Christians in the Workplace

#12: Work at different stages of life

# Introduction

Good morning! Welcome to one of our last classes in “Christians in the Workplace.” This morning, we’re going to explore work at different stages of life. What we’ve talked about in the class so far pertains to the work that many of us will experience as normal in life: employment. But of course, in a normal life our “work” doesn’t always fall into that category—even work that we would classify in the category of our job. How do you take what we’ve talked about so far and apply it to your life as a student, your life when you’re unemployed, your life as retired? I’m going to call these “exceptional callings.” Not because they’re rare—many people are called to them. Certainly not because they mark us out as odd. No: I’m calling them “exceptional” because we don’t traditionally think about them as callings. How many times have you heard someone say, “I’m called to be unemployed.” Or retired? Or a student? But these are callings just as assuredly as being employed or married are callings.

So here’s what we’re going to do this morning. I want to start by grounding us in what we’ve discussed already in this class. What exactly is a calling and why do our callings matter? Then we’ll take each of these so-called “exceptional callings” and tease out what it means to be faithful to God’s call in each of them.

My prayer is that as we do this, we’ll come to understand that God calls us to work as good and faithful servants—for his glory, and for the good of others—in every aspect of our lives.

# Are exceptional callings really callings?

So let’s get started. A good place to begin is with that question on your handout. “Are these callings really callings?” Isn’t it kind of blaming God to say that my unemployment is his *calling*, for example?

Or, more mildly, you might think, “I get it, but some of these exceptional callings seem negative. I mean, aren’t they really the absence of a calling?” Isn’t is more accurate to say that “I’m not called to employment” than “I’m called to unemployment?”

Or how ‘bout being a student and being retired? In our work-centered culture, we view our studies as the ramp up to success at work. And we view retirement as the wind-down from a successful career. So being a student looks like “not yet called to work” and being retired looks like “not called to work any more.” Well, going back to an earlier class, this is a terrible distortion of the Biblical concept of work; it says that our lives and value are defined by and centered on our paid employment. *They are not*. If you miss this point, and your life and value remains defined by your paid employment, then our last exceptional calling—unemployment—will come as a nasty blow.

So before we get to any of these, let’s remember, by way of review, how the Bible thinks about calling. Our primary calling as Christians is *by* Christ, *to* Christ, that we might do good work *for* Christ. It’s our *primary* calling both because it happened first and because it supersedes every other calling on our lives.

Our secondary callings, on the other hand, are the things that Christ has called us to do. And as we’ve discussed earlier in this class, the wonderful thing is the knowledge that *Christ* is the one who calls us to do these things. No matter who your boss is, you’re ultimately working for Jesus—no matter what your position in life. You’re working for the King. Not only that, but because Jesus is the sovereign ruler of the universe, *every* circumstances in his life is his calling for you. He might call you to work, to be out sick for a day, to go on vacation, to lose your job—and he only calls us to do these things because he has a purpose for our callings. We can work for him in all situations, whether or not our society would traditionally consider our situation as “work.” So yes: exceptional callings are in fact callings—and have no less purpose or ambition in them than any other work you do in life.

Before we get on to these specific callings, though, let’s review some of the basic principles from earlier in the course that we’ll use as we consider God’s purpose in these callings. Let’s step through four principles:

1. The purpose of your work is to glorify God—and that applies to any calling in life. 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” In other words as we’ve been saying in this class, your work matters mainly because it shows off his work in you. Anything you can do, Jesus can do better. He’s a better doctor, a better parent, a better mechanic, a better plumber. But he’s decided *not* to do those things—to entrust you instead. Why? Because he’s not mainly about your work, or he’d do it himself. He’s mainly about what your work says about him, in how and why you do it.

2. *All* work can bring glory to God, not just so-called “spiritual” work—and not just employment.

3. Our work matters to the extent that it reveals who God is. So from the perspective of heaven, we’re measured not according to how many widgets we sell or widgets we make—but according to our faithfulness. To what extent has our work been an act of faith, that shows off the trustworthiness and goodness of God?

4. God is in control of your circumstances. Nothing that happens to you is an accident to him. No situation is beyond his control or beyond his purposes.

