

**Sermon for Sunday, September 11, 2011**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Called to Work**  
**1 Cor 7:10-17, 20-24**

*10 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. 12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

*17 Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. 20 Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. 21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you, although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.*

### **1. The meaning or "results" of our life is largely hidden from us**

C.S. Lewis once said, "Despair is a greater sin than any of the sins that provoke it." Truly despair is a foe of the disciple at work. We answer phones and wonder if a machine could do as well. We pass fast food to customers and wonder: Do they know how much salt and fat is in this meal? Would it be better if this place closed? It's one thing to hold doubtful jobs for a season, in one's youth, but another if we question the work we have done for a decade or more.

The question holds whether the worker seems successful or unsuccessful. I know a man who approved loans for cars, boats, home improvements. He said, "I crunch numbers and move money around to generate profits for my boss. Anyone could do this. I don't even *make* anything."

It is wise to ask about the results or fruit of our labor. Teachers wonder, as they watch students who look bored at best, resentful and disruptive at worst. Then we get letters, "You probably don't remember me. I sat in the back row, aloof, silent, inattentive, but I'm writing to thank you, because I'll never forget your class."

I once wrote such a letter to a grade-school teacher when I was in grad school: "You taught me in fourth grade fifteen years ago, and I know I caused you grief. I didn't listen to you because I was trying to get everyone to listen to me, so I could make them laugh. You moved me from my friends after one week. Eventually, you put me in a corner and surrounded me with your best-behaved girls. You constantly told me I wasn't reaching my potential and punished me with Cs I didn't deserve. You made the naughty life miserable and I thank you for it. My parents moved that summer. I was too scared to misbehave at first. I listened in class and even studied a little. I got As and my teachers seemed to think I was OK and the change was so pleasant, I chose to keep it up ever since."

A couple weeks later, a school administrator replied, "Your former teacher died about a year ago, but I'm sure we would have been glad to hear..." So she never knew, never knew that her justifiable firmness also proved effective.

This is one of the great challenges of the worker. Teachers, advertisers and marketing folk wonder if anyone is listening. Doctors wonder if patients will adopt a healthier life-style. Do we labor in vain. This is a great question: Is my work worthwhile? Will it be received? Appreciated? If I disappeared, would the machine grind along as well as ever? If so, is my work still meaningful?

The biblical teaching about God and his callings answers these questions. First, it's the human condition that the all to us. We're shoveling fast food out the window to anonymous people. But the car may hold someone who is desperately hungry. The loan officer's decision may allow someone to buy a car so they can get to work. It may finance a business venture that will one day employ hundreds. The meal and the loan may answer fervent prayers.

We can't see these results, but God can. Every one of us has wanted to say, "You probably don't remember, you may not realize it, but your word, your small act of kindness, gave me life. Thank you." We can't see results, but God sees them and, more importantly, orchestrated them by calling us to our place in life, a place he appointed, so we can bear fruit.

But first, the apostle Paul says there is more to a calling than our work. The Lord God calls us in several senses. The first of these is his call to know him.

## **2. God first calls us to himself, then to places in life**

God calls us to Jesus. We think of work as our "calling" or vocation, but according to Scripture, we have several "callings." God does call each of us to the work or tasks he ordains for us. But he also calls people to himself and to life in the community of disciples, a life of goodness and grace.

The Lord issues a "general call" to everyone to live in God's goodness and grace. He calls all people to believe in him. He calls believers to faith, obedience, and godliness. Paul labels these blessings and duties as a *call to Jesus*.

- We are "called to belong to Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:6).
- We are "loved by God and called to be saints" (Rom 1:7).
- We are "called according to his purpose...to be conformed to the likeness of [God's] Son" (Rom 8:29). God calls us to share in Jesus' glory (2 Ths 2:14).
- God "called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:9).
- We are "called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:2).

The last point is essential. "All those everywhere who call on our Lord" share the call to Christ. The idea of a "general call" means all believers have the same heritage and duty: to be holy, like God. Whatever the differences between us, God has the same basic purpose for everyone. We all have "one hope" (Eph 4:4) – that we should know God and be like him.

