

Work-Ship Lesson 8: Knowing God's General Will for Your Work

Just Tell Me Already

Ice Breakers: *(Use one or more of the following topics to begin a discussion.)*

1. Give them a puzzle without the box-top picture and have them attempt to put the picture together. You can create multiple groups. One with the picture, one with the wrong picture and one with no picture and have them compete to put the pictures together.
2. Tell us how you became employed at your job. Did you apply? Did you interview? Did they recruit you? Who did you ask for advice when taking the position? Did you pray about it? What made you decide to take the job?
3. Are there jobs that a Christian cannot do? Which ones? Why?

A Story

Shannon is an engineering student with the option of two different internships this summer. One is for a major private defense contractor. The other one would be working for a branch of the U.S. military intelligence community. Both internships would be impressive resume builders. Both employers are actively recruiting her. Both want her to work for them and are going to great lengths to make their opportunity appear to be the best opportunity. There is even the possibility of one of these internships turning into a career after graduation.

However; there are a couple of issues with them. The U.S. government job is highly classified. Shannon doesn't know what she will be doing. She will have to sign extensive legally binding non-disclosure forms. She doesn't know what she would do if she arrives to her job and it is a project that she finds objectionable. She doesn't want to do anything that would conflict with her Christian beliefs. The problem with the classified job is that she won't know if it conflicts before it is too late for her to back out. It probably doesn't, but she still wants the freedom to decide after she knows what it is.

In the defense contractor job she knows what she will be doing. She will be working on a brand new type of RADAR technology that will make naval ships less vulnerable to terrorist attacks. She is certain that this project is something that she can't put her whole heart into and it aligns with her beliefs. She loves the fact that it has a protective and defensive purpose. The problem is with the larger company. This particular defense contractor has been known to research, design and develop weapons that are definitely outside of what Shannon believes are good and even necessary. The company doesn't believe that it has a moral obligation for its products. It believes that only the end users are morally obligated to use them in a good way. Shannon isn't sure that she can overlook the larger company and just concentrate on her specific project.

Discussion:

1. Have you ever found out that the company you work for is doing things that are wrong?
How did you handle that situation?

2. As a Christian how should we react when our non-Christian employers are doing unchristian things?
3. Does it matter what your company stands for ~~or just in light of~~ what your specific job is?
4. What advice would you give Shannon?

A New Question

We have been concentrating on the idea that work is good. No matter what we are doing (except for blatant sin) we can do it as worship toward God. Any type of work is ultimately valuable in its relation to God. This is because the image of God can shine through us as we work. We can work like God works. We can work in obedience to God's command toward humanity to work. We can acknowledge our dependence upon God as we work in His creation and with the skills He has given us. And we work in community being a model of the Trinity in action. We have established that work can be worship. So with that said, what should we be doing?

Occupational mobility is a relatively recent development brought by the Industrial revolution. Historically, occupations were not a matter of personal decisions. You did what your father did before you. The sons of carpenters were carpenters. The sons of farmers were farmers. Boys went into the family business. It was not just an expectation. It was merely a fact. Today some people experience pressure from their parents to choose the same line of work that they have chosen. Fathers still want and encourage their sons to take over the family business. This is not what I'm talking about. In previous times there really were not options for occupations. It was occupationally static for all males. I have been intentionally sexist in my description because there were even fewer choices for women.

Some rare moments the community would call on a specifically gifted individual into a different line of service. Every once and awhile a father could arrange special training for a son in a different occupation. Some people would be chosen by the elders to go into religion. But these were not matters of personal decisions. The individual never had to wrestle with the question of, "what should I do?"

Scripture is written in this context of static occupations. Farmers remained farmers and slaves typically remained slaves. Soldiers were soldiers. Tax collectors stayed tax collectors. The best Christian theological development on work can be seen in the idea of vocation. However; most of the thinking was initiated by John Calvin and finalized from within the European feudal system. The feudal system is still a context of basically static occupations. Allow me to summarize traditional Christian medieval thinking on work. An omnipotent and omniscient God has divinely ordered the entire world down to the minutia of detail. This order includes your station in His created realm. Where God has placed you is exactly where God wants you. To question your occupation is to question the very plan of God. But today things have changed. So what guidance can we find from God for the occupational context in which we find ourselves?

Even in Scriptures that were written in a static environment we can apply some of the principles to our new found freedom in the world of work. First of all, let's look at one verse that encourages change.

1 Corinthians 7:21 ~~Were you called while a slave? It should not be a concern to you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity. (NIV) Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so.~~

Although, slavery was more than just an occupation in Ancient Roman culture, it was at its core a type of work. This verse does two specific things. First, it allows people to be content in a less than optimal work environment. If you are forced into work and working conditions that are not perfect, it is okay. In other places Paul will even encourage you to do your best in bad situations. But second, it says that if we do have the opportunity to pursue a working situation that is better than our current condition we should. It is okay to be downtrodden if you can't change your circumstances, but if you can, go for it. The Scriptures allow for us to move but how should we decide to do that?

Discussion:

1. If there are many available and good options for us, how do we decide what specifically to do?
2. Does God care what type of work we do?
3. Should we seek God's guidance in our career and job choices?
4. What does that guidance look like?

