

Trust God, Not the Outcome

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It was in a school staff meeting about ten years ago that I first began to think seriously about vocation; a colleague had observed that, at our Christian school, instruction about vocation was largely absent. The comment piqued my curiosity because I was used to hearing the term in the context of someone attending a “vocational school” or “trade school.” When I had interviewed for employment at the school, I was asked if I felt “called to teach,” but other than that, my experience with the word “vocation” seemed more closely related to a job or career than a seemingly intangible calling. Because I was teaching high school seniors at the time, I felt compelled to investigate this possible gap in the curriculum. My initial thoughts were directed to the practical: surely there must be career interest surveys that our students could use to investigate a potential path to employment or to help in choose a major in college. But I soon realized that this, while practical, did not begin to encompass the idea of vocation, and as I began to read resources from people of faith, I became aware that there was not merely a gap in our curriculum, but there was a crucial element missing in the spiritual education we were offering our students. And so, while it took several years to plan, gain approval and funds, and then implement, eventually “Life Calling” became a one-semester Bible course for the 12th graders at our school.

However, what began as an academic endeavor soon found its way into the personal. As a teacher, I have regularly sensed that God is teaching me as I teach my students (and He quite often uses my students to do this!). This journey into vocation was no different—even as I

sought to bring vocation to my students, God was holding up a mirror so that I might engage in serious self-reflection and conversation with Him about my own vocation. When insecurity and discouragement seemed to prevail, He reminded me of an essential vocational truth: if one is “called,” then they ultimately work for the one who called them. While I could not please everyone around me, I could be faithful to the One who called me, relying on His strength. When I learned about the Work with Purpose Colloquium offered at Bethel Seminary San Diego, I knew that I needed to participate; I was thrilled at the opportunity to be part of a larger discussion about vocation with professors and fellow seminary students.

As I read Amy L. Sherman’s *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*, I saw the wider vision of vocation pictured in the Bible. For the Christian, vocation is not merely about a paycheck or employment, though there is a practical element to vocation, and it is not merely about self-fulfillment, though there is satisfaction and joy to be found in vocation. In the introduction to the book, Sherman discusses a verse she considers key to the idea of vocation: “When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices.”¹ Sherman goes on to say that the righteous people in this verse “view their prosperity not as a means of self-enrichment...but rather as a vehicle for blessing others...they steward everything...for the common good, for the advancing of God’s justice and shalom.”² With this in mind, it is clear that envy or resentment of others’ success has no place here; the flourishing of the righteous brings about the flourishing of the whole community and everyone benefits.

¹ Proverbs 11:10, *New International Version*.

² Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downer’s Grove, InterVarsity, 2011), 17.

If this kind of flourishing and rejoicing is going to happen in our communities, Sherman emphasizes that churches need a more comprehensive view of what they should be aiming for and they need to take vocation more seriously.³ She calls for churches to learn vocational stewardship so that they intentionally and strategically deploy “vocational power—knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills, and reputation—to advance foretastes of God’s kingdom.”⁴ She then specifically describes these foretastes of God’s kingdom as justice (rescue, equity, and restoration)⁵ and shalom (peace with God, peace with self, peace with others, and peace with creation).⁶ While most Christians tend to integrate their faith through work in one of four areas, Sherman calls for Christians to combine the areas of ethics, evangelism, enrichment, and experience in order to bring about the healthiest form of integration.⁷ Sherman also advocates action and practicality in her vision for vocational stewardship;⁸ however, she is clear that “doing” is not enough; we must cultivate character⁹ and imitate God’s way of stewarding power by sharing it with others.¹⁰

Admittedly, Sherman’s many examples and stories of Christians who are working for the common good of their communities were uncomfortable for me; they are inspiring and beautiful, but I tend more towards thought than action, and more towards comfort than risk. But the greater vision of vocational stewardship resonated with me. As a teacher, when school

³ Sherman, 19-20.

⁴ Sherman, 20.

⁵ Sherman, 28-32.

⁶ Sherman, 33-43.

⁷ Sherman, 93-95.

⁸ Sherman, 151-222; for example, her four pathways of “bloom where you are planted,” “donate your skills,” “launch your own social enterprise,” and “participate in your church’s targeted initiative.”

⁹ Sherman, 130-136; key character traits: servanthood, responsibility, courage, and humility

¹⁰ Sherman, 136-138; recognizing the gifts of others and sharing power with them.

begins anew every autumn, I have felt almost as if I was embarking on a missions trip; and just as my church prayed for and “sent” missionaries, there was something inside me that was a little disappointed that my church did not pray for and “send” me out into the new school year. Sherman’s idea of vocational stewardship validated my desire to have my church join in my work, but it also lifted my eyes from myself to the people around me. It seemed clear that my church should pray for teachers, and it is easy to see that a community would rejoice when teachers and students flourish. But then I began to think about the people sitting next to me in church. Do I pray for the work of my friend who is a mechanic? Do I see how God is present in the work of the grocery store clerk who sat across from me at Bible study? I can certainly see the good that my midwife sister-in-Christ is doing, but her work does not ebb and flow like a teacher’s does, with a clear beginning and ending each year. So, when do I remember to pray for her?