This call is a gift of God's grace, yet we don't listen passively. Paul says, "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession" (1 Tim 6:12). God called us to himself (Phil 3:14). We are responsible to answer that call, to be faithful in it,

to make it sure (Heb 3:14, 2 Pet 1:10). Again: God's call goes to the world and everyone who says "yes" has the same position. But Paul describes another calling in 1 Corinthians 7:

### **God calls us to places and roles**

It's easy to become dissatisfied with our place in life. We get stuck in a job, a city, a relationship that seems to constrict, limit, or bind us. We become frustrated, even miserable. We wonder if we should invest energies elsewhere. We may hope to escape. This can happen at work or in the home. People become dissatisfied with their marriage. They can resent the way children or sick relatives make them put their lives on hold as they care for the very young or the aged and infirm.

The problem is universal; the Christians living in Corinth faced it too. They had two problems: 1) Some were slaves. 2) Some were unhappily married to pagans (1 Cor 7:12-16). Take marriage first. Almost everyone in Corinth grew up a pagan and married a fellow pagan. Then Paul arrived, preaching the good news of Christ, and many believed. Naturally, they hoped their husband or wife would share their faith in Jesus, but many never did.

This provoked a question: How can I grow in my faith, my life as a disciple, when my spouse rejects my faith? Divorce was common in the Empire, so the Corinthians asked Paul, "Is it best to leave or divorce a pagan spouse?"

"No," Paul says, "marriage is permanent and married believers should fulfill their marital duties" (7:10-11). But they should take comfort, for in his goodness, God sets apart a believer's entire family, including an unbelieving spouse. They can and should live together in purity and peace (7:14-15).

This doesn't mean divorce is always wrong. Some breaches, even betrayals can be forgiven and healed. Some cannot. To save themselves or their children, a spouse may need to leave a violent spouse. Paul says desertion functionally ends a marriage too. In that day, it was impossible to force a spouse to stay in a marriage if he was determined to leave. If he walked into the wild, it was impossible to track him. None of our data streams existed. Due to no-fault divorce laws, the situation is similar today. No matter how much one partner wants to save a marriage, if one wants to leave, the marriage is over.

No one can compel a spouse to stay. Paul says that believers should not desert a marriage. On the other hand, if a believer has an unbelieving spouse and he wants to leave, Paul says to let him leave (7:15). To be precise, most translations say "let" as in "Let him do so" (New International Version (NIV)). But the original is a command. If the unbeliever wants a divorce, "you should agree to it" (Contemporary English Version (CEV)).

Paul continues, "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife" (7:16). This is studiously ambiguous. Is he optimistic: "Despair not. Your spouse might yet convert yet"? Or pessimistic: "Don't cling. Your spouse might never convert"?

Both make sense. The passage gives a reason for letting an unbeliever go, so the pessimistic view fits.<sup>1</sup> Yet Paul says the unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believer, so the optimistic view fits.<sup>2</sup> The ambiguity is essential, for we can't see whether the situation is hopeful or hopeless. Whether one feels a

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett, 167.

<sup>2</sup> Fee, 305

marriage is doomed to death or destined for renewal, no one knows the future. Therefore, we should leave the results to God. We neither seek a divorce in despair, nor do we force a spouse to stay, thinking he or she will surely convert.

See how Paul's teaching applies to the uncertainties we face. We do not, indeed cannot, know what will happen next. Therefore let's stay where we are, labor faithfully, and trust the results to our Sovereign Lord.

Paul's conclusion applies to so many life issues: "Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him" (7:17). It applies to the married and to those who contemplate marriage (7:27-28). We shouldn't leap to think that we can improve our lot by fleeing a hard marriage. Even a poor marriage is a "calling."

A calling in this sense is a place, a "life assignment" to relationships and tasks. So Paul tells the new Christians living in city of Corinth to stay where they are, to fulfill the duties they had when they came to faith. This idea is so vital Paul says it three times: "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him... So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God" (7:20, 24, Revised Standard Version (RSV)).

This is important: New believers should see their past marriage, history and work not as accidents, but as the result of God's sovereign direction. Before they knew the name God, He was directing their lives. Before we know him, God places us in our callings. So: wherever you were when God called, stay there!

