Ever feel like you’re facing that choice? Ever feel like you’re stuck in your job because of financial or other responsibilities? Ever wish you could do something different career-wise but it seems that the numbers and circumstances just wouldn’t work?

If so, you’re not alone. In fact, you’re in the
majority. For the past 15 years, The Gallup organization has conducted an annual poll to measure how employees feel about their job ... which isn’t so good.

**What they’ve discovered is that ...**

- Almost half of all employees could be described as “not engaged.” According to Gallup, they are “emotionally detached and unlikely to be self-motivated.”

- 2 of 10 could be labeled as “actively disengaged.” Gallup says these employees “view their workplaces negatively and are liable to spread that negativity to others.”

- That leaves only 3 of 10 employees who can
be described as “engaged” meaning “emotionally attached to their workplaces and motivated to be productive.”

And that breakdown has remained constant – within a percentage point or two – since Gallup started doing the survey in 2001 ... which means ... that it’s a safe bet that, for 7 out of 10 of us who are sitting here today, our job (assuming we have a job) is, to us, just a job.

- We go to work but we really don’t like what we’re doing.
- Or, we do like what we’re doing, but we don’t like the fact that we have to do it.

In the words of that great and wise sage “Lunch Money Lewis,” we work because “we got bills we gotta pay. So we’re gonna work, work, work every day.” Like it or not, we’ve got to put our heads down and slog on through because that’s just what it takes.
And if that’s where you are today – if you’re walking through “the valley of the shadow of occupational death” – my hope and prayer is that you will be inspired and encouraged by what you hear in the next half-hour or so.

A “Working” Theology

To accomplish that, we first need to step back and get a broader view of what the Bible says about work in general. We need to flesh out a “theology of work” that will serve as a framework not only for this message but for the others in this series as well.

So, I want to give you three principles that, I think, encompass a God-based view of work. I’ll also give you a heads up that these principles might require a radical shift in thinking for some of us.

Principle #1. Work is not a “necessary evil.” It is an institution ordained of God (along
If you look at the Bible from beginning to end and consider the institutional structures that God ordained for humans to embrace and support in every place in every culture and in every era of history, there are only a few ... and work is one of them.

That’s because men and women were created to work by design. It’s a reflection of who we are as beings made in the image of God. And God is a worker, which we discover in the first few pages of the Bible.

**Genesis 2:2 tells us that.**

*By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.*  
*Genesis 2:2 (NIV)*

And after that day of rest (which we learned several weeks ago wasn’t because God needed rest
but because He wanted to give humans a pattern to follow) ... after that day of rest, God resumed His work.

As Jesus once put it to the religious leaders of his day ... 

“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”

John 5:17 (NIV)

Genesis tells us that after this “working Father God” created humans, He gave them a similar assignment.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Genesis 2:15 (NIV)

“Take what I have created,” God was telling Adam (and by inference, all of his descendants), “and make it even better. Work on it – apply your knowledge and energy and creativity – and
transform it into something that brings about prosperity and well-being for yourself and for everyone else.”

So ... the next time you get in your car and head off to work, or you flip on the computer and login to the server or answer a bunch of emails – even if you don’t like what you’re doing; even if you’re just doing it because you have to – you are participating in an activity that is as “ordained of God” as coming to church today or taking care of your family or obeying the government ...

... which also means (and this is the next principle) that ...

2. Work is one of the most “spiritual” things we can do ...

... which, for most people, is a counterintuitive thought because most people think that “being spiritual” means drawing away from the physical world to pray and worship; to rest and reflect on God.
“Being spiritual” is that, too, but because work is ordained by the God who works and who created us to work, work (whether we love it or hate it) is a key part of the process He uses to transform us.

And we’ve talked about that a lot lately – that God’s goal for every person who believes in and trusts Jesus of Nazareth as their savior and follows Him … God’s goal is that we are transformed over time so that we look more and more like Jesus and less like us in the way we think and act.

Given that, for most of us, almost half of our waking life is spent working, it would be rather illogical (and wasteful) for God to say, “Well, looks like Sally Sue is at work now. Time to shut off the spiritual formation process in her life until she gets home and goes to small group.”