Somehow it seemed that God had entrusted all these thoughts and books and discussions about vocation to me so that I would actually *do* something about it. I began talking with my pastor and other leaders in my church about implementing a vocational ministry at my church. After surveying the congregation, we divided up various vocations into 12 categories (for example, “construction & physical trades,” “business & finance,” “medicine & health,” and “arts & communication”); once a month during the church service we recognize and thank the people who work in that field for the ways in which they benefit our community and bring about human flourishing. Then, someone who works in or is retired from that field prays specifically for their co-laborers. As I continue to coordinate this ministry and help write the monthly prayers,

God is opening my eyes to the many ways He is using all kinds of people doing all kinds of work to give our community a reason to rejoice and to bring Him glory.

Brad Hewitt's and James Moline's *Your New Money Mindset: Create a Healthy Relationship with Money* offered perspective on my relationship with money—specifically “our everyday attitudes and actions toward money—how we think and feel about money, and how we use or misuse it.”¹¹ With insight and humility, Hewitt and Moline admit that they have not been immune to incorrect attitudes toward money; after all, “consumerism is the air we all breathe.”¹² Their wisdom, perspective, and experience challenged me to think about my attitude toward money. I had previous knowledge regarding things like the practical necessity of budgeting and what the Bible had to say about money. However, Hewitt and Moline's challenge to “break free from consumerism” was very timely. They write, “Without changing our inner attitude towards money, it's unlikely we will succeed in remaking our outward behaviors.”¹³ This fits well with things God has been showing my family and me regarding our possessions and habits; while I can see the behaviors that I want to change or adjust, their reminder to first step back and evaluate one's heart and attitude toward money was timely.

There were two particularly valuable resources in this book. The “5S Attitudes Toward Money” (surviving, struggling, stable, secure, surplus) was helpful not only to assess where I am in my “money relationship,” but also to show that there is room for growth.¹⁴ My view of money was more of a “pass/fail” perspective (which does not give much hope if one is failing). This

¹¹ Brad Hewitt and James Moline, *Your New Money Mindset: Create a Healthy Relationship with Money* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2015), 5.

¹² Hewitt and Moline, 6.

¹³ Hewitt and Moline, 25.

¹⁴ Hewitt and Moline, 27.

spectrum demonstrates that there is a way forward, and that feeling confident and secure about money is not the pinnacle; the goal is movement toward the “surplus” group, believing that what they have is enough and are ready to share with others. The “New Money Mindset Assessment” was another valuable tool not only because it revealed information about my relationship with money, but also because the questions in the assessment were specifically addressed throughout the rest of the book.

The contrast between a mindset of scarcity versus a mindset of surplus was eye-opening for me. In the chapter on “Living in Community,” Hewitt and Moline quote Thomas Brooks: “The best way to gather is to scatter.”¹⁵ They explain, “Deeply ingrained in our sensibilities is the desire to hang on to ‘my’ stuff for a proverbial rainy day. But we have also discovered this: whenever we tighten our grasp, we invariably lose our grip.”¹⁶ I realized that I often tend toward a mindset of scarcity, which leads me to hold on to things tightly; yet, my grip on things, even if motivated by a desire to prepare for the future, is likely directed by either fear or discontent—neither of which leads to a heart attitude of generosity.

In the chapter on “Living in Contentment,” Hewitt and Moline discuss tithing as they write, “Remember, giving from a surplus mindset is not linked to how much money you have; rather, it is choosing to lead with generosity in all forms.”¹⁷ The phrase “lead with generosity” stood out to me because that is the attitude that I dearly want to have. My husband and I are in the midst of a significant change in our finances. As we are still figuring out how to make a budget work with unexpected changes, we agree that we want to increase our tithing, but have

¹⁵ Hewitt and Moline, 122.

¹⁶ Hewitt and Moline, 125.

¹⁷ Hewitt and Moline, 159.

been having trouble with the timing of it. "Leading with generosity" kept echoing in my mind as we were discussing it and I shared with my husband the surplus mindset in Hewitt and Moline's book. We decided that even though a balanced family budget depends on some variables we cannot control right now, we could "lead with generosity" and increase our tithe by 1%. While there is still some uncertainty about how this is all going to work out, there is also a sense of great freedom as we trust God to continue to shape our hearts as He provides for us.

Tim Keller's and Katherine Leary Alsdorf's *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* gives a comprehensive view of vocation, showing God's good plan for work, sin's destructive effect on work, and how the gospel transforms work. Beginning by showing the inherent design and dignity of work, Keller and Alsdorf point out that work itself is not a curse, nor a demeaning necessity.¹⁸ Rather, we were built for work; work gives us freedom and reflects God's image in us.¹⁹ The Christian perspective of vocation offers us a unique insight: God invites us to join with Him, to "carry on His pattern of work"²⁰ as we bring order to chaos, cultivate community, and make culture.²¹ Our work becomes our service to God, not because He needs us, but because He invites us to join with Him. The gospel becomes truly "good news" in our work because we are freed "from the relentless pressure of having to prove ourselves and secure our identity through work, for we are already proven and secure" because of Jesus. This perspective of work takes our eyes off of ourselves and frees us to see work in a new way: "all

¹⁸ Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 30.

