**Discover Your Calling**

“WHAT’S MY PURPOSE?”

“WHAT SHOULD I DO NEXT?

“WHICH DIRECTION SHOULD I GO?”

“WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?”

“HOW DO I KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS ME TO DO?”

T

hese questions are asked by a 15-year-old trying to find herself in high school. And a 23-year-old stumped about what to do after college. And a 47-year-old in a mid-life crisis. And a 70-year-old who feels useless in retirement. The need for purpose and direction in life is a universal human need.

Our modern era is plagued by confusion, distraction, and an overwhelming sense that there is no transcendent purpose in life. We often hear, “Do what makes you happy,” but we are let down by unfulfilled desires. We pursue happiness but are never happy. There’s a difference between what you *want* to do and what you’re *called* to do. In these short pages, I want you to ask, **“What am I called to do?”**

I’ll show you some simple ways to discover what you should do. This applies to major decisions, such as career and family. It also applies to more ordinary situations such as staying focused in a present circumstance. I’ll begin with a basic understanding of Christian vocation, and then take a look at some practical ways to examine your unique situation.

**Vocation**

The word “vocation” gives the Christian an unmistakable reason to live. We get the word vocation from the Latin *vocatio*, meaning “to call.” Calling is about more than just your job or what you do for a living. It includes all of the God-given responsibilities placed upon you.

There are four general realms that each Christian lives in. These spheres are common to each of us. Yet within them, our particular vocations are as unique as a fingerprint. Consider your unique imprint in each of the four realms.

**Home.** You are called to be a brother or sister, father or mother, son or daughter, niece or nephew, and so on. Within the common elements of family, my specific niche is unique. While there are many husbands in the world, I am the *only* husband to my wife Bobbi. While there are many brothers in the world, I am the only brother to Anne and John.

**Occupation.** A teacher imparts knowledge to children. An IT specialist contributes to a system that makes a whole company run efficiently. A garbage man maintains a sanitary city. You are a classmate or co-worker. You have a unique skill set and capacity that you exercise in a profession or job.

While a job certainly provides income to live on, it also bestows a deep sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. Your occupation isn’t only about you. It functions for others (see the Great Commandment). Scripture is clear that we are given meaningful work to do here on earth (Gen. 2:18; Rom. 12:1). Our work is good for the planet, society, friends, and neighbors.

**Society.** You are a next-door neighbor, a voter, a taxpayer. You are customer or client within a functioning economy. You are a volunteer, a block captain, a friendly smile on the sidewalk or in the store. Our general place as citizens in a wider society is important. Collectively, we work for peace, justice, and prosperity in our communities, cities, states, and country.

**Congregation.** You are a fellow worshiper, an elder, a committee member. You are a singer, a teacher, an encourager. You are a brother or sister in Christ to a local community of Christians.

Like a snowflake, each of us has a one-of-a-kind design. My particular portfolio of vocations is distinct from anyone else. Here are some characteristics of vocations that give us a sense of meaning and purpose.

**God-Given**

I once searched for baby names on the internet. I came across some extraordinarily uncommon ones like *Awesome*, *Handsome*, and *Boss*. As I was thinking about Awesome as a 15-year-old freshmen in high school, I was reminded that names are *given*. You did not choose your name.

In a similar way, a calling is like a name. It is given to you. Like the words loved and sent, the word “called” is passive. If you are called, someone else is doing the action and taking the initiative. While we play a role in discerning our vocations, we believe that ultimately our callings are **God-given**.

This is an offensive concept in our individualistic society. A sacred value for Americans is freedom of choice. We hear this value in statements like, “Follow your dreams.” “Do what you want as long as you’re happy.” “Let your heart be your guide.” “Don’t let anyone tell you what to do.”

A biblical concept of calling challenges the dreams of our hearts. God gives us reason and the ability to discern, but a deeper calling trumps our best ideas and desires. Our feelings, passions, and emotions are involved, but a greater force overwhelms the whim of our wishes.

A biblical understanding of vocation insists that God is working in and through us. We are agents of God’s will and work in the world. Our lives serve as a means for God to dispense his love and care to those around us. A farmer tills the soil because he desires to provide food for his community. A foster parent tucks an orphan into bed because God wills for the child to have a home. Our deepest callings are divinely originated.

