

God Doesn't Need Your Good Works, But Your Neighbor Does

Here I Stand: Foundations of the Faith

Pastor Josh Black

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Celebrating the Reformation

After four weeks of celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we come to Reformation Sunday this morning. If you're just joining us this morning, you may want to know why we celebrate the Reformation. Well during the Middle Ages the Bible was largely unknown and the gospel was all but lost. But Martin Luther and the other reformers recovered the Bible and recovered the gospel.

The Reformation recovered the glorious truth of justification. We're not saved by anything we do. We're saved by what God has done. We're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But although that is 100% true, there's an important qualification to that statement. Yes, we're only saved by faith alone, not by works. But as Martin Luther said 500 years ago, saving faith never stands alone; it will always be accompanied by good works. In fact, *the reason* God saved us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone was *for* good works, which he prepared in advance for us (Eph. 2:8-10).

Recovering Vocation

And one of the good works that God has prepared for us is our actual work; what we do day in and day out. One of the amazing things about the Reformation is that Luther not only recovered the doctrine of justification and reminded us of the doctrine of sanctification. In his day, one of the most important things Luther recovered was the doctrine of vocation. Luther recovered a doctrine of work. And that doctrine needs to be recovered in our day as well.

In Luther's day, people viewed secular work as basically meaningless. It was simply a means to an end; a way to provide food or money. In the medieval world, the only legitimate sacred work was work as a priest or a monk or a nun. This was seen as the only true Christian calling. In fact, in the medieval world, they didn't believe that you could live a perfect Christian life if you didn't leave your secular job, take a vow of poverty and a vow of celibacy, and take on a "holy vocation."

Where did this view of work come from? A few weeks ago, Ray Dorsett sent me a quote from John MacArthur that explains the way the medieval church viewed sacred and secular work and where it all came from.

Eusebius started a lot of this stuff in the fourth century, he was an early church father. Listen to what he wrote. "There are two ways of life given by the law of Christ to His church. One is above nature and beyond common human living, holy and permanently separate from the common customary life of man. It devotes itself to the service of God alone. Such is the perfect form of the Christian life..."

Now what Eusebius was saying was that the first manner of life is Christian ministry, Christian service, devoting yourself to the service of God alone and that is the perfect form of the Christian life. Then in a second paragraph he said this, "And the other, the second more humble, more human,

permits man to have minds for farming, for trade and the other secular interests and a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them..."

What Eusebius said is first-class Christians are those who serve God alone. The second-class Christians are those who have secular employment. So if you want to be a first class Christian, then you must devote your life to serving God alone.¹

This is how almost all medieval Christians viewed work. And this is still the way that many people today view work. But is this God's view?

Luther didn't think so! Sure, he believed that pastoral ministry is a totally legitimate, God-given vocation. But he didn't believe that those in full-time ministry were first-class Christians. And he didn't believe those in so called secular work were second-class Christians.

Listen to what he says in his treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*:

*It is pure invention that Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the "spiritual estate" while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the "temporal estate." This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and that for this reason: all Christians are truly of spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office...*²

Luther grounded this belief in what he called the priesthood of all believers. In 1 Peter 2:9, we read, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."³

Luther believed that all Christians are priests, not just the clergy. And if all Christians are priests, then all Christians had equal standing in God's eyes and equal access to God. All Christians can become equally godly. And all can share the gospel. These privileges are not restricted to some spiritual elite. They belong to all Christians. We all have a role to play in God's plan, through our specific work God has called us to.⁴

Luther recovered the biblical doctrine of vocation. Luther recovered the belief that all good work, well done, is Christian work.⁵ And that's what I want to talk about this morning. Luther recovered at least three things about our work. He recovered the view that all of our work is a calling from God. He also believed that God uses our ordinary "secular" work to provide for the needs of everybody in the world. And he believed that work is one of the main ways we love our neighbor. So to divide our time this morning, I want to look at these three areas Luther recovered.

VOCATION

Let's start with work as vocation or work as a calling from God. All good work is a calling from God. The word vocation comes from the Latin. It means calling. And the New Testament uses the word calling in at least three ways.

¹ MacArthur, John. "[Work A Noble Christian Duty, Part 1](#)," Sermon, Grace to You, July 5, 1992.

² Quoted in Keller, Tim. *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016, p. 69.

³ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Cf. Veith, Gene Edward. *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2011, p. 19.

⁵ Sayers, Dorothy L. *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*. Nashville, Tenn.: W Pub. Group, 2004, p. 132.

Called to Christ

The word calling usually describes a Christian's call to Christ. For example, Romans 8:30 says, "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." Or 1 Corinthians 1:2, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

Called into the Church

But God's calling is not just an individual calling. We're also called into the church. We're called into a body of believers. Colossians 3:15 says, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body." The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. Literally it means "called out ones." The church is a gathering of people who are called out of the world to gather together.⁶

So how does this calling to Christ and into the church affect our view of our work? If we're called to Christ and called out of the world, shouldn't we leave our "worldly" work and go into full-time Christian ministry?

Calling and Work

No, because there is another way the Bible speaks of calling. Luther sees this in 1 Corinthians 7:17. "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him."