¹⁹ Keller and Alsdorf, 35.

²⁰ Keller and Alsdorf, 47.

²¹ Keller and Alsdorf, 48, 50.

work now becomes a way to love the God who saved us freely, and by extension, a way to love our neighbor."²²

With God's design for work clearly established, Keller and Alsdorf examine how the Fall has distorted work and frustrated human efforts. Although our work is often fruitless and even a failure, God offers us deep consolation in His ultimate redemption of all things.²³ While our work is often pointless, Ecclesiastes reminds us that satisfaction in our work is a gift from God and comes through the balance of both toil and tranquility.²⁴ Our work in this fallen world often comes from a desire for self-glorification and reveals our own "idols," but the gospel changes everything, giving hope—even in the midst of work that is fruitless, pointless, and selfish.²⁵

There were numerous quotes and stories in Keller and Alsdorf's book, yet one particular image—J.R.R. Tolkien's short story, "Leaf by Niggle"—stands out as particularly meaningful to me. Tolkien, feeling discouragement and despair in his own work, writes the story of a painter named Niggle. Niggle had a particular picture in mind that he wanted to paint; he envisioned first a leaf, then a tree, and then, beyond that, a forest and mountains topped with snow. Niggle, knowing that a "necessary long journey" (death) was near, began to paint; he fussed and fiddled over a single leaf, but no matter how hard he worked, could not get much else on the canvas. In addition, he was frequently interrupted by neighbors who needed assistance, and Niggle kindly complied. When death comes for Niggle, he weeps over his unfinished work and his painting

²² Keller and Alsdorf, 63.

²³ Keller and Alsdorf, 89-90; in reading this, I was reminded of Elisabeth Elliot's *These Strange Ashes*—an account of her year in the jungle of Ecuador; at the end of the year, all of her language notes were stolen and at the same time her fiancé's year-long construction of missions buildings were washed away by a flood; Elisabeth writes, "Of one thing I am perfectly sure: God's story never ends with ashes."

²⁴ Keller and Alsdorf, 106-107.

²⁵ Keller and Alsdorf, 149.

"Leaf: by Niggle" was hung and then forgotten in the town museum. As Niggle enters the afterlife, the voices of Justice and Mercy debate his fate; Mercy, citing Niggle's kindness, wins. When Niggle arrives in heaven, he sees "his" tree; the tree that he had envisioned stood perfect and complete, and Niggle, in awe, declares, "It is a gift!"²⁶ Keller and Alsdorf comment, "[Niggle] finds that his tree, in full detail and finished, was not just a fancy of his that had died with him, No, it was indeed part of the True Reality that would live and be enjoyed forever."²⁷

Tolkien's story is deeply moving to me because I can identify with Niggle. I am not a painter, but as a teacher, I am always updating and revising my lessons and curriculum. Each new school year is a welcome opportunity to fiddle with and edit aspects of the course or include new material. As the school year was drawing to a close this past spring, my husband and I sensed that God was leading me to resign from my teaching job. At first I thought that I would return for one final year, and I looked forward to "finishing well;" I thought that, with the knowledge that the end was near, I would finish writing curriculum and several other projects I was working on. But when the school year ended, my husband and I knew that this was also an unexpected ending for my work as well. It was a new experience for me in grieving my work and wrestling with many questions related to my vocation. There was a sense of leaving things unfinished—ideas and personal projects left incomplete—and a sense of wondering if the work I did for 17 years mattered at all (Would anyone continue the things I had started? Would all my work be wasted?). Like Niggle who remained focused on getting one leaf just right, my work was

²⁶ Keller and Alsdorf, 10-12.

²⁷ Keller and Alsdorf, 13.

often focused on minutia, and yet both Niggle and I had a vision for something much more grand and all-encompassing.

It is to these kinds of questions and griefs that Keller and Alsdorf speak words of truth and hope in the last section of their book. Because of the gospel, there is a new story for work in which the Christian worldview gives a changed perspective on culture and every field of work;²⁸ because of the gospel, there is a new concept of work in which, through common grace, all image-bearers of God are called to wholly participate in work and culture.²⁹ Because of the gospel, there is a new compass for work, operating within a different set of virtues, guided by wisdom, and always keeping human dignity at the forefront;³⁰ and because of the gospel, there is a new power for work whose passion is sourced in God Himself, seeks genuine rest in Him, and knows that true satisfaction awaits in our "true country, the new heavens and the new earth."³¹ This is the kind of good news that is rest for weary hearts and strength for broken bodies; it is the kind of good news that pervades the deep longing for meaning that is overshadowed by failure and selfishness; and it is the kind of good news that gives dignity to our work and hope for our future as we live before the Audience of One.

²⁸ Keller and Alsdorf, 184.

²⁹ Keller and Alsdorf, 189.

³⁰ Keller and Alsdorf, 208, 215.

³¹ Keller and Alsdorf, 250.

References

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