Putting all these together, we see that in *every* situation in your life is God’s sovereignly-orchestrated opportunity for you to show off who he is—and so in every situation in your life, he calls you to be faithful. He calls you to pursue his purposes.

# A calling to being a student

What’s your goal for being a student? Most responsible adults would say, “so you can get a job.” Stay in school, get good grades, get a good job. That’s the modern purpose of education: preparation for a productive, paying job.

That sounds really positive and really helpful. But the problem with describing the function of education as preparing for a job is this: it’s a perfect example of the so-called Protestant distortion of vocation that we discussed earlier in the class. As Oz Guinness described that distortion: “Eventually the day came when faith and calling were separated completely. The original demand that each Christian should have a calling was boiled down to the demand that each citizen should have a job.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

What’s a biblical view of education? Well, the same principles that govern all our secondary callings come into play in a calling to education. Through our education, we work to glorify God and to serve our neighbors. How does a student study to glorify God?

Let me give you three answers to that question:

1. Work hard as for the Lord. Imagine that you’re a bat boy for the Washington Nationals. A lot of what you do doesn’t seem that complicated or difficult—but you do it with all your heart, right? Because you’re working for the Nats. In the same way, if Christ has called you to be a student, work at it with all your heart—because ultimately you’re working for him. You don’t need to know his purposes for calling you there in order to work hard for him. Simply knowing that *he’s* the one who put you there is enough. And you know what: as you work hard for the Lord, you’re showing off how worthy he is of your work and devotion.
2. Develop your mind. Education isn’t simply about teaching you a specific skill; it’s about developing the mind God gave you so you can use it better. Remember from Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25: being a good steward glorifies God because it shows off that God is good to his promises and that God rewards those who seek him. You *could* seek to develop your mind in a self-serving way. But you can also do that as a steward—and when you do that with the aim of serving Christ better, you glorify his worth and value.
3. Developing your skill. Then of course, we *do* glorify God in our studies by seeing them as the normal preparation for a normal kind of job that does all the eternal good a job can do that we’ve seen in this class. Not a self-glorifying development of skill—but developing skill so we can serve God. And keep in mind that the skills you learn in school aren’t limited in their use to the workplace. Some of those skills will help you as a Sunday School teacher, as a friend, a parent, a neighbor, a disciple, and so much more.

So then, let me give you some implications of this:

* Aim for Christ’s commendation, not your teacher’s. What if instead of studying hard to get an A, or to be at the top of your class, or to compete, what if you devoted yourself to doing every single assignment with your utmost effort, as though working for the Lord? What if you had the perspective that school work done with excellence greatly pleases the Lord, because you are exercising the talents that he’s given you. What if you had the idea that work done sloppily, or incompletely, or incorrectly was a neglect of talents and limited the future opportunities you might have to glorify God and serve your neighbors?
* Remember that Christ owns your time. So let his purposes for your education take center stage in what you do. For some students, that will mean more focus. If you’re working for Jesus while you’re in school, that means school isn’t about doing the minimal work to get by and goofing off the rest of the time—it means redeeming the time by seeking to conform your life as a student to his purposes. And for some students, that will mean less focus. If you’ve been 110% focused on your studies and your future career, you need to recognize that, at least for Jesus, there’s more to your life than that. In other words, he’s called you to be more than just a student right now. He’s called you to be a friend, an evangelist, a church member, and so much more. For those who are guilty of too much focus, Titus’ exhortation in Titus 3:1 is a good reminder: that we be “ready for every good work.” Be on the lookout for where Jesus your King might be redeploying you from your studies for a brief chance to do good.
* See your education as preparation for all your callings, not just your job, as I mentioned before. Some of that has to do with how you view your studies. For example, see a teaching certificate as not just about a job, but about all the teaching you’ll hopefully do in your Christian life—in your family, in your friendships, and in the church. And some of this has to do with *what* you choose to study—not thinking merely of your future job.

So students, work in your studies as though you were working for the Lord, not just your parents, or your teachers, or for some far-off goal of a great job. And parents, take the time to teach your children the *real* reason that they are in school, and the *real* reason that they will most likely have a job, and many other callings.

