

“The Masks of God: Understand Work as Vocation”
Various Texts: 1 Cor. 7:17; Psalm 147:7-20 & 1 Peter 4:7-11

Intro:

Today we are going to deviate from our typical practice of taking one passage and working through it systematically to explain and show its relevance for our lives. We are actually going to reflect on three different but related texts. We will see that these passages teach us to...

The Point: Use your work as a God-given opportunity to serve and love others. [How can we go about that? First,]

I. Engage in work as an assignment given by God. (1 Corinthians 7:17)

Have you considered that God is at work in every detail of our lives? This is the doctrine of providence. The Bible teaches us God is sovereign over the details of where we live (Acts 17) and the length of our days (Lk 12). So it should not surprise us that God is active in the sphere of our work. This is what theologians have called ...

The Doctrine of Vocation

- Vocation” comes from the Latin word for “calling.” The Bible uses the word “calling” in different ways: 1) Called to faith and salvation through the gospel; 2) called to a particular office, way of life or assignment.
- We see this idea of calling and assignment most clearly in 1 Corinthians 7. Look at **1 Corinthians 7:17** with me: **“Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.”**
- If we had the time to read the entire chapter, we would discover that Paul is referring to marriage, singleness, and even our work as assignments and calling.
- Gene Veith defines vocation like this: **“God has chosen to work through human beings, who in their different capacities and according to their different talents, serve each other. This is the doctrine of vocation.” (Veith, 14)** Veith says that God gives us different capacities and talents, in order to fulfill what he calls or assigns us to do.
- **Pic:** Now, in God’s “university.” We all take multiple classes and take them simultaneously. We all have multiple callings, multiple vocations. We all wear different vocational hats. Every Christian, and every human being, for that matter, has multiple vocations that carry distinct privileges and responsibilities.
- Take ___ for example: Christian. Wife/Husband. Mother/Father. Worker. Citizen. Church Member (1 Peter 2:9-10; 1 Cor. 12)...
- Medford Police have authority in their vocation that I don’t enjoy in my vocation as a citizen. I could choose to go Barney Fife, Sherlock Holmes, or Paul Blart Mall Cop on criminals but I do not have the authority to write someone a speeding ticket.
- God calls us to specific assignments in life, and that should motivate us to work well. It should also help us understand that

All of Our Work Matters to God

- All of our work has dignity before God. Understanding this will keep us from 2 key errors: The first error is...

1) Error #1) Demeaning certain vocations because of the nature of the work.

- We have a tendency, whether stated or not, to divide work into separate classes: dignified work (usually more prominent positions or intellectual in nature) & demeaning work (positions with less power and often in the manual labor category)
- A doctor may have a different assignment, but their work is no more dignified in God’s sight than the orderly. A manager may have greater responsibility, but God is no less impressed with the hard day’s work of the waitress working two jobs to make ends meet.
- We tend to miss the obvious. The jobs we often overlook and denigrate are essential for our very survival. What happens to our city without sanitation workers? Bubonic plague... that’s what happens!
- This also applies to how we view “sacred and secular” work. Martin Luther taught during the Reformation that every legitimate calling has the same worth to God. He saw no division between the sacred and secular as if Pastors and Missioaries are really doing God’s work, but teachers, technicians, and programmers are doing man’s work. (Gen 1:28)
- Pic: Brother Lawrence. . The most spiritual and mature dude in the monastery was washing dishes in the kitchen.

Trans: Understanding the dignity of all work will also keep us from

2) Error #2) Pursuing work primarily for status and salary...

