

## Every Career is a Sacred Calling

Romans 16:21-23

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How do you view your job? Is it an exciting vocation, a tiring burden, or a mindless chore? The apostle Paul wants to invite you to reexamine your relationship to work, and accept the divine calling God has given you. God has placed each of us in a work situation for a reason, and He wants us to honor Him through our work ethic, diligence, and creativity in incorporating gospel themes into our tasks. Stephen Davey uses scriptural analysis and real-life examples to help us redefine what our “vocation” really is.

In one of Chuck Swindoll’s books, he retells the humorous, anonymous testimony of someone who was overworked and tired of it and wrote a book about it. The author of the book wrote: “I’m tired. For several years I’ve been blaming it on my weight, my diet, my middle age, a lack of vitamins, air pollution, water pollution and a dozen other things that have worn me out. But I’ve discovered that it’s none of those things. I’m tired because I’m overworked—and I’ve finally figured out why.

The population of this country is 350 million, but 148 million are retired. That leaves 202 million to do all the work. But there are 161 million in school, which leaves 41 million to do the work. The problem is, 22 million of those are employed by the federal government and another 14.8 million are employed by state and city governments, and none of them are doing any work, which leaves us with 4.2 million people left.

4 million of them are serving around the world in the military, so that leaves 200,000 people to do all the work, but 188,000 of them are sick and in the hospital, so that leaves 12,000 people. But there are 11,998 people in prison, so that leaves just 2 people to do all the work, and you’re sitting there reading my book ... no wonder I’m tired.”

Adapted from Charles Swindoll, *Tale of the Tardy Ox Cart* (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 319

Maybe you can identify: you’re overworked and underpaid and tired!

You probably know someone on the job who decided they were tired of work and they spent more time getting out of work than actually working. That makes your job even harder!

Businesses estimate that the average American gets paid for 40 hours of work, but only works 30, at most.

Don't misunderstand: the Bible doesn't recommend that Christians become workaholics.

But the Bible reveals a distinctive work ethic for Christians. Christians are to actually work hard enough on the job to get tired.

**The apostle Paul told the Colossian believers** exactly how they were to show up and work on the job. He writes this:

*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ... You are serving the Lord.*

*Colossians 3:23-24*

Do your work **heartily**. The Greek word can be translated “energetically or diligently.”

Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, [Linguistic Key to the New Testament](#) (Regency, 1976), p. 582

In fact, buried in this compound word is the transliterated word **zest**.

How often do we show up at work with the thought, “I’m going to work with zest today”? Sounds like a soap commercial! “Show up at the job with zest!” Who does that?

If you showed up like that, somebody is bound to pull you aside and say, “Settle down, you’re making the rest of us look bad!”

**But God's word offers this advice in Ecclesiastes 9:**

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your your might.

*Ecclesiastes 9:10*

The trouble is, the average Christian does not consider their job to be a sacred calling from God.

Most Christians think, “Preachers and missionaries have a sacred calling, not me.”

By the Middle Ages, a key concept about employment had been buried as the priesthood of the Catholic church rose to elevated status.

The priests alone could read the Bible; they alone could interpret the Bible; and they alone worked for God; their jobs were sacred, and the rest of the world was secular.

This created a false distinction which effectively eroded the joy and purpose of simple labor.

But the Reformation resurrected this concept inherent in the Latin word *vocatio*, which gives us our word “vocation.”

It means, “a calling.” More specifically it came to refer to “a calling from God; a sacred calling.”

And that’s the biblical truth. God designed certain work for you to do that would bring you joy and bring Him glory.

Every vocation is to be considered a sacred calling from God.

We talk about pastors and missionaries being called into the ministry, but have you ever thought about the fact that your sacred calling is to be a teacher, a plumber, a doctor, a salesman, a mechanic, a homemaker, an artist, a musician, or a lab technician?

God is at work, through you, in whatever your hand finds to do. So do it with everything you’ve got.

