

Whatever You Do

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Colossians 3:17).¹

My friend Steve Hadden once observed that the world is forever asking “What do you do?” but that this is the wrong question. The real question is “**What are you doing with your life?**” Many of us cannot answer *that* question. We really don't know what we are doing with our lives.²

This question of “what we're doing with our lives” is the question of “vocation.” “Vocation” is derived from the Latin *vocare* (“to call”) and *vocatio* (“call” or “calling”), and “vocation” is closely related to the New Testament idea of “calling.” My friend Mark Jensen wrote that “vocation is more than work. . . . vocation has to do with our commitment to a way of life that seeks to follow Jesus.”³

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that the vocation of Christians is to be reconciled with God, and then to become God's agents of reconciliation in the world. To “have a vocation” means to have a purpose for living that is joined with the purposes of God, and this calling is to be central to all we do, not an afterthought. A Christian's whole life is to be centered in vocation under God.

To have a vocation means that “what we believe about Providence on the plane of world history we also believe about our own stories.”⁴ God has graciously invited us to help move the creation toward its appointed end.

Such vocation is a wonderful gift from God. Vocation involves “the sense that there are aims in the universe beyond our own and that our aims can be harmonious with them and contribute to them.”⁵ The answer to “what we are doing with our lives” is focused at this point: that our lives are grounded in eternity.

Martin Luther was once approached by a working man who wanted to know how he could serve God. Luther asked him, “What is your work now?” The man said, “I'm a shoemaker.”

Much to the cobbler's surprise, Luther replied, “Then make good shoes and sell them at a fair price.”

Luther didn't tell the man to make “Christian shoes.” He didn't tell the man to leave his shoe business and become a monk. As Christians, we can faithfully serve God in a variety of vocations and jobs, and we don't need to justify that work in terms of its “spiritual” value or evangelistic usefulness. We simply pursue our calling with new God-glorifying motives, goals, and standards.⁶

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on September 2, 2012.

² Stephen L. Hadden, “A Vocation Clarification Seminar for College Students at Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Kentucky” (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 12.

³ Jensen, *Shattered Vocations, The Bible and Personal Crisis*, ed. Edward E. Thornton (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), p. 21.

⁴ Jensen, p. 147.

⁵ John B. Cobb, Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology: Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 132.

⁶ Tullian Tchividjian, “Our Calling, Our Spheres,” *Leadership* journal (Summer 2010), p. 98.

On October 26, 1967, six months before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. told students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia, “If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: “Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

Reggie McNeal tells a story about a woman who understood this principle: “I was sitting on a bench on a beach boardwalk late one afternoon, resting after an hour’s walk. I had passed a woman in a green uniform pushing a broom several times. She came toward my bench doing her meticulous sweeping of the sidewalk. Suddenly she stopped, wiped her forehead, and rested on her broom. I called out to her: ‘You do a great job.’

“Thank you,’ she replied. Then she added something that explained why the sidewalk behind her was spotless. ‘I just believe people want to walk on a clean sidewalk.’

“I was humbled to be in the presence of a worker who viewed her task with such significance. Whatever the park service was paying her, there’s no way they could have demanded the excellence she brought to her work. That kind of motivation comes from within.”⁷

Similarly, James Plueddemann reflects on an experience that taught him the eternal value of service and working hard—even at what others might call menial jobs. During his high school days, Plueddemann worked at a Christian camp under the direction of an outstanding leader named Hiram Johnson.

“One day,” Plueddemann writes, “we worked until dark trying to finish a staff house before the camp season started. My shirt was soaked with sweat and my hands blistered from shoveling sand around the foundation. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself when Hi Johnson strode around the corner of the building. He watched what we were doing for a while and then quietly reminded us that the staff who were moving into this house would be a big help to the camp.

“Then he said something that I will never forget: ‘Your shoveling will, in the long run, be used of the Lord to bring a lot of campers to Jesus.’ We started shoveling with a renewed sense of purpose. Now we were not just a bunch of dirty, sweaty high school kids tired of shoveling mud. We were instruments of God Almighty to bring people to himself. What a lesson in leadership! Our view of the task shifted from shoveling sand to building the kingdom.”⁸

At the other end of the scale of fame and fortune, Shaun Alexander, former running back for the Seattle Seahawks and the Washington Redskins, and the Most Valuable Player for the 2005 NFL season, told a reporter that “I am a Christian that loves the Lord, that just happens to play football, that happens to get to be on cool TV shows, that happens to get to be on commercials. I’m a godly man first. I chase after God. I play football for the sole reason to give God glory.”⁹

⁷ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), p. 98.