In the context, Paul is addressing marriage. If a person is married when they're called to Christ, they should stay married, even if they're married to an unbeliever. If they're single, they should generally remain single. Paul goes on to apply this teaching to other areas. If a person's not circumcised when they're called to Christ, they should remain uncircumcised. If they're a slave when called to Christ, they shouldn't worry about it. Unless what you're doing is inherently sinful, there's no reason to change your situation in life just because you become a Christian. In fact, that's the life that the Lord has assigned you!

How does this relate to work? I think it's fair to say, there's no reason to leave your "secular" job just because you're a Christian.

Paul uses two religious words in 1 Corinthians 7:17: assigned and called. As we've said, Paul regularly uses the word "called" to refer to our call to Christ. And most of the time he uses the word "assigned" to refer to ministry and spiritual gifts used to build up the body of Christ.

Think of Romans 12:3, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

The measure of faith Paul is referring to here is our spiritual gifts that are given (or assigned) to members in the church to build up the body of Christ. And that's the way the word is normally used in Paul's writings—to describe a ministry or spiritual gifts.

⁶ See O'Brien, Peter. "Church." in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. eds. Hawthorne, Gerald F., Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

But in 1 Corinthians 7:17 the word “assigned” refers to the ordinary life situation each person finds themselves in...even their “secular” job.

Do you see the implication of this? This is the way Tim Keller puts it: “The implication is clear: Just as God equips Christians for building up the Body of Christ, so he also equips all people with talents and gifts for various kinds of work, for the purpose of building up the human community.”⁷

Did you catch that? According to Keller, gifts are assigned to each Christian to build up the church. But those gifts can also be used to build up the human community. So that means that the secular job that you’re in is likely what God has called you to. It’s what he’s assigned you to. You don’t have to leave your work in order to fulfill your Christian calling. Your work is God’s call on your life.

The Four Vocations

Now, for some of you, you may be thinking, “I must not have a calling,” at least not in this third sense. Because some of you are unemployed, or stay-at-home parents, or retired. Does that mean that God has not placed a call on your life? Not in Luther’s view. You see, Luther viewed our work for pay as only one type of work or vocation. He actually saw in the Bible four vocations.

The medieval view said that true holy calling involved going into the ministry and renouncing secular work, money, and family. It also meant coming out from under secular authority and coming under the sole authority of the church. But Luther believed that the Bible’s view on vocation included all of these things, not the renouncement of them. He listed four vocations or what he called four holy orders.⁸ They were the church, the family, the state, and the marketplace.⁹

Work in the church is a vocation that all Christians are called to. This includes pastoral ministry. Some have come to see that the priesthood of all believers removes the importance of pastoral ministry. That wasn’t Luther’s view at all. He saw the pastor’s role as pivotal for the health of the church. But he also saw everybody else’s role in the church as critical! Sure, pastors are important and those in the church are called to submit to their leaders. But all roles in the body are important. And everybody is called to participate in building up the body. That’s part of your vocation.¹⁰

Work in the family is also a vocation that all Christians are called to. If you’re married, you have a calling as a husband or a wife. Even if you’re not married, you have a calling to any family you do have. And children have a calling to their parents.¹¹

Work in the state is another vocation that all Christians are called to. Luther saw serving in the government or in the military as God-given vocations (cf. Rom. 13:1ff). And even those

⁷ Keller, p. 66

⁸ See Luther, Martin. “The Small Catechism.” in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*. St. Louis, Mo: Concordia Pub House, 2006.

⁹ Veith, *God at Work*, pp. 19, 22.

¹⁰ cf. Veith, Gene Edward. “The Glory of God Alone: Luther on Vocation,” in *The Legacy of Luther*. eds Sproul, R.C. and Stephen J. Nichols, Orlando, Fla: Reformation Trust, 2016, p. 181.

¹¹ cf. Veith, “The Glory of God Alone,” pp. 181-182

who aren't in roles of civic leadership have a role to play as good citizens in a society. This is part of our vocation.¹²

The fourth area has to do with the marketplace. Not everybody will work outside of the church and the home. And that's okay. There's plenty you're called to do. But for those who are called to take a job and make a living, you need to know that this is part of the way God designed you and the way God designed the world that we live in.

PROVIDENCE

And that leads me to the second major area that Luther emphasized in his doctrine of vocation: providence. Our work is God's way of providing for the world.

The doctrine of justification teaches us that our salvation is not about what we do, it's about what God has done to save us in Christ. The doctrine of vocation is about what we do in our work. But that's not all. For Luther, vocation is first of all about what God does. Gene Veith says, "We often talk about what God is doing *in* our lives; vocation is about what God is doing *through* our lives."¹³

Vocations, according to Luther, are "masks of God."¹⁴ Why did Luther say our vocations are the masks of God?¹⁵ Luther looked at Psalm 147:13 where we're told that God strengthens the bars of your gates. God made a promise to protect people. But how does God protect people generally speaking? Is it not through lawmakers, police, and politicians? Luther also looked at the Lord's Prayer where we're called to pray for our daily bread. But how does God provide food for people generally speaking? Is it not through the farmer, the banker, the miller, the baker, the retailer, the website programmer, the truck driver, the fast food worker, and all others who contribute to bring us food?