As the Reformation began to expand in Europe, Martin Luther, the converted monk, attempted to settle the matter. He wrote this:

“God Himself is milking the cows through the *vocation* of the milkmaid.”

Gene Edward Veith, *The Doctrine of Vocation* (Modern Reformation, May/June, 1999)

Luther also wrote this:

“All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in government—these are the masks of God, behind which He is hidden and accomplishes all things.”

Ibid

The apostle Paul instructed Titus to inform the believing church that their employment was to be viewed as an opportunity to demonstrate that they understood they were not working for earthly supervisors, but on assignment by, and in honor of, their Savior.

In fact, Paul further wrote that our jobs become the canvass where we paint the beauty of Christ and His gospel. Paul wrote this in the context of employment:

*... so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.*

*Titus 2:10*

The word “**adorn**” is *cosmeo* which gives us our word “cosmetics.”

In other words, our jobs display the beauty and glory and grace of the gospel of our Lord.

So, your job isn’t just an assignment; it’s a divinely directed appointment.

It’s your embassy post, where you display the character and beauty of Christ.

What Paul is saying is what the Reformation reignited. This is the higher motive for work, even when it’s tiring.

This is what Paul emphasized: we’re not just serving our supervisor, our company; we are serving Christ.

This changes everything about the tasks we’re given, no matter what they are.

One author put it this way:

“The homemaker cooks a meal as if Jesus Christ were going to eat it; she cleans the house as if Jesus Christ were the honored guest. Doctors treat patients and nurses care for them as if they were the Lord; salesmen help clients, shop assistants serve customers, accountants audit books and secretaries type letters as if in each case they were serving the Lord.”

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians* (Crossway, 1990), p. 208

Understanding that you have been called by God into *your* sacred vocation makes that cubicle, that desk, that laundry room, that classroom, that boardroom, that repair shop, that office nothing less than a holy of holies where God touches earth.

If you want to introduce your world to Jesus Christ, it won’t be through a series of sermons no one comes to hear; it will be through hardworking employees people can’t help but notice.

One historian wrote back in 1908:

“The great mission of Christianity in the first 300 years was accomplished, not by evangelists, but by the mere existence of persistent activity of the individual Christian who became an informal missionary”

Adapted from Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. and ed. James Moffatt, vol. 1 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1908), 368.

Ordinary, everyday people, thousands of anonymous Christians down through the ages have used their place of employment as a bridge for the gospel to ride into their world.

These ordinary people reminded me of the apostle Paul, wrapping up his inspired letters, mentioning different people by name. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul writes in chapter 16 and verse 21:

*Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you.*

*Romans 16:21*

Now, yes, Timothy was a pastor and a missionary pioneer who served with Paul.

But if you're older in the faith, you know that Timothy was influenced by a spiritually single mother. In other words, Timothy's father was an unbeliever, according to Acts 16.

But Timothy's mother, Eunice, poured into his life the truth of the Scriptures. Living in their home, evidently, was Timothy's grandmother, who also played a huge role in his spiritual instruction.

**Paul wrote this in a letter to Timothy:**

*I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well.*

*2 Timothy 1:5*

Two women who took parenting and grandparenting as a sacred calling and they influenced *one* little boy.

This is a wonderful reminder that the absence of a godly father in the home does not limit God's work in a child's heart.

The work of grace is not determined by genetics; faith does not depend on your family tree.

A little further now in Paul's letter to the Romans, he allows someone interesting to insert their own greeting, in **verse 22**.

*I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.*

*Romans 16:22*

We would typically say that Paul wrote the Book of Romans. Technically Paul dictated the Book of Romans, and a man named Tertius wrote it down.

Some Bible scholars believe that Paul suffered from vision problems so he needed a secretary, so to speak.

But what an honor for Paul to effectively say to this volunteer: “Tertius, why don’t you add your own greeting before we close the letter.”

And the Holy Spirit moved Paul to do this because this was such a significant surprise.

The name “Tertius” isn’t a proper name. It’s a number. It means “Third.”