The meaning of vocation is not only pragmatic. There is a more profound urge within our callings. For a Christian, vocations are holy. They are holy because God has called us to them. In our vocations, we believe that God is at work *through* us. He whispers in our ear, “You are vital. You are necessary.” Our unique skills and experiences make us a valuable commodity for our family, neighbors, community, and country.

**For Others**

These holy callings serve the purpose of impacting others. Paul wrote, *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (*Gal. 5:13). In this sense, mundane and boring tasks take on divine significance.

We typically see work as a means to make money. Within the realm of God-given calling, the purpose is firmly focused on others. Cleaning the house becomes a necessary and God-pleasing task that blesses others. A series of files composed in a cubicle impact a company that provides goods and services to the public. Vocation is about more than just profit. It’s about people.

The reality that others need us fills our vocations with urgency and humility. With urgency, our service is needed *now*. The necessity of our work is imminent. This drives us to great humility. My callings are not about personal ambition, gain, or pleasure. My career, family, or position is for someone else. There is no room for arrogance, apathy, or hoarding.

Within the context of covenant, God said to Abram, “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2). The words “so that” are significant. They express an intended result. God blessed Abram *so that* he would be a blessing. His call was bigger than his own happiness or pleasure. **It was for others.**

God’s intention for your callings is not to make all your dreams come true. That’s Disney’s goal. His intention for your vocations is to bless others. Your own blessings are not to be selfishly hoarded. There is purpose in your blessing.

Have you been given wealth? Share it. Have you been given a great family? Adopt others into it. Have you been called to a position of influence? Use it for the sake of others. God-given vocations are always for the good of your neighbor. Our callings are the place for us to live out the Great Commandment, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

**Significance**

My wife and I once calculated how many diapers we had changed. We estimated that four kids over ten years came out to 26,000. There was some discrepancy over who changed the majority of those diapers. I initially said 60/40 me. She said 70/30 her. I eventually conceded.

Martin Luther once called diaper-changing a holy work. Why? Because it is an act of care that needs to be done. His point was that callings, even the most mundane, are of great significance. Our vocations don’t necessarily bring happiness. But they do bestow significance. “I’m doing something that really matters.”

In our news feeds and highlight reels, we look for the spectacular. Someone who gave their kidney away. Or took a bullet for someone else. Or started a new company from scratch. By comparison, we feel inadequate and unaccomplished.

But what if the most spectacular feats were unsung and unnoticed? A diaper changed. A hug given. A meal made. A hopeful word. An hour of listening. A ride to work. What else could love look like? Where else would we see it so clearly?

This is important because God-inspired significance helps us to persist under pressure. When our callings are burdensome, the power of a call compels us to redouble our efforts. Proudly embrace the simple and sometimes dirty tasks that God places before you. Don't be ashamed of the mundane things you do day after day. **The love we show, the patience we take, the attention we give - this is Christ living in and through us.**

**How to Discover Your Calling**

These characteristics sound good, but how do you know where to begin? How do I discover my calling? Some callings are naturally obvious. They seem to seek us out. Others are more subtle, and we must make decisive choices through heart-wrenching deliberation. Here are some principles to guide the discernment of our callings.

**Begin Where You Are:**

Before you get too far, don’t miss the obvious. We frequently neglect the call of people and tasks that are right in front of our noses. Take a look around. Where are you? Who and what is around you? What are you already doing? Who currently depends on you? It could be that your calling is self-evident, right before your eyes. Or maybe your current circumstance will point you to an entirely new calling.

**Know Yourself:**

The skinny 5’4” kid probably doesn’t have the capacity to play professional basketball. That’s OK. So what does he possess?

A prerequisite to discerning a calling is self-awareness. What are my strengths, gifts, interests, and abilities? What are my liabilities and weaknesses? Where are my gaps? What experiences make me uniquely qualified?

To be truly self-aware, it is necessary to seek help. Share your deliberation with others. Seek trusted counsel and be ready to listen and receive their words. Confront sentimental or unrealistic dreams. Ask someone what they see in you. God works through people in your life. We need their advice, insight, and encouragement. They will both challenge and affirm you.

**Know Your World:**

If our vocations are for other people, then we must be aware of our neighbors’ context. What are the needs around me? What suffering exists? What needs to get done? What do I possess that might help? What role do I have in the broader scheme of things?

This assumes that we live in and love the community around us. It means we must be reasonably familiar with society’s issues. We listen to our neighbors. We walk the streets and roads. We shop the stores.