In a comment that seems incredible to us, Paul applies this to slaves. Listen as Paul asks, "Were you a slave/servant when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (7:21). Given what we know about slavery in antiquity, this is astonishing.

A slave had scant legal rights, was sold at his master's will. A slave was "a living possession," a "talking tool," "property with a soul."<sup>3</sup> Not even the master of their own bodies, they always were liable to beatings. At best, slaves had security and decent treatment in a great house. How can Paul act as if slavery is "no problem." How can Paul say, "Don't let it bother you"?

Paul did not endorse slavery. He told believers how to live within an entrenched institution that would last for centuries till Christian principles brought it down. He says our faith changes things.

Paul says everyone belongs to someone. Paul called himself a slave or servant of Christ. Moses, Joshua and David were called the servants/slaves of the Lord. Paul says Jesus became our slave. This is the human condition. The secretary belongs to the boss. Each boss has an overseer, up to the CEO, who belongs to the stockholders and the board, in a way. If someone truly answers to no one, he is probably a slave to his desire for independence. Everyone serves some master.

Therefore, we should be willing to stay wherever we are, married or single, slave or free. Yet Paul doesn't advocate fatalism or passivity. He tells slaves, "If you can gain your freedom, do so" (7:21). Slaves could save their earnings and buy their freedom. It's better to be free, so do it if you can. But don't think you must gain your freedom. God has assigned you a place. Serve well where you are.

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, Politics, 1.4-6

It's best to have the Lord as master. All believers do. We are "bought at a price." As a result, free-born men are "Christ's slaves" (7:22). Yet literal slaves who belong to Christ are free. Jesus liberates us, in principle, from lesser bonds: illness, poverty, dull jobs, bad families – anything that can feel like slavery at times.

Standard Christian teaching misses something here. We hear this: When we look for God's call, we seek a match between the internal call, what we want to do, and the external call, what someone asks us to do. This model checks our subjective impulses. That's vital because lots of people "feel" a call that no one else detects. The problem: this model still gives the initiative to our feelings. It then offers other people's judgments as the check.

In his excellent book, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, John Frame presents a God-centered approach. He says our call comes to us four ways.

- God gives gifts to humanity and to his people
- The Spirit enables us (fallibly) to discern our gifts thru self-examination and the confirmation of others.
- God provides opportunities to develop and exercise those gifts.
- God grants wisdom to use gifts to glorify him and love our neighbor.

### **We experience God's call today, in the present**

Gene Veith's book, *God at Work*, challenges the way we aim to find God's call. He says, we all have several calls; most of them are clear. Besides the call to work, we have a call to follow Jesus, to family, to society, and to the church. A retired woman does not work for pay, but she still has callings as grandmother, citizen, disciple, sister and friend.

Given that we have many callings, some of these will inevitably change. But, Veith says that we should not focus on changes in calling, as if the right calling is always in the future. The college student who works at a coffee shop has a calling now. He is a student, a coffee man, a roommate, even a guard on his intramural basketball team. These are his callings now.

The world has its status games and career ladders, jobs good and bad. But before God, all are equal, because God himself issues them (V. 49-50). Self-help books guide people to make plans, follow their heart and choose wisely. But according to Scripture, vocation is not self-chosen. God directs us to our vocations.

When I was young, I mocked the faith. I thought most pastors were hypocrites or buffoons. When a church lady pinched my cheek and said that I'd be a preacher some day, I recoiled in horror. Nonetheless.... How did this happen?

For some reason, I decided to go to a church in college. I heard **real preaching** and immediately saw the difference between that and religious moralism. I found it **irresistible** and stayed, even though I disliked certain things. Slowly God contradicted my distaste for his work.

So let's question the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Boys will say, "Fireman, fighter pilot, Navy Seal, baseball player." Yes, but no matter how much a boy chooses "professional athlete" or "Navy Seal" very few have the skills required.

"What do you want to do?" is a good question. Here is a better one: "Who are you? What are your God-given talents? What can you do that's important and good? Of the things you can do, which fit your personality? Your soul?" Perhaps you can do the work of an accountant. But if you hate it, do something else.