In a well-to-do Roman household—think Downton Abby or Buckingham Palace—there were a number of maids and footmen and gardeners and cooks.

The men were known by a number rather than a name, and the number indicated their rank in the household. They carried that designation with them everywhere.

The head butler would be Primus (Number 1); the next in line would be “Secundus,” or the second man.

In **Acts 20, Paul greets a man named Secundus.**

So Tertius was the number three man—a household servant, an ordinary gardener, or chef, or farmhand, we’re not told. But he knew how to write and he had become a believer and volunteered to write for Paul.

**Now Paul passes on the greetings of two more men in verse 23:**

*Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.*

*Romans 16:23*

**Quartus** is another number; he’s the fourth highest ranking household servant. And notice that Paul calls him here “**our brother.**”

Let me tell you, Paul is sending a clear message, another reformation message: “The ground at the foot of the cross is level.” The city treasurer and the servant were brothers. The apostle and the farm hand were brothers.

There was no sacred calling for apostles, or pastors, any more than there was a sacred calling for the number four man who showed up to church in his work clothes.

Now here in verse 23, Paul mentioned this man named **Erastus.**

Paul identifies him here as “**the city treasurer.**” From what we know now of the first century, in today’s culture, Erastus would have had the title, “*Chief Financial Officer and Overseer of Public Works and Buildings.*”

Since Paul is writing this letter from Corinth, Erastus is one of the leading town planners for the city of Corinth.

If you wanted to build a church building in Corinth, you would have to make an appointment with Erastus.

In 1929, excavations in Corinth uncovered an inscription on limestone paving in Corinth, dating back to the first century, and it refers to Erastus. The inscription reads: “Erastus, in return for his position as magistrate, laid the pavement here at his own expense.”

Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson, *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity* (Hendrickson, 2017), p. 1552

So, here’s an employee of the city, a city planner, not only serving as a volunteer in the church in Corinth, but he is so respected by his community that they honored him for laying new paving stones downtown.

And he was so committed to city improvements and excellence in his role that he paid for that stretch of pavement out of his own financial resources.

He used his job to build a bridge of distinction and credibility and integrity and self-sacrifice, which ultimately honored the Lord.

That kind of work ethic, that kind of service to the community, that kind of employee leaves behind a legacy of light, and Paul wanted everyone to know what Erastus did for a living.

He used his job to bring honor to his Lord.

That kind of legacy would be imitated by Robert Alexander Laidlaw. After he was born in Scotland in 1885, his parents immigrated to New Zealand.

At the age of 16, Robert became a clerk in a hardware store. That same year he heard R. A. Torrey preach, and he gave his life to Christ.

Three years later he began serving as a hardware salesman, serving mostly rural farmers. He met and married a young lady who also loved Christ, she was the sister of Harry Ironside, an evangelist who eventually became the pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, in 1929. Robert and his wife raised three children, one of whom became a rather famous toy maker in New Zealand.

Robert came up with the practical idea of developing a catalogue system where farmers could place their orders. In America, the same idea had taken off under the leadership of two men whose last names were Sears and Roebuck.

The idea took off in New Zealand as well, and within a few years, Robert was the CEO of what became known as the Farmer’s Trading Company. They eventually developed a nationwide chain of stores that serviced the catalogue business.

In today’s terminology, Robert became a multi-millionaire.

He was committed to giving his wealth to evangelistic causes. By the age of 40, Laidlaw had already begun giving 50% of his income away.

He served as the chairman of a local Bible School, which in 2008 was renamed Laidlaw College in honor of his leadership.

But he wasn't satisfied with simply giving money to gospel efforts.

With the help of another man, they used the idea of the mail order catalogue system to begin sending Sunday school lessons to children in rural areas.

They called it, "The Postal Sunday School Movement." Eventually, nearly 10,000 children were enrolled and received, by mail, free Bible literature that taught them the Bible.

But still, that wasn't all he did. Before he turned 30, he had grown concerned for all the customers and employees who were connected to the Farmer's Trading Company.