# A calling to retirement

Well, if education is seen as the on-ramp to a good job, retirement is seen by many as an end-of-the-rainbow time of relaxation and personal fulfillment, funded by a fat retirement account. Work after age 65? Only if you’re a Type A overachiever, or need a part-time job to help make ends meet after the stock market crash gobbled up your retirement savings. Better to golf, garden, travel, and luxuriate in a beach-side retirement home. Thomas Jefferson put it like this: “The [highest good] with me is now is truly Epicurean, ease of body and tranquility of mind, and to these I wish to consign my remaining days.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Sounds lovely.

Problem is, God doesn’t turn off our callings when we hit 65. Our responsibility for faithfulness doesn’t evaporate into a decade or more of self-absorption. Let’s say that you’ve worked hard and well, and you’ve set aside enough money that you don’t need to work 9-to-5 for your day-to-day needs. Guess what? Just like the single person in First Corinthians 7 who has more time and energy to devote to pleasing God and serving others, so do you!

Keep in mind how the apostle Paul thought about the closing years of his life. “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith” (Philippians 1:13-15). Paul saw his time on earth in terms of faithful service. He lived for others.

So what are some of the unique resources that we have in retirement?

* Flexibility. Some of us choose to declutter our schedules as our years of employment end. For some of us, that choice is made for us because of our health, or maybe the needs of spouse. But either way, we need to recognize that being faithful as God’s stewards doesn’t mean necessarily filling every available moment. There is great value in being the one who’s often available for unplanned opportunities. Those could be opportunities to serve your children, or your neighbors, or your church.
* Wisdom. When Proverbs says that gray hair is a crown of glory (16:31), what do you think is in mind? Certainly, the wisdom that comes with experience—wisdom God has given us to share.
* Bible knowledge. That goes hand-in-hand with wisdom. There’s just a different kind of knowledge you have of the Scriptures when hundreds of passages have been your go-to verses in various crisis points in your life.
* Perspective. Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes that we’re better spending time in the house of mourning than the house of feasting (7:2). Why? Watching life draw to a close helps you keep an eternal perspective. The things that once appealed in this world just don’t seem to matter as much.
* Money. For some, retirement is a time of financial uncertainty—a time that God will carry us through. For others, there’s a realization that we won’t need all we’ve set aside—and so retirement can be a wonderful opportunity for generosity.

Of course, the danger here is that we’ll make the same mistake we do in our working years—to equate worth with productivity—just changing our definition of productivity. So we feel worthwhile when we’re able to help others, but when energy or health fade away, our worth seems to go with them. So perhaps one of the greatest opportunities of retirement is its ability to once and for all disabuse us of this notion. Worth does not come from the things we accomplish. Remember: if Jesus cared primarily about that, he’d do it himself. No: what matters is our faithfulness. Whether we have two talents or five, to steward whatever opportunities God gives us to show off his goodness and his glory.

So as opportunities for service begin to slip away, opportunities for faithfulness never do. What matters is not how much we accomplish; what matters is whether we gamble everything in life on the promises of our faithful God.

So if you’re retired, consider how you can continue to work to glorify God and serve others at the different stages of retirement that lie ahead. If you know a retired person, engage them for their wisdom and experience. Include them in your families and as mentors. And if you’re looking forward to retirement some day, don’t save up for some kind of 24-7 party and neglect to do other great things now with that money in your current calling to paid employment. And by all means, never stop spending your talents for God.

# A calling to unemployment

Let me wrap up this morning with some thoughts about a calling to unemployment. For a great many of us, at some point in our lives we’re not going to have paid employment: we’ll be unemployed or underemployed—especially with how so many careers in this city seem to operate. So what does it look like to work for Jesus during these times?

Not having paid employment leaves a hole. And for just about all of us, it’s a hole that has to be filled. But we have two ways to look at that hole. We can languish in it, lamenting it, exploring its every nook and cranny, and lose our self-worth and sense of value because we’re unemployed. Or we can take the season for what it is: a time to find new work, and also a season in which we probably have more time and energy than we did while we were working for a living.

