

# A Higher Calling

## 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

In June 1894, the US Congress passed a formal act marking the first Monday in September each year as Labor Day. According to the Department of Labor's website, the Holiday was birthed from the rise of the Labor movement and "is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers... [it is a] yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country." The holiday was marked by parades of workers exhibiting "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations" and often included a festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families.

The Department of Labor finishes its article on Labor Day with these words: "The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy. It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pays tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership — the American worker."

Somewhat ironically, the act was passed in the midst of "The Pullman Strike" (centered in Chicago) that saw 125,000 workers from 29 railroads quit rather than handle Pullman cars. In fact the day after the Labor Day act passed (June 28, 1894) there was a train derailling and arsons. Eventually there was a standoff with government troops and 30 people were killed.

This illustrates the odd relationship we as people (and a nation) have towards Labor. Work is noble and workers are worthy of celebrating – but work is hard and workers sometimes demonstrate in ways that we don't celebrate! Closer to home – in our own lives, work pays the

bills and can bring blessing – but work is also hard or hard to come by – and it can bring sorrow even more than blessing.

A later resolution in the history of Labor Day set aside the Sunday prior to Labor Day to be Labor Sunday and was "dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement." Today I'll use Labor Sunday to look at Labor, or Work, from a Biblical perspective. I hope this message is a blessing to everyone – even those who are too young to be in the workforce, and for those who have retired from their years of work.

**READ:** 1 Cor. 7:17-24

**TITLE:** A Higher Calling

**TRANSITION:** Before jumping into our text I want to do a brief overview on Labor/Work to set the stage for the application I want to draw from our text.

## I. A Look at Labor

### A. The Drudgery of Work

1. The Fall resulted in work being "painful" – requiring "toil" (Gen. 3:17)
2. Sometimes labor is in vain, another reaps from your labor (Is. 65:22-23)
3. "What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity." (Eccl. 2:22-23)

### B. The Dignity of Work

1. God himself Works (Gen. 1, Ps. 104) – unlike the gods of ancient mythology who are lazy or use humans to work for them.

2. Humanity is created in God's image – and work is given to Adam/Eve before the Fall. We follow in God's pattern of dignified, creative (and productive) work.
3. Jesus, our greatest Example, mimicked God the Father in His work – Jn. 5:17

### C. The Delight of Work

1. God has created the world so that sowing results in reaping – hard work has its rewards. (Gal. 6:7)
2. Work is our lot in life, and we can rejoice in work done well – “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil – this is the gift of God.” (Eccl. 5:18-19)
3. “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil – this is God's gift to man.” (Eccl. 3:12-13)

TRANSITION: Now let us look at our text with these thoughts about work in our mind.

## II. A Consideration of our Calling

**A. Context** – In light of Christ's soon return, and possibly due to a “present distress” (v. 26), it seems some people were calling for radical change in order to serve God better. The chapter deals primarily with the concern of whether believers should divorce unbelieving spouses, and whether unmarried believers should bother with looking to marry or not. Some were

evidently claiming that one position (remaining single, or leaving the unbelieving marriage partner) was inherently more holy than the other approach to these questions.

- B. Calling** – 1 Cor. 1:2, 9 show that “calling” is God's calling people to become believers. Being part of the church (the *ekklesia* – the called out ones) is to be called. And God calls from Jews and Greeks and different classes of people (1:24, 26-27) – the calling is God's choice of us to be his People. It is our call to follow Christ. This calling comes to us when we are in a variety of conditions (as many different conditions as there are people here).
- C. Charge** – The main point is repeated 3 times in these verses: Live the life God assigned you (v. 17), remain in the condition in which you were called (v. 20), remain “with God” in whatever condition you are (v. 24).
- Underlying this charge is the understanding that the situation you have in life is irrelevant – You can serve God in whatever situation you are in – one situation is not more holy than another.
  - This is illustrated 2 ways – with Circumcision/uncircumcision (a religious distinction which in light of the Gospel no longer means anything!) and with slavery (servitude – not as harsh as you might think, but something about which you shouldn't be concerned with whether you were slave or not – but if you could be free, go ahead) – these illustrate the point that in any situation (bond, free, Jew or Gentile, married or single, male or female – Gal. 3:28) you can serve Christ. God's calling is bigger than a specific condition in which you are called.
- D. Contentment** – The takeaway for the Corinthians is that they can be content in whatever condition they are in – they don't need to change in order to be able to please God fully. They

can remain with God – in his presence, be before God in whatever situation they find themselves in. What counts is not circumcision/uncircumcision but keeping God's commands – living for Him as a Gentile or a Jew. In fact, we are bought with a price and so the fact we are called leaves us with no option but to be God's servant (and thus to not be concerned about our options in life – but about our Lord).

TRANSITION: From this text and the notion of God's calling and assigning us a specific life circumstance, the Puritans (notably William Perkins, following Calvin and Luther's lead) taught that God calls all of us to particular vocations. Perkins defined vocation as "a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God, for the common good." Calvin said calling was "a lawful mode of life." Puritans approached the question of what vocation to choose as not simply being a question of what is best for them or their families, but what would best use the gifts God gave them and what would bring him the most Glory. They felt obligated to live for the good of all and not merely for their own advancement or self-fulfillment.