So as a salesman of farm machinery, he decided to write a tract, which soon became a small booklet. He wanted to offer illustrations for the existence of God, the credibility of the Bible and the truth about Christ's sacrifice.

I have given many of these booklets away over the years.

It's simply entitled, "The Reason Why."

It was first printed in 1913. I'd love to read to you the entire 64-page booklet, but I thought I'd give you just a few examples of his simple, yet profound illustrations.

On the importance of your soul, which lasts for eternity, Robert wrote this:

"Suppose that a young man sent his fiancée a diamond ring costing \$10,000 dollars, placing it in a little case which the jeweler supplied for free. How disappointed would he be, if upon meeting her a few days later, she says, 'Sweetheart, that was a lovely little box you sent me. I promise to keep it in a safe place.' Rather ridiculous, isn't it? Yet, it is just as foolish for men and women to be spending all their time and thought on their bodies, which are only cases containing the soul, which the Bible tells us will live [forever]. So pray, 'Lord, help me not to neglect my "diamond" by focusing merely on "the box."'"

A few pages later, Robert gives an illustration on the complexity and beauty of creation demanding the existence of a Creator; he quotes a famous biologist as he writes this: "The late professor Edwin Conklin, a noted biologist, very aptly said, 'The probability of life originating from accidents is comparable to the probability of William Chamber's Dictionary of the English Language resulting from an explosion in a print shop.'"

In another chapter Robert writes to someone who might feel it's unfair for God to judge them according to His law and holy standard. Robert writes:

“The traffic laws of Great Britain say that all drivers must drive on the left side of the street. But in America, the law of the road demands that a driver keeps to the right side. Now, suppose I go driving in London, but keep to the right side. On being brought before a judge, I say, ‘In the United States, the law allows me to drive on the right side.’ But the judge replies, ‘You are not being judged by the laws of America, but the law of this country.’ In the same way, God’s law is the only one by which I will be judged in eternity. The judgment will be based on what God has said, not what my friends say. God’s law awakens us to our guilt and need—it points us to the Savior who alone can redeem us from the curse of the law.”

With that, Robert deals with someone who might decide to simply turn over a new leaf, rather than admit past sin. He offers this illustration: “Suppose a manager of a business goes to his accountant and finds that his company owed \$50,000 to the manufacturers. He says to his accountant; ‘Write letters to all those people and tell them that we are not going to worry about the past, that we have turned a new page in our ledger and we promise to pay 100% for all future business.’ The accountant would think his employer has gone mad. Yet thousands of people are trying to get into heaven on such a proposal, offering to meet their obligations towards God for the future, but refusing to deal with the past. It is said that Jesus came to pay a debt He did not owe for us who owed a debt we could not pay. In His death, Jesus laid down His sinless life in our stead, settling once and for all, all the debt that we owe to God.”

One more illustration, which emphasized the free gift of salvation. Robert writes: “When you receive from Christ His righteousness, His gift is complete. You cannot add to it your own righteousness, which the Bible calls filthy rags. ‘But I don’t understand that,’ a cabinet maker said as his friend tried to explain the gift of salvation. Then an idea came to his friend, who lifting a sander, made as though he would sand the top of a beautifully polished table that stood nearby. ‘Stop!’ cried out the cabinet maker. ‘Can’t you see that table is finished? You’ll ruin it.’ His friend replied, ‘That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you about Christ’s work of redemption. If you try to add your work to His finished work, you’ll ruin it.’ Like a flash, the cabinet-maker saw the truth and received Jesus Christ into his life as Lord and Savior.”

The author was not a pastor, a professor or a Bible scholar; he was a sales rep for farming equipment—a man who cared about people he worked with on the job. He understood his sacred calling

Like Erastus, a town employee who paved a roadway and helped the church in Corinth gain credibility.

Like Tertius, who might've polished boots or tended gardens, but who volunteered to write down the Book of Romans.

Like a mother and a grandmother who taught the Scriptures to their little boy, who went on to become a household name.