**Know Where You’re Indispensable**:

No one is completely indispensable. God can do his work without us. Yet he chooses to use us to accomplish specific and necessary work. In determining a particular calling, it’s important to know where I’m uniquely positioned to make a difference.

When you know yourself and your world, you begin to identify urgent needs. Ask, ***“What is it that if I don’t do it, no one can or will?”*** You have a skill to bring, a voice to speak, or a perspective to impart. There are some things that another could do just as well as I can. But there are other things that only I can do, or can do extraordinarily well.

**Pray:**

It may seem obvious, but don’t miss the priority of prayer. At the end of all your great thinking, you might still be confused. Or after all your schemes and strategy, you may well be misguided. We need more than a well-thought plan. We need illumination from the Spirit of God.

Prayer keeps us from believing that our callings are about us. Those who are called by God must call on him. In calling upon God, we acknowledge that all our callings come from him. We submit our skills, time, energy, and ability to him. We allow him to ultimately govern and guide our lives. “Thy will be done,” is our concluding statement of faith.

As we pray, we often find serendipitous opportunities that arise. An unexpected offer comes. A brand new friendship is formed. A new skill is discovered. What seems to be “out of the blue” is actually divinely arranged and provided for.

**Trust:**

At the end of all these things, are you still confounded? Occasionally we find ourselves paralyzed by a decision. “What if I make the wrong choice?” When we are at an end, we find ourselves in the perfect place for faith. At some point, *just choose*. Make a decision. Go. Take action.

You have callings that are filled with uncertainty. You might shiver with fear to take the first step. When God calls you to something, it’s not neatly packaged or clearly mapped out. So you just start walking. And you trust that when you take a step, there is ground underneath. That is faith.

Many of our decisions are between two good things for which there is no “wrong answer.” Just step forward and trust that God will go before you on the road. Our callings are not a complicated maze of options for which only one road is our destiny. There is freedom in our vocations. There is grace in determining our callings.

**Priorities**

How do you live out your callings? How do you do them well? A multitude of temptations detract. We multitask and never get anything done. We are overcommitted. We are distracted. We say “yes” to everything. In a fast-paced society, we’re too busy to effectively stay focused on a few key things. The result is stress, burnout, and poor health.

Our vocations give us clear priorities. They keep us focused on where we’re sent. Here are some practical ways that vocation can keep us focused on what matters most, and defend against unhealthy busyness.

**What are the top five priorities in your life?**

List your top five. Post them on your mirror, your refrigerator, or anywhere you will see them every day. These should be the key things God calls you to. Faith in Him, a spouse, children, friends, career . . .

**Does my schedule reflect my priorities?**

Look at your last month. Just by looking at your calendar, could someone identify your top five priorities? Where did you spend most of your time? Are you busy with the wrong things?

**Schedule Everything.**

You have a work or school schedule. You schedule doctor and dentist appointments. Do you schedule family time? Do you schedule time for rest or exercise? Do you schedule time for worship and prayer? Often the items at the top of our priority list don’t make the calendar. We assume that we’ll get to them, but if they don’t make the calendar, we don’t follow through.

**Create Boundaries.**

What lines are hard? What lines cannot be crossed? Draw those lines right now. Boundaries protect priorities and give you focus. For instance, on a day off, commit to not checking e-mail. Or set aside a dinner hour when the TV is off and phones are set aside.

**Manage Notifications.**

One of the great challenges to priorities today is our ability to be contacted anywhere at any time. E-mail, social media, calls, and texts. Our phones have the ability to push lower priorities up higher. Notifications can make unimportant things urgent. Limit your notifications to high priorities. Only check email or Facebook at designated times, not 20 times throughout the day.

**Let Some Things Go.**

If you seriously evaluate your God-given callings, you’ll recognize that you have to let some things go. You have to say "no" to lower priorities. You may have to decline some commitments, not do the softball league, or pass on the additional overtime shift.

Time and energy are finite resources. You are limited. You can’t do everything . . . *and that’s okay.* God is "on" all the time. He takes care of you even when you don't complete all the tasks you wanted to. God is gracious enough to give you a few really important callings. Do those things really well.



Regardless of your specific calling, you have important work to do. You matter to God and he makes you matter to others. If you should doubt your worth, look to his great work on the cross. Jesus was called to self-less sacrifice in order that you might live. His vocation had *you* in mind. Go in confidence and joy as you live out your God-given callings.