your natural assets. What are you good at? Do you like to work with numbers? It would be

foolish to try to become a lawyer if you prefer to work with numbers. If you like to work with numbers but feel shy around people, you may be more suited to accounting than sales. What comes easily to you?

### *3. What are your acquired abilities?*

Acquired abilities are the things you are trained to do. For the past several years, I've been racing sports cars. To help me get started, I hired a racing coach. If you knew him, you'd understand why he's good at his job. You can ask him any question about racing or mechanics, and he will know the answer. He didn't come into the world with all that knowledge embedded in his brain. Obviously, he has a natural ability to understand those things, but he acquired a high level of competency through study and experience. In the same way, you may have some acquired competency that would lead you into a work calling. It could be from formal education, on the job training, or even a hobby.

### *4. What are your spiritual abilities/gifts?*

In the same way that we pursue vocational employment based upon our aptitudes and abilities, we can also look at how God has spiritually gifted us.

Every believer receives at least one spiritual gift. "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). The Holy Spirit determines our spiritual gifts. "Each man has his own gift from God . . . he gives them to each one, just as he determines" (1 Corinthians 7:7; 12:11).

The purpose of our spiritual gifts is to serve Christ by serving others. "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

These gifts usually synchronize to natural abilities. So knowing your spiritual gifts can help you be more effective in your calling.

While theologians and teachers often differ on how to precisely classify and name spiritual gifts, the following generally captures the gist of the different gifts:

1. *Service gifts.* Service gifts are often low-profile, behind-the-scenes gifts. They include showing mercy, service (or helps), hospitality, giving, administration, leadership, faith, and discernment.

2. *Speaking gifts*. Speaking gifts include knowledge, wisdom, preaching, teaching, evangelism, apostleship, shepherding, and encouragement.
3. *Signifying gifts*. The signifying gifts are miracles, healing, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

To better understand your gifts, you can study the four passages of Scripture that deal with spiritual gifts: Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:1–31; Ephesians 4:11–13; and 1 Peter 4:9–11. Prayerfully write down the gifts to which you are drawn.

*For more*, go to [www.maninthemirror.org/alm/alm157.htm](http://www.maninthemirror.org/alm/alm157.htm) to read “How to Determine Your Spiritual Gifts,” including one-sentence explanations of each spiritual gift.

So is there a sacred and a secular calling? In the biblical mind-set, there is no chasm between sacred and secular. Regardless of whether you’re a businessman or a minister, your work is a calling. It has intrinsic value, and it has potential to bear eternal fruit.

#### A PRAYER YOU CAN PRAY

*Lord Jesus, thank You for the clarity of Your Word regarding every issue in life. You have made the desire to work part of my nature—a nature that is made in Your image. Help me to find the vocation that best suits who You have created me to be. I know that I will feel most alive, most useful, and most happy when I am doing what I was created to do. Help me to bring You glory through my work—even as I feel the prick of thorns. Give me a renewed sense of commitment. Give me a broader perspective and a greater resolve to walk in Your way at work. Help me understand that whether I am in full-time “ministry” or work in the marketplace, it’s all the same. It’s a calling with eternal value and consequence. I pray this in Jesus’ name, amen.*

## **Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion**

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1. Have you felt like your work was a calling or not? Explain your answer.
2. Which of the following statements best summarizes how you have viewed work in the past, and why?
  - Spiritual jobs are more important than secular jobs
  - Work is a platform to do ministry
  - Work has intrinsic value and is equal to any other calling
3. What does the Bible say about work in Genesis 2:15; 3:17; Psalm 8:5–8; Ecclesiastes 2:24–26; and 2 Thessalonians 3:10? What are the implications for your view of work as a calling?