Like them, Robert Laidlaw was a legacy of light who used his job, his position, his influence, his work ethic and his creativity to clearly, graciously, persistently spread the gospel of Christ to the world around him.

And let me say this in closing: besides the Bible and then Pilgrim's Progress, there is not any other single book or booklet which has sold more copies than "The Reason Why" by Robert Laidlaw.

After he wrote it, and then for the next 100 years, this single volume sold 50 million copies and was translated into 30 languages—and still counting to this day.

What could we do if we viewed our jobs as a canvass upon which to display the gospel and beauty of Christ?

- We might reach around the world.
- We might influence a town.
- We might influence one little boy as we accept from God our sacred calling today.

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# Study Guide

## Summary

Every career, not just those in formal ministry, is a sacred calling from God. The early church was filled with ordinary people—servants, city officials, mothers, and grandmothers—who each played a vital role in God’s mission. God is at work through us in every vocation, whether we are teachers, mechanics, homemakers, or city planners. Through historical examples like Erastus and modern ones like Robert Laidlaw, we can see our daily work as a holy assignment, a place where we can display the beauty of Christ and the gospel to the world. Ultimately, the legacy we leave is not determined by our job title, but by our faithfulness in using our work as a platform for God’s glory.

## Key Takeaways

- The idea that only pastors or missionaries have a “calling” is a distortion of biblical truth. God has uniquely placed each of us in our vocations—whether in an office, a classroom, a kitchen, or a workshop—to serve Him. When we approach our work as a divine appointment, even the most ordinary tasks become opportunities to honor God and reflect His character.
- Paul’s mention of people like Tertius, Quartus, and Erastus in Romans 16 shows that God values the contributions of those who serve behind the scenes. The gospel is adorned not just by sermons, but by the integrity, diligence, and excellence of believers in their daily work. Our faithfulness in small things can become a powerful testimony to those around us.
- In God’s kingdom, there is no hierarchy of importance based on job titles or social status. The city treasurer and the household servant are both called “brother” in Christ. This truth frees us from comparison and compels us to honor every role, knowing that God uses each one to accomplish His purposes.
- The story of Robert Laidlaw reminds us that God can use our creativity, resources, and work ethic to impact countless lives—even if we never stand behind a pulpit. Whether it’s a booklet, a paved road, or a word of encouragement, what we offer in faith can ripple out in ways we may never see. Our legacy is built not on fame, but on faithfulness.
- The examples of Timothy’s mother and grandmother, and the countless unnamed Christians throughout history, show that God delights in using ordinary people who are simply faithful where they are. You may never know the full impact of your prayers, your work, or your witness. But when you embrace your vocation as a sacred calling, you become a legacy of light in your world.

## Discussion Guide

### Bible Reading

- Romans 16:21-23
- Colossians 3:23-24
- Titus 2:10

### Observation Questions

1. In Romans 16:21-23, what kinds of people does Paul mention by name, and what are their roles or jobs?
2. According to Colossians 3:23-24, what attitude should Christians have toward their work, and who are they ultimately serving?

### Interpretation Questions

1. Why do you think Paul took the time to mention people like Tertius, Quartus, and Erastus in his letter to the Romans? What message does this send about the value of different kinds of work?
2. How does seeing your job as a “sacred calling” change the way you think about your daily tasks, even if they seem small or unnoticed?
3. What does it mean to “adorn the doctrine of God” through our work, as mentioned in Titus 2:10? How might this look in real life?

### Application Questions

1. Think about your current job, schoolwork, or daily responsibilities at home. In what ways have you seen these as “just work” instead of a calling from God? What would it look like to approach them as a sacred assignment this week?
2. The sermon gave examples of people like Erastus and Robert Laidlaw, who used their jobs to serve God and others. What is one practical way you could use your skills, position, or resources to bless someone or point them to Christ?
3. Robert Laidlaw’s influence reached far beyond what he could see, simply by being faithful in his work. Is there something you’re doing now that might have a bigger impact than you realize? How can you stay encouraged when you don’t see immediate results?