There's a real sense in which *God* is the one who protects and provides for people. But there's another sense in which he does so through the ordinary work of ordinary people just like you. Luther is famous for his saying, "God milks the cows through the vocation of the milkmaids."

The same applies to other areas. When we hear that God is at work in the world, we often think of God working in miraculous ways. When we think of healing, we think of God providing miraculous healing. When we think of God speaking, we think of an inner voice or a vision. And I don't want to discount those views. But isn't it also true that God heals through doctors and pharmacists? Isn't it also true that God speaks through the preaching of pastors? In fact these are the normal and usual ways that God heals and speaks.¹⁶

If we want to understand the importance of our work, we have to understand that God works through means.

We all know that when it rains it involves certain factors in nature. Relative humidity, cold fronts, etc. are all conditions present when it rains. But just because we know that there are certain chemical and meteorological things at work when it rains, that doesn't diminish the fact that it is still God

¹² Veith, *God at Work*, pp. 30-32

¹³ Veith, "The Glory of God Alone," p. 180

¹⁴ Veith, "The Glory of God Alone," p.180

¹⁵ Keller, pp. 64-80

¹⁶ Veith, *God at Work*, pp. 25-26

who makes it rain. God uses means to make it rain. And God uses means to protect and provide for his people. He uses our work.¹⁷

Does your work matter? You bet it matters. In fact, it's the normal way that God provides for the needs of the world.

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Now, it must be said that God uses *all* good work to provide for the needs of the world, even the work of unbelievers. But Luther's doctrine of vocation wasn't just to baptize work in general. It was to show the distinctively Christian nature of even secular work. And the way that he drew this out was by pointing out a third important aspect of our work. Our work is a way that we love our neighbor.

When an unbeliever does good work as a parent, or as a judge, or as a banker, they are being used by God to provide for the needs of the world. But they may not always be acting in love. They may have very selfish motives. They may have no care whatsoever to provide for other people. They may simply be providing for themselves. But in that one selfish act, there are two things at work: the sinner's desire to care for themselves and God's desire to care for the world.

But if a Christian's work is to be distinctly Christian, it must be out of a desire to love our neighbor. God is love (1 Jn. 4:16). He expresses his love in providence. He also expresses his love in Christ. 1 John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." For those of us who have experienced God's love in Christ, it only makes sense that our work would also be done out of love for others. We love because he first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19).

God's love is such that we don't have to do anything to earn his favor. We're saved by faith alone, not by works. But as we've said, saving faith never stands alone; it will always be accompanied by good works. And those good works include our work. Luther put it this way: "God doesn't need our good works. But our neighbor does."¹⁸ And we said last week, as Christians, our work needs to be marked by love.

In *The Freedom of the Christian*, Luther said, "Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks that in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through [our work]."¹⁹

We help our neighbor by loving them through our work.

Successful or Sacrificial

We all know that work isn't easy. We live in a fallen world. Everything is shot through with sin and the effects of the fall. Therefore, our work won't always feel successful. But Christian work that's done out of love for our neighbor doesn't necessarily need to be successful. But Christian work should be sacrificial.

¹⁷ Veith, *God at Work*, p. 28

¹⁸ Gustaf Wingren's summary of Luther, quoted in Veith, *God at Work*, p. 28; Veith, "The Glory of God Alone," p. 183

¹⁹ Veith, "The Glory of God Alone," p. 185

Luther wrote extensively about bearing the cross in vocation. He wrote about vocation in terms of the priesthood of all believers. That doesn't mean that all believers are pastors. A priest is someone who offers a sacrifice. Now in our relationship to God, Christ is our only priest, and his sacrifice for our sins was once and for all (Heb. 7). But all Christians are called to take up their cross and present their bodies as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).²⁰

And this applies to our vocations as well. We were never promised that our work would be easy. But when we offer our work as a sacrifice acceptable to God and profitable for our neighbor, we're reflecting the love and sacrifice of Christ in all that we do.

Because we do our work in a fallen world it will be full of sin. It will be difficult because of the sin of others. And it will be difficult because of our own sin. Sometimes we'll even sin against our vocations. We won't work with all of our heart as unto the Lord (Col. 3:23). We won't seek to serve, but to be served. We may even do harm from time to time.²¹

But that's why Christ died for our sins. That's why he's redeemed us. And even in the midst of our sin, he wants to redeem our work for the good of others and the glory of his great name. And if we want to see that happen, we need to depend on God in our work.

Conclusion

You don't have to view your work as secular or as a necessary evil. And you certainly don't have to leave your work and go into full-time ministry to serve God. God has called you to the work that you're doing. It's sacred. And he wants to use it to provide for the needs of the world. And he wants you to view your work as a way to love your neighbor as Christ has loved you, with service and sacrifice.

May God be glorified in the work of his people.

²⁰ Veith, "The Glory of God Alone," p.187

²¹ Veith, "The Glory of God Alone," pp. 187-188