Martin Luther thought of vocation as a way that God worked indirectly to provide the needs of people. He said, "when you pray for 'daily bread' you are praying for everything that contributes to your having and enjoying your daily bread... You must open up and expand your thinking, so that it reaches not only as far as the flour bin and baking oven but also out over the broad fields, the farmlands, and the entire country that produces, processes, and conveys to us our daily bread and all kinds of nourishment." Like a parent gives children chores to let them "help" the parent (and also teach the child), Luther said that the works God allows us to do are "the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things." He held that even the humblest farm girl fulfills God's calling and vocation: "God milks the cows through the vocation of the milk maids", he said.

So let's try to apply this concept of vocation to our situations today.

### III. A View of our Vocation.

- A. God called us to faith and obedience, and he assigned us a vocation from which to serve Him. Our work is a way to serve others and to serve God.
- B. We don't have to be a full-time Christian servant in order to be a full-time Christian servant! We don't have to be a minister to minister! We don't have to be a missionary in order to be a missionary. *[If have time – talk about a wrong elevation of full-time service can denigrate secular service.]*
- C. Thoroughly Christian work, not just a Christian worker. God does not just want Christians who happen to be bakers, accountants and mailmen. God wants us, specifically, to be Christian bakers, accountants and mailmen. That doesn't just mean that we have a tract on our desk or in our pocket or that we go to church on Sundays. Dorothy Sayers elaborates: "*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 Sundays. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.*" Our faith should transform how we work (and it is our job to find out how best faith should impact our work). Here are a few principles to help:
  - We should be diligent in our work (Eccl. 9:10a – "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might")
  - We should seek to please the Lord, not just men (Col. 3:23 – "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.")
  - We should do our work to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31b – "whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.")
- D. [You say, but "I'm just a janitor" or "I don't even have a diploma." I can't work, I'm disabled"] Well know that no

vocation is too lowly or insignificant to be a mode of life from which you can please God. You don't have to go to school to be able to serve God. You don't have to get a better job, or find a wife – or move out of that neighborhood to be able to do something for Christ. If you don't have employment you still have a father or a child, a spouse maybe or a friend – and those relationships require a certain mode of life that is prescribed in Scripture as well. We can be the best neighbor on the block and so serve the community and Christ in our vocation. Perkins said even if all you do is sweep, or be a shepherd, you can find worth in what you do if you are doing that as a Christian.

- E. In fact, work itself (or service of any kind) can be worship in and of itself. Our work is good because of what it is, not what it makes us. Luther said of believers: “Even their seemingly secular works are a worship of God and an obedience well pleasing to God.” He said we can “give [ourselves] as a Christ to [our] neighbor[s], just as Christ offered himself to [us].” Now this is only an analogy, and if we truly love our neighbor we still should seek to share the gospel with them. But loving service to others is a way to obey God and find fulfillment in life. Serving others is the quickest way to happiness [Dorothy Sayers’ illustration of men in war finding fulfillment in the job done rather than the pay/benefit.]
- F. A final clarification: our text is not saying to never change your status. If you come to Christ as a single, you don't have to stay single forever. If you are a child you will grow up, circumstances do change. But we don't have to change our circumstances in order to find contentment in Christ and serve Him. You can serve Christ where you are. And if an opportunity comes to change our vocation – pick a major,

change jobs, take a promotion or not – the way we look at that opportunity should be Christian in itself. Pastor Tim Keller puts it this way, “The question regarding our choice of work is no longer ‘What will make me the most money and give me the most status?’ The question must now be ‘How, with my existing abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of God’s will and of human need?’”

### Closing:

I only scratched the surface of what the Bible has to say about how to serve God on the job. I hope you are encouraged with what we did cover, however. God has a purpose for you and finds great significance in your life. What you do matters, and you may be the only person who can do something that God needs done. It may be that there is someone who could only hear the Gospel from you. It might be that only someone in your situation can devote the time to prayer that results in a specific answer that blesses many people. Perhaps you have a special ability to raise funds for mission projects, or maybe you are the only one who can decorate the sanctuary. There are other examples too. God has a world to run, and he needs doctors, lawyers, clerks and cooks. He needs teachers and daycare workers. He needs mothers and grandfathers. He needs need social workers and nurses. He needs sanitation workers too. Just think what life would be without faithful service in these areas.

This Labor Day, I hope you take time to evaluate what your attitude has been toward the condition in which you find yourself now. God knows where you are – he called you! He knew you'd get here when he called you. He has plans for you where you are. You don't have to clean yourself up to be able to be used by Him. You can be faithful where you are.

I was blessed by the testimony of Steve Sandquist that we heard at

his funeral this week. He was an ordinary person doing extraordinary things as a Believer in Christ. He was being faithful – brightening the corner where he was. God wants us all to “Brighten the corner where you are” as the old song says.

May we all find significance and lasting hope for life in and through our heavenly calling in Christ Jesus. We are citizens of Heaven, here on assignment. We must serve where God has placed us until He returns. Let’s be faithful and fulfill the ministry God has entrusted to us.