That’s certainly not what happens, for the scripture is clear that God uses all things – not
just “religious” activities – to bring about His good and perfect will for those who belong to Him. And “all things” includes work. God uses our jobs – both what we do and the people with whom we do it – to shape and mold us into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So ... the next time you go to work, if you’re a Christian, remind yourself that you are doing something spiritual. God is using that experience to work on you ... even if your job is “just a job.”

Alright, the first two principles are ...

- Work is not a “necessary evil.” It is an institution ordained of God.
- Work is one of the most spiritual things you can do.

Here’s the third:

3. There is no difference between a “secular job” and a “sacred job” in terms of Divine
calling or preference. For a follower of Jesus, all work (assuming it is moral and ethical) represents a “calling.”

And that’s totally opposite of what most people think. Most people, including many Christians, believe that the only people who truly have a calling from God are those who are in “the ministry.” But that’s not what biblical Christianity teaches.

Many years ago, after several failed attempts at college, I finally buckled down and applied myself and wound up with a couple of degrees in Math and Computer Science. (It’s amazing what happens when you actually go to class and study).

After that, I got a great position as a Member of Technical Staff (doing software engineering) at one of the most prestigious companies in America at the time, Bell Labs in New Jersey. I was good at my job. I loved what I did. And I thought I was going to do that for life. But when I
was 30 years old, I began to sense God leading me to leave that job to pursue a career in full-time ministry. And, that’s what I did.

Now, most people, when they hear my story, say, “Oh, you left because you received a calling from God.” And they are right.

But, does that mean that, in my early 20s, I was any less called to be a software engineer? Not at all. In fact, I’m no more called to my current profession than I was to my former one. And furthermore ... I’m no more called to my job as a pastor than you are called to your job ... whether your job is to be somebody’s momma or somebody’s mechanic or somebody’s manager.

Now, here’s why I say that. The Bible tells us that Jesus often hung out with many of the despised tax collectors of his day, but we only know the names of two: Matthew and Zacchaeus. And we know that both of them, after getting to know Jesus, believed Him to be the Messiah of
Israel, the Savior sent from God. They were among the very first Christians in the world.

You know what else we know about them? We know that Jesus’ “calling” on their lives was very different.

In Matthew’s case, Jesus told him to leave his job. He said, “Follow me” and Matthew entered what we consider to be full-time ministry. He even wrote a book that got into the Bible. But Zacchaeus, on the other hand, was not called away from his career. Instead, his orders were to stay and do his job the right way, the honest way, the God-honoring way: with fairness and integrity.

Does that mean Matthew (who had the “sacred job”) was more called than Zacchaeus (who had the “secular job”)? I don’t think so. Both men were doing exactly what God intended for them to do. Both were given a calling.
And that’s how it works with you and me. God calls you to do one thing and me to do another. We are both called to our work, even if it feels like that work is just a job … even if we’re just slogging along.

How “Calling” Happens

Of course, that raises a tough question. Can slogging – working simply because we have to – really be a calling from God?

I mean, it makes sense that God has ordained that we work (even if we don’t like it). And it makes sense that some kind of transformation could take place in that circumstance. But a calling?

That’s hard to swallow … if you have a limited understanding of how God actually calls people.

So let’s talk about that.
1. Most people think of “calling” as something that comes in a moment of supernatural revelation (sometimes audible) that leads us to do something far beyond our natural capacity.

And that is one way, biblically speaking, that a calling is received.

Even if you’re not that well-acquainted with the Bible, you’re probably heard the story of the calling of Moses. Exodus 3 tells us that, one day, while he was out tending the sheep, he came upon a bush that was on fire but not burning up. So, he went over to take a look at it.

And ... 

*When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.”*  
Exodus 3:4 (NIV)

And from then on, this moody, reluctant, tongue-tied shepherd had a new job and a new
calling: to lead the greatest freedom march ever recorded in all of history and get those people – thousands of them – into the Promised Land. It took him 40 years to get it done – and then he died. And it all stemmed from a single moment of supernatural revelation.