Keeping the principles of this class in mind will be important especially during a time of unemployment. They’ll help us see how high the stakes are when we don’t have a job—since employment is one of our main opportunities for worship in this life. We were, as you’ll remember from class one, created to work. And yet keeping the principles of this class in mind will also protect us from seeking too much in a job—because we recognize that it’s just a job we’re looking for, not meaning or significance. That in turn can help protect us from being too picky about what we’re looking for, and from despondence when the wait seems endless.

But back to the positive. How exactly can a calling to unemployment show off God’s goodness in our lives? How can we do even this to the glory of God?

*Work hard to find a job*. Perhaps most obviously, we can work hard as unto the Lord, even in a season when it looks like we’re not working. You’ve often heard it said that during a time of unemployment, it’s good to treat your job search as a job. In other words, set goals for yourself, set work hours, get others to hold you accountable. That’s true for the non-Christian who’s just about finding a job; it’s even more true for the Christian who recognizes that even during unemployment they *have* a job: to serve the Lord in everything they do. Thankfully, because you are kind enough to keep me on as your pastor, I haven’t faced unemployment for some time. But I remember when I first left church work to go back into business in the middle of a recession, the transition took longer than I’d anticipated. The first dozen resumes may have been easy to do well, but to be honest, after a while, it got pretty hard to keep up my work ethic when the chance of success for each cover letter seemed so low. Which is why it’s so important to keep this in mind. Whether or not that cover letter gets me a job, I should be writing it with excellence because how I write reflects the Savior I serve.

*Use the time well*. Of course, most likely it’s impossible to use *all* your time to find a job. So just as in retirement, unemployment provides a season of special and exceptional service to others. Titus 3:1 should be close to our hearts, just like in the other two seasons I’ve talked about so far: be ready to do what is good. Use that extra flexibility, that extra time, to do good you probably couldn’t during a time of employment. Read those books on your dusty “to read” pile. Think about scheduling that lunch with a younger Christian brother who needs mentoring, go rake the leaves of your elderly neighbor. If you’re a husband, take on what your wife normally does so that she can enjoy some of that additional time and flexibility. Make your season of unemployment a time of spiritual growth and blessings to others.

*Provide opportunities for others to do good.* One of the humbling things about a time of unemployment is that it makes us lean hard on others. That’s a good thing; don’t run away from it. You’ll need others to provide leads for jobs. To help you prepare for interviews. If your savings runs out, you may need others to navigate our city’s social services or to provide you with loans and gifts. You may need to talk with an elder about depending on the church’s benevolence fund. Part of our reluctance to do this is godly; after all, Paul told the Thessalonians that they should be dependent on no one (1 Thes. 4:12). But much of our reluctance comes from a wrong-headed, prideful self-sufficiency. So we need to recognize that it’s *good* for others to love us in this way—because in so doing they can participate in God’s care for us. Where appropriate, Christians should embrace the ministry of *de*pendency.

*Trust God*. Perhaps the most significant way in which we can be unemployed to the glory of God is by trusting him in a time when trust is hard. After getting over the shock of a job loss, we can run into unemployment with a full head of steam, insistent that we’re going to trust God and use the time well. But if it becomes clear that God’s timeline for that new job doesn’t jive with ours, faith can become very, very hard and very, very messy. We just need to remember that it’s right then that the real opportunity begins. Think of Hebrews 11:6, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Faith by nature is massively uncomfortable. It hurts. We desperately want to get back to living by sight instead of by faith. But it is our faith that shows God to be sufficient. It is our faith that pleases him. It is by faith that we’re counted as faithful.

So by faith, I trust that, no matter how important it is to get a job, what God is accomplishing in my life right now must be more important. That’s how I resist bitterness, anger, and apathy. That’s how my life becomes a testimony to his goodness. That’s how God is most glorified in my time of unemployment.

# Conclusion

I hope that you can see that these so-called “exceptional” callings are in fact, just normal callings. Beyond the requirements of our primary calling as Christians, in every season or situation to which we are secondarily called, we are to work as though for the Lord, for his glory, and for the good of others. If we can do that through all the ups and downs of a lifetime, then I think we’ll be very pleased to hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your Master’s happiness!”

1. Guinness, *The Call*, page 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lester J. Cappon, ed.“The Adams-Jefferson Letters” 335 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)