- Sometimes we believe a lower paying job with a lower status “is an assault on our dignity.” This leads many people to choose work for a salary not the service rather than the work itself.
- Pic: As early as MS & HS we start seeing charts with different occupation with projected salaries for each field, and the temptation is to pursue the job that pays the most. I’m not saying the wages are unimportant. We all gotta get paid. ☺ Even Jesus said, “a laborer is worthy of his wages.” BUT I am suggesting that the average salary of a particular vocation should not be the driving factor in what we job pursue. Related to this...
- Many people choose not to work rather than accepting work that they feel is beneath them. (K, 47)
- The Bible has strong words concerning our responsibility to take responsibility for our needs: **“If anyone is not willing to work, let**

him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)

- I realize some of you may be unemployed, yet you are diligently looking for a job. That is to be greatly commended. You are in our prayers. This is a warning against the temptation to receive a handout rather working hard, even if it's not our dream job.
- When we consider the humility of Christ, what job could we legitimately say is beneath us?
- Three of my favorite people from childhood were named Gary, Tony, and Reba. They were people who took a sincere interest in my life and from what I could tell, did their work with excellence. Gary & Tony were custodians and Reba was my bus driver.
- Before we move on, we should be clear that all *legitimate vocations* are dignified in God's sight. Drug Dealers? Human Traffickers? Hugh Hefner, Whitey Bulger, Bernie Madoffs, are not exercising a true calling, because their work does not agree with the purpose God gave for work: to glorify him and serve others.

II. Understand God works through your work to accomplish his purposes (Psalm 147:7-20)

We learned last week that God is a God who works. Consequently, we can take heart in knowing that every time we step into our workplace, God beat us to work, but God is not only at work, he is working intricately through our work.

- Remember Veith's definition of vocation? He begins it by saying: **“God has chosen to work through human beings, who in their different capacities and according to their different talents, serve each other. This is the doctrine of vocation.” (Veith, 14)** God has chosen to work through us.
- We see this in Psalm 147. Psalm 147 is a psalm of praise. **Read 7-20**
- Martin Luther's “Exposition of Psalm 147” explains how God is working through our work.
- Focusing on verse 13, Luther says, “By the word ‘bars’ we must understand not only the iron bar that a smith can make, but . . . Everything else that helps to protect us, such as good government, good city ordinances, good order, and wise rulers . . . this is a gift of God.”
- So Luther says, God gives us lawmakers, govt. leaders, and civil authorities to strengthen our bars of our gates.
- In one of his most quoted sections... **“What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but the work of children, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.”**
- It's as if God is hiding himself in our vocations. He is in the workplace, our families, our church, you name it working in and through us.
- It's amazing to think that God is accomplishing his purposes to care for people through the farmers, mechanics, investors, writers, artists, and nurses. God is at work in all of that, everything! This should radically transform the way we look at our daily lives. At the same time, that does not negate our responsibility to be instruments in his hands.
- Luther goes on to say: **“God is the giver of all good gifts; but you must fall to, and take the bull by the horns, which means you must work to give God an occasion and a mask.”**
- So when you go to work, ask God to use you as an instrument in his hands to distribute his good gifts to all people, which leads us to our third and final encouragement.

III. Learn to love and serve others intentionally through your work. (1 Peter 4:7-11)

- **Read 1 Peter 4:7-11.** These verses do not provide a prescription for our work, but they do provide a picture of how the doctrine of vocation operates.
- These verses address life in the Church. Peter is addressing Christians, so we are in the realm of special, specific, Spirit given grace and gifts. At the same time, what is happening in the church is an amplified picture of what God desires for all people and what we see through our vocations. This is possible for two primary reasons:
- 1) Every person is made in the image of God with rational, relational and creative capacities (Gen. 1:27).
- 2) Every person receives “common grace” from God. In Jesus' words, “God makes it rain on the just and unjust.”
- **Here's Veith's definition one more time: “God has chosen to work through human beings, who in their different capacities and according to their different talents, serve each other. This is the doctrine of vocation.” (Veith, 14)**
- So our work is a very tangible, concrete way we fulfill the command to “love our neighbor as ourselves.”
- Sadly, many times we work not to serve others but to defeat others. We don't work with humility but pride.
- Listen to what C.S. Lewis says about our pride in his classic, *Mere Christianity*: **“Pride is essentially competitive . . . Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say people are proud of being rich, or clever, or goodlooking but they are not. They are proud of begin richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others.”**
- Do you work to be viewed as better than others, or do you see work as a primary way to love and serve others?
- The purpose of work is much deeper than fulfilling the objectives we set or handed down to us from our boss. Work is an opportunity to discover ways to serve and love others.
- This means... *our Vocations Make us Incredibly Interdependent on Each Other.*