But that’s not the only way someone can be called. John Maxwell, in his excellent book Life@Work (which I believe we still have in our bookstore), points out that there are two other ways that a calling is received.

2. A calling, he says, sometimes comes through the presence of a desire so strong that it compels and drives and pushes us to go or be or do.

Bill Hybels calls it “holy discontent” where you’ve seen all you can stand and you can’t stand it anymore. You have to do something.

A great example of this in the scripture is that of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a brilliant man and
top executive serving the king of Persia. But he was also a Jew whose homeland was in shambles.

One day, he asked some people who had been to visit Jerusalem what it was like, and they told him.

“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

**Nehemiah writes …**

“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”

*Nehemiah 1:3-4 (NIV)*

As turned out, “some days” equaled about four months. For four months, Nehemiah’s heart was consumed with desire to set things right in Jerusalem because, as the story turned out, God
was calling him to lead the rebuilding effort.

One day the king said, “Nehemiah, why are you so down these days?” And Nehemiah told him and asked the king to send him to Jerusalem with money, supplies and men. And the king amazingly said yes. And Nehemiah, instead of being the king’s right-hand-man became the governor of the province of Judea, a position that he held until his death. And he go there because God called him through a desire – a holy discontent – he just couldn’t shake.

But there is another way calling from God happens, Maxwell says.

3. Sometimes, calling comes from a path that dictates what we simply must do.

This one is not as spectacular as the other two, and it’s usually not as emotional when it’s received, but it is no less valid.

Basically, this is the idea that you’re called to do
what needs to be done, right where you are, because God is the one who has led you to where you are.

**Or, as Solomon wrote in the book of Proverbs:**

*We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps.*

*Proverbs 16:9 (NLT)*

Probably the greatest biblical example of this kind of calling was that of a young Jewish girl by the name of Esther who also lived in captivity in Persia years before Nehemiah came onto the scene.

Esther was an orphan. She was being raised by her cousin Mordecai who, like Nehemiah, was a highly-respected official of the king. Long story short, one day the king’s wife did something displeasing to him, so the king divorced her and began a search for her replacement. Mordecai allowed Esther to enter the contest (so to speak)
and, amazingly, she won the king’s heart and ended up with the job of queen – which, as a Jewish woman, was probably the last thing on Earth she ever dreamed she’d be doing!

Not long afterwards, Mordecai discovered an internal plot – unknown to the king – to exterminate all of the Jews living in the kingdom. And so he came to Esther and said “you must do something very dangerous. You must approach the king on matters of kingdom business” – which is something women (even queens) in those days didn’t do – “you must approach the king,” Mordecai said, “and reveal this plot or our people will be exterminated.”

Then he concluded:

“It may very well be that you have achieved royal status for such a time as this!”

Esther 4:14 (NET)

In other words, “Esther, God has put you on this
path. This is your calling. It’s what you have to do. There is no other option.”

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Now, the reason I’ve gone into such detail on this issue of calling is to ask this question: if someone is slogging through a job over the long-haul because it is simply what must be done, what kind of a calling is that most likely to be? Is it calling by supernatural revelation ... or calling by desire ... or calling by path?

I’d say it’s calling by path ... most of the time.

- If you long to work outside the home but stay with the kids because it’s simply what must be done ... then you’ve been called by path. And every day that you slog through as mommy or daddy is the working out of your calling.

- If you have kids in college and you have to
stick with a job that’s not fulfilling in order to get them through, then you’ve been called by path.

- If you’re near retirement and your financial future and the financial future of your spouse is dependent on you finishing well – even though it’s no fun – then you’ve been called by path at this time in your life. And every day on that job, you are working out that calling.

And there are a hundred other examples we could think of. But the bottom line is this:

**Some people (followers of Jesus) are called by God to invest themselves for a time in an occupation that seems like it’s “just a job.”**

And that calling – calling by path – can and should be worn as proudly as any other calling. It should be respected as highly as any other.

So, if you’re working a job because God said, “this
simply needs to be done even though it’s not a lot of fun,” I say “way to go for hanging in there. Way to go for making the personal sacrifices so that others can benefit. You are imitating Jesus when you do so.”