Every Christian's General Calling

Every part of every Christian's life is challenged by the basics of their faith. Every Christian's occupation must also come under the influence of their Christianity. You must work as a Christian should work. An in-depth look at what it means to be a Christian is a grand topic that is outside of this endeavor. For the interest of time (with the hope that I'm not being too cliché) I will summarize the Christian faith by the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Matthew 22:37-39 (HCSB) He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Everything we do must fall within the parameters of a healthy worshipful, loving, relationship with God. And nothing we do should interfere with our love of others.

Discussion:

1. What are some jobs that might get in the way of you loving God? Why?
2. What are some jobs that might get in the way of you loving others? How?
3. Have you ever had a job that seemed to interfere with your Christian walk? Describe it for us.

Matthew 28:18-20 (HCSB) Then Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

We are commissioned by Jesus into the world to make disciples. Jesus sends us to baptize and teach others to follow his name. These instructions should be the guiding principle for our lives as Christians. But how does this verse relate to work? How do we apply it to our everyday occupations?

First, our jobs must not prevent us from carrying out the Great Commission. This might be a little difficult to imagine. I’m not talking about jobs that take up your time and have certain limitations on your social interactions in the work environment. All jobs have a time requirement that prioritizes what we can accomplish during the work and what we cannot. I am talking about a job that would lower your ability to communicate the Gospel accurately to others; a job that hurts your testimony or credibility. It could also be jobs that are so mobile or isolating that we are not able to interact with others in a normal way. Just for a somewhat exaggerated example, a job where you are the only person inhabiting a weather reporting station in Antarctica might be a job that prevents you from fulfilling the Great Commission.

Second, our jobs should help us in completing the Great Commission. Now this is a bit easier to explain. Most work, if examined properly, would and could be viewed as a benefit to completing the Great Commission. Most work will place you in a context that would not otherwise be available to you. As you work you go places you would not normally go. As you go you can take the Gospel with you. Most work brings you into contact with people that you would have never met otherwise. As you work, you meet people. With some of these people, whether co-workers, clients or customers, you have the opportunity to build a relationship. As you build that relationship you will have opportunities to share the Gospel with them. We are going to look at some passages that describe Paul’s missionary lifestyle and how his work as a tent-maker is a great example of how you can use your profession to help share your faith.

Acts 18: 1 – 4 (NIV) After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. After this, he left Athens and went to Corinth, where he found a Jewish man named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul came to them, and being of the same occupation, stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks.

The first item to note is that Luke refers to Aquila as a Jew. From this introduction it is proper to assume that at the time of Paul meeting Aquila in Corinth, Aquila was not yet a follower of Jesus. However, later in Scripture, we see that Aquila and his wife Priscilla become, “co-workers” with Paul for the sake of the Gospel. Paul uses the work environment to lead someone

to Christ and disciple them. Their relationship was more than likely initiated over their share^d trade and grew from there.

Acts 20:34-35 (NIV) ~~You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”~~ You yourselves know that these hands have provided for my needs and for those who were with me. In every way I’ve shown you that by laboring like this, it is necessary to help the weak and to keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, for He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

The second item to note is that our work gives us the ability to bless those in need. Being able to help the weak demonstrates the validity of the words of Jesus. The Gospel is shown to be powerful when we help others through the resources we gain because of our work. Ministering to others’ needs doesn’t make the Gospel true, but it does help others see the truth of the Gospel. Ministering to others’ needs does not validate the message of God, but it helps validate us as God’s messengers.

1 Corinthians 9:15-18 (NIV) ~~But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.~~ But I have used none of these rights, and I have not written this to make it happen that way for me. For it would be better for me to die than for anyone to deprive me of my boast! For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because an obligation is placed on me. And woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward, but if unwillingly, I am entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my authority in the gospel.

1 Thessalonians 2:9 (NIV) ~~Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God’s gospel to you.~~

In Corinth and ~~Thessalonica~~ Thessalonica, we see that Paul chose to work so that the Gospel could be preached to the lost without cost. He did not want to burden those without Christ with having to pay for the blessing of hearing about Him. This idea of funding the Gospel with resources outside of the ministry allows for the Gospel to be preached in places that would never pay for it themselves. We share the faith, not to those who are willing to invest in it already, we share the Gospel with anyone and everyone. We share the Gospel wherever, no matter how much money is available. Grace is a free gift. The preaching of the Gospel to those who need to hear it should be as well.

Discussion:

1. Have you ever rationalized a job to make it fit into your Christian faith when it was actually interfering with your fulfillment of the Great Commandment or the Great Commission? Describe that situation to us.
2. How could your work help you fulfill the Great Commission?
3. What would it take from you for one of your ~~Do you have~~ work colleagues ~~that may to~~ become disciples of Jesus?
4. How could your work ~~Do you work so that you can~~ support others sharing the Gospel?
5. How could your ~~Do you have a~~ job ~~that could~~ support you on the mission field?

Conclusion

Deciding what to do for work is now an important decision in every Christian's life. This decision is an opportunity to imagine ways that we can fulfil the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Moving Forward

1. Find your company's mission, vision, and/or purpose statements. Is there anything in your company's intentions that seem to be antagonistic to the Great Commandment or the Great Commission? If yes, what are you willing to do about it?
2. Spend time this week to specifically outline ways your job helps you fulfil the Great Commission. Include finances, relationships and opportunities that you would not otherwise have if not for your job. Also, include improved skills or character traits because of your job that you can use to fulfil the Great Commission.