- Our work is much bigger than we know. How many people are connected to the chair you are sitting in right now? Not just manufacturers and everyone who makes the factory go, but engineers and designers, but not just them, but everyone who educated them. We're already up to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, for that chair.
- As much as we crave independence, we are desperately dependent on one another. "Self-sufficiency is an illusion." (Veith)
- Gospel Hook: Our dependence on one another should highlight that we are fundamentally dependent people.
- Our greatest dependence should be our dependence on God! Many people resist God because they believe they do not need him. But the gospel shows us our need for Christ and the amazing lengths of love that God has made to give us his free gift of salvation if we would only open our arms and receive it.

So work is not simply business, simply meeting a bottom line, earning a paycheck, or a necessary evil, but *work should be the ultimate expression of a life invested in good works for the sake of others!*

Conclusion:

So the doctrine of vocation teaches us that our work is a calling and assignment from God, that God works through us in our work, and that our work is an opportunity to love and serve our neighbor. Now, I realize some of you may be saying: "I get that. That's really nice and all, but what am I supposed to do with it?" Some are thinking: "I don't even know what my vocation should be." Others are saying: "I don't really like my vocation? Or I really want to excel more and find greater fulfillment in my work." To conclude, I want to offer some suggestions for...

FINDING WORK & GREATER FULFILLMENT IN OUR WORK:

Find work and greater fulfillment in your work by...

1) Operating in your God-given gifts and abilities.

- How has God gifted you? What skills do you have or could you develop? What are you good at?
- Alex Chediak says: "**Vocational calling is not as mysterious as some may think. Rather it is directly related to the discovery of our God-given talents, which we then hone into skills and useful competencies**"
- We all have different talents and skills. Chediak says that, talents are "God-given" abilities for "doing something with at least a moderate degree of potential for excellence." Skills are "what become of talents through diligent practice." [Those skills are transferred into "useful competencies" that can be exchanged for a paid job.] (Chediak)
- You might want to be a great banker, or great athlete, or great musician, but perhaps God has not wired and gifted you to excel in that work. When I visit a museum, I get inspired and begin to think... I could have made it with the great painters and sculptors of the Renaissance and produced masterful works of art. The only problem is that my Michaelangelonic dreams, when put on paper, only produce kindergarten level stick men, and most of the time, they are crooked at best.. That's not how God has wired and gifted me. Anyone watching season 12 of American idol? You either have the gift or you don't. Poor people. I miss Simon Cowell.
- Pursue work where you can operate in your God-given gifts and talents, #2)

2) Seek work that you love.

- Where are your greatest desires and Passions? What do you love? There may be some things I could do, but my heart doesn't necessarily beat for. It would be a significantly worthy cause for someone else, but not me.
- Dorothy Sayers says: "**The Christian understanding of work . . . is that work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's [abilities] . . . the medium in which he offers himself to God.**"
- Pursue work that you enjoy and you will find more joy and satisfaction in your work.

3) Discern how God is at work in your life.

- God works through a combination of gifts, desires, and *also our experiences* to lead us to pursue particular fields of work. We should not be surprised to look back and say, "Oh yeah, God gave me an opportunity to take that music class, work on that project in school, be mentored by that teacher, to help me discern the path I should follow in life.
- It is wise to receive confirmation and wisdom from those who know you well. (Story: Dr Akin & Dwayne: Do I have what it takes?)
- Additionally, we need to remember that God has placed you at your job for his purposes. Go read the OT book of Esther, who God made Queen, so she could accomplish his plan "for such a time as this." God always has a larger plan in our work. Finally...

4) Pursue work where you can do the most good.

- Not where you can make the most money (ex. Jacquelyn). Not where you can gain the greatest personal notoriety. Not where...
- In pursuing work, our questions should shift from, "How can I utilize my skills and gifts to make the most money and maximize my own comfort?" to, "How can I leverage my life for the good of others and the glory of God?"

This is what the doctrine of vocation is all about. We reflect God's greatness by loving and serving others through our work as instruments in his hands.