Now, I wish I could leave it at that and move to the final section of this message but I can’t because saying that “some people are called to invest themselves in an occupation that seems like just a job” is not the same thing as saying “everyone who is currently doing that is called to that.”

Truth is … there are some people who are slogging through who are not called to slog through.

So, why are they doing it?

- Some are doing it because they’re afraid to
try something new. They’re afraid of failure. They’d rather be safe (and unhappy) than take the risk required to fulfill God’s true calling on their lives, whatever it might be.

- Some are doing it because they’re discouraged and believe a lie “I’m just destined to be miserable.”

- Some are doing it because they were called to it for a time, but they haven’t been listening for God and they haven’t heard Him say “Ok, it’s time to move on now.” (Callings work that way, you know).

- And some people are slogging through because, quite frankly, they’re lazy and they’re passive.

After I made the decision to leave my first calling as a software engineer and pursue my second calling in vocational ministry, we moved to
Kansas City so I could attend Midwestern Baptist Seminary down on North Oak Trafficway. As part of the degree program, I was assigned to a weekly study group that I knew from the first day was not going to be as helpful to me as it could have been.

But I didn’t say anything about it. Instead, I slogged through two semesters of my seminary career because I told myself “this is the system and who am I to say anything?”

At the end of the school year, they gave us an evaluation form for the group and I made a comment that I thought that, with a little more effort, the groups could be better arranged to be more helpful to the students. And I signed my comment form because that’s just what Christians should do. You never take an anonymous shot at someone who is trying to help you grow and develop as a follower of Jesus.

Anyway, a few days later, I got a note back from
the director of the program. It said (basically), “do you mean to tell me that you sat in an ineffective group for two semesters and didn’t do anything about it?” And then he wrote: “God save us from passive pastors!” ... which (and I’m sure this will surprise you) made me very angry.

So, I stormed into his office and said, “I’ve been called a lot of things, but passive is not one of them.”

And he said – I’ll never forget this – “You wasted nine months of your educational life. What else should I call you?”

He was right. I slogged through that year because I was passive towards a system that could have been changed – at least for me.

Now, let me be clear that I’m not passing judgment on any person’s motives for staying in a situation that is, for them, “just a job.” I’m just trying to raise the question: is this what you’re
supposed to do, really? Or, are you just afraid or not paying attention or, like I was, lazy and passive?

**Slaves for Jesus**

Now if that *is* what you’re called to do – staying in a situation that seems to be “just a job” ... following the path that God seems to have laid out for you ... where you didn’t really choose *it* – *it* chose you ... and you just have to do it “for such a time as this” ... if that’s what you are called to do, you need to know that there’s a Bible passage that has a very direct application for you.

And, based on how it often feels in your situation, you probably won’t be surprised to learn that the Apostle Paul wrote it to Christians who were *slaves*.

Now, I was a little hesitant to use this passage because it was so *misused* by well-meaning (and
not-so-well-meaning) Christians to justify the kind of slavery that existed for so long in our nation and in many others. But, I’m going to use it anyway because in first-century Roman culture, slaves were more like indentured servants. They often had freedoms similar to their masters and they were not expected to live as slaves for the duration of their lives.

However, during the time that they were slaves, they were required to do whatever job the master told them to do ... whether they liked the job ... or the master ... or the master’s family (with whom they often shared a household) ... or the other slaves with whom they were working.

Here’s what Paul told them:

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.*
Ephesians 6:5-6 (NIV)

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

Ephesians 6:7-8 (NIV)

Now, if read closely what Paul wrote, you see a pattern in those three sentences. He repeatedly talks about ...

- Who you really work for (ultimately)
- How you should work
- And two things you need to remember as motivation.

So, let’s break it down.

1. First of all, Paul says “work as if you were working for Jesus … because you are.”

Three times he says it. “As you would obey Christ … like slaves of Christ … as if you were serving
the Lord and not men,” he writes.

Now, one way to look at that is to say, “OK, I’m just going to grit my teeth and tell myself I am writing software for Jesus” or “Really, what I am doing here is changing diapers for God” or “I am serving God by answering complaints in this customer call center.”