⁸ James E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Culture* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 33; see also Brother Lawrence (1614-1691), *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Revell, 1967), www.amazon.com/Practice-Presence-God-Brother-Lawrence/dp/0800785991.

⁹ Andrew Knox, “Shaun Alexander: Running Back for Jesus,” www.cbn.com.

The great early American preacher, Jonathan Edwards, lived by a similar maxim: **“Resolved: that all men should live for the glory of God. Resolved second: That whether others do or not, I will.”**¹⁰ William Ward expanded that idea:

“I will do more than belong. I will participate.
 “I will do more than care. I will help.
 “I will do more than believe. I will practice.
 “I will do more than be fair. I will be kind.
 “I will do more than forgive. I will forget.
 “I will do more than dream. I will work.
 “I will do more than teach. I will inspire.
 “I will do more than earn. I will enrich.
 “I will do more than give. I will serve.
 “I will do more than live. I will grow.
 “I will do more than suffer. I will triumph.”¹¹

John Ortberg and Ruth Haley agreed that “Doing the right work with the right attitude and the right spirit is immensely important, because the most important thing you bring home from work is not your paycheck. The most important thing you bring home from work is you.”¹²

In 1969, Malcolm Muggeridge went to Calcutta to make a documentary movie about Mother Teresa for the BBC. She didn’t want to do it, but church leaders finally persuaded her. When she finally agreed, she said, *“Let us do something beautiful for God.”*

When they began filming, a strange thing happened. Even though there was not enough light in the hospice for filming, the finished film was bathed in a particularly beautiful soft light. Muggeridge figured it was the halo of love he sensed there. Later, he wrote a book about Mother Teresa and gave it the title, *Something Beautiful for God*.¹³ Muggeridge eventually became a Christian as a result of that experience.

In a similar way, in the story *Babette’s Feast*,¹⁴ about a world-class chef laboring anonymously in the service of two elderly sisters in a remote Danish village, Isak Dinesen wrote, “From the ends of the earth one long cry goes up from the heart of the artist: *Give me a chance to do my very best!*”

My friends, may these two statements become our heart-cry on this Labor Day Weekend: **“Let us do something beautiful for God!” “Give me a chance to do my very best!”**¹⁵

This week marked our oldest grandchild’s beginning of kindergarten. I can imagine that events like this one that Laura DuVall Bush describes becoming rather commonplace when Hadley arrives home from school:

“When my daughter Aimee was in nursery school, she’d come home each day with drawings, collages, and other projects. Next to her own name she’d scrawl the name

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Leadership*, vol. 6, no. 1.

¹¹ William Ward, cited in Haddon Robinson, *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* (June 2003), 12.

¹² John Ortberg and Ruth Haley Barton, *An Ordinary Day with Jesus* (Zondervan, 2001).

¹³ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (HarperOne, 1986).

¹⁴ *Babette’s Feast*, written by Karen Blixen, directed by Gabriel Axel (Orion Classics, 1987).

¹⁵ Lee Eclov, www.preachingtoday.com.

of someone she loved—usually Mommy or Daddy, sometimes baby brother Ben. ‘I did this for you,’ she’d proudly say.

“As I reflect on this,” Laura wrote, “I remember the apostle Paul’s exhortation, ‘*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*’ (Colossians 3:17). If Aimee could do every school project for me or for her dad, surely I can do my ‘projects’ for my heavenly Father. Now I often ask myself, ‘Have I written my Lord’s name on all I’ve done today?’”¹⁶

So after all this, what does vocation really involve? The prophet Micah summarized vocation powerfully and effectively when he wrote, “**And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God**” (Micah 6:8b).

Christian vocation is the call (1) to be a faithful member of the household of God; (2) to respond in obedience to the claims of God upon your life; (3) to rejoice in your present station in life but to regard it as impermanent; (4) to grow in your knowledge of yourself and of the various implications of personal vocation; and (5), to pray for God’s guidance and help in living out your calling.¹⁷

Frederick Buechner suggested that such vocation has the twin components of meeting our own needs for personal fulfillment (*Relationships that Last*) as well as the legitimate needs of others (*A Life that Matters*). Buechner wrote that “neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. **The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.**”¹⁸

Vocation is really more about the journey than about the destination. **Vocation is about following Jesus.** Albert Schweitzer was right when he said of Jesus that

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.¹⁹

¹⁶ Laura DuVall Bush, “Heart to Heart,” *Today’s Christian Woman*.

¹⁷ Donald R. Heiges, *The Christian’s Calling*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 77-79.

¹⁸ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.

¹⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd. ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954), p. 401.