Yet we must be careful here, for *choosing* is something our culture exalts more than the Bible does. The culture says "Choose your values, your friends. Choose to have a baby! Choose the right school!" Yes, we make choices, but "My choices" often reflect an interest in "my power and control." Remember 1 Corinthians 7. We stay in the place God appointed.

In a vital way, our call is out of our control, for it comes from outside ourselves. From outside, God gives gifts. From outside, we gain and lose opportunities. Doors open and doors slam shut: "One may lament the circumstances or try to change them or wait for a later opportunity, but... from the aspect of eternity, these developments [are] part of God's plan." Illness and emergency, financial straits and pregnancies are part of God's plan.<sup>4</sup>

God calls us through other people. Whatever our ability, training or desire, someone must hire us if we are to say, "Marketing is my call." If no one offers a job in my preferred field, *that must not be my call*. "Our inner feelings do not entitle us to any specific calling. 'I want to be a policeman' does not mean 'I am a policeman' [or] 'You have to let me in the academy.'" People get angry or upset when schools, businesses, or churches don't invite them to do what they want. But we can't assume that God is calling us to "exactly what we want."<sup>5</sup>

One more step. We have been saying we do not *choose* our vocation, but in an important sense, we don't find it either. It isn't unknown, in the future, it's "already here... in the relationships, duties, and daily work" that God already gives us. Therefore we don't *find* our vocation, we live it. If you're in grad school or high school, if you sell chicken nuggets or wash dishes or change diapers. If you're married – or single – don't lament or ask why; live faithfully where you are. As you buy groceries or drive children, don't muse "I need to find my life work." Think "This is my work".<sup>6</sup>

Hear Paul again, "Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him" (1 Cor 7:17). When we feel trapped, we may want a new vocation. But if nothing happens, grant old callings more meaning. God oversees the forces of history, even the ones that lead to apparent bonds.

This is teaching our restless age needs. When in distress, don't think first of change - to a new job, city, marriage or social circle. A change of circumstances is not the cure. Instead strive to serve God and neighbor where we are. The great factors for happiness in any place are God and the self. And God is everywhere and we take ourselves wherever we go.

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<sup>4</sup> Veith 55

<sup>5</sup> Veith 56-7

<sup>6</sup> Veith 57-9

### 3. We serve the Lord, with all our hearts

Two practical words: Let us work heartily and let's work with restraint. Paul says we should work "with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." Whether our labor is paid or unpaid, appreciated or unnoticed. Whether we operate by commission or salary or as volunteer. We work with all our hearts, for the Lord's glory, for peace and healing.

We try to accomplish something significant, with all the skill and experience we can muster. We aim for quality. But we also do what lies before us, confident it is from the Lord and to the Lord.

Ten years ago, two planes smashed into the World Trade Center. Among all the stories, what impresses me most is about calling. Thousands of office workers dashed down the stairs and out the building. At the same time policemen and firemen raced toward the building and up the stairs, against the stream of humanity, to rescue whomever they could. Hundreds of them knew, as they went, that they might lose their lives. Many did. Later, they labored around the clock, fighting exhaustion, searching for survivors. The normal heroes of the land – politicians, athletes, executives, entertainers – all confessed that their achievements are nothing, compared to the courage of these men. But the firemen and police deflect the praise and said: "We just did our jobs." Better: they knew their calling.

That is the doctrine of vocation. If we listen, we hear it widely, from builders, to neurosurgeons to mothers of twins. "How do you do it?" we ask. And they say, "We're just doing our jobs." Heeding God's call.

One more word: The doctrine of vocation can fuel the workaholic, the over-achiever. For this person, the Lord says "Remember the Sabbath." If we think of the Sabbath as rules about rest, we miss the point. The Sabbath is "God's gift to busy, distracted, weary" achievement-centered people. God commands us to take a break, rest, recharge, celebrate, think about the meaning of it all, alone and with the family. Because God is calling and doing his work and we can rest in him.

That principle of the Sabbath leads us to Jesus. Jesus calls us to our life work, but he also tells us we can rest. He is the Savior, we are not. He is the guide, we are not. Our future is his resting place, not our retirement.

Jesus is our Sabbath rest because we're not saved by works. Jesus worked for us, so we can rest from toil forever. "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Heb 4:9). We find it when we rest from our toil and rest in Jesus.