But for most people – and I’m talking about Christians, actually – Paul’s instruction requires a little creative thinking. In addition to the job description your employer has given you, you have to create a secondary job description in your mind that reflects your calling to serve Jesus in that position. And that job description would be the answer to “how does writing software actually serve the purposes of God? How does changing diapers or answering complaints serve Jesus?”

Sometimes it’s easy to answer that question. If you work in the medical field, for example, it’s
very easy. After all, what was Jesus best known for in his earthly ministry? Healing. So, you’re not just testing blood samples or prepping a patient for surgery. You’re serving Jesus by helping to continue His healing ministry in our day and time.

But sometimes it’s not easy to answer the question. And you might need to wrestle with God about it or talk to someone who has wisdom about such matters.

In any case, Paul says, when you work, work like you are working for Jesus ... because, in some way, if you’re a believer, you are.

2. Secondly, Paul says “Put your heart into your work. Give God your best effort.”

Three times he mentions the heart. “With sincerity of heart ... from your heart ... serve wholeheartedly,” he writes.

And, if you’re really working for God and not just
the person who signs your paycheck, that makes sense. God deserves your excellence in whatever it is you’re doing.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a great quote by British author and playwright, Dorothy Sayers.

“The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter,” she wrote, “is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him,” she continued, “is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. What use is [good behavior and church attendance] if, in the very center of his life and occupation, he is insulting God with bad carpentry?”

Serving God starts with this: Do a good job at work. Focus on “how would Jesus want me to do this task? How would he want me to treat this
person?” And then do it wholeheartedly and lay it out there as an offering to Him.

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So Paul has given us instruction on who we really work for (especially if our employment feels like “just a job”) and on how we should work (wholeheartedly, with excellence). Now, here’s the motivation:

3. “Remember that when you work you are doing God’s will.”

“You are slaves of Christ,” Paul wrote, “doing the will of God” … which, again makes sense in a general sort of way since, after all, God created work … and God is a worker … and work is one of the most spiritual things you can do.

But more specifically, if we belong to Christ, we need to remember that because God is sovereign over us, He directs our steps. And if we’re open to Him and trying to follow to His leadership in our lives, we can trust that we are where we’re
supposed to be and that, furthermore, when the time comes for us to not be there, God can open the door for us to move.

Until he does, why not trust Him? Why not see ourselves as working for Him and not for the boss or the company? Why not think of our job right now, today, as doing God’s will in our lives, in this world?

If you’re a Christian, that is the truth of it. And we would do well for ourselves to embrace it.

Finally, Paul tells us ...

4. “Remember that God will reward you.”

In the end, Paul says, the idea that you are working for someone other than the company or the boss is going to turn out to be true – literally – because, when you do your work with excellence, a reward from God Himself is coming to you.
Sometimes it will come in this life and sometimes it will not be received until the next life. But the bedrock truth is that it’s coming because God eventually and always honors His promises. God will reward you for doing good work ... even when that work seems to be, to you, just a job.

... which, I think you have probably figured out by now, is really not the way to look at it because, for a Christian, there really is no such thing as “just a job.” It might feel that way but it’s just not true. What you are doing, even if you’re just slogging your way through, matters to God because, ultimately, you are working for Him.

And that, I believe, is cause for rejoicing.

Let’s pray.

<PRAYER>
Feature – “Rejoice”
Closing Comments – Rick

1. Next week: continue this series “When You Love What You Do”
2. Golf Tourney sign up

Endnotes

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i This message is an update of a similar message given in 2006 called “Sloggers.”
ii I’m referring to the Willow Creek drama “Call Waiting” which was performed just prior to this message.
iii http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/declining-employee-loyalty-a-casualty-of-the-new-workplace/
iv Bills by LunchMoney Lewis (the clean version) was performed before this message.
vi John Maxwell, Life@Work, pg 16.
vi This excellent example came from “I Gave at the Office,” an article found at http://www.wineskins.org/filter.asp?SID=2&fi_key=28&co_key=479