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Title: “A Theology of Calling”

Key verse: 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:9 (NASB95) – God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Last week, I told you that I am currently taking a course in seminary on Discipleship, and so I spoke on that topic in my sermon last week – Discipleship. In that same seminary course, during this past week we have been studying a related topic: our calling in life ... our calling as Christians. Today’s message is entitled “A Theology of Calling.” I would like to share with you some of the things I have been learning. By the way, for the past many weeks, in the Wednesday Bible Study, Pastor Bruce has been teaching about this very topic: our calling. I hope that what I share today will complement and reinforce what Pastor Bruce has been teaching on Wednesdays.

What does this word mean – “calling”? Somebody’s “calling in life”? What comes to most people’s minds when they hear this is that God has “called” somebody to do a certain thing with his or her life, usually some certain kind of occupation. Somebody might have a calling to be a schoolteacher or a doctor or a missionary or a pastor. When I was young, my aunt used to say that her husband had “missed his calling.” He was quite a storyteller and he loved reading books, so maybe he should have been some kind of writer. But he was a small business owner instead. He wasn’t very good at that job, and so my aunt would say that he must have been called to be a writer but that he had gotten misdirected and had therefore missed his call.

But is this what the term “call” means? A particular occupation that somebody is supposed to be doing? What does the Bible have to say about this topic?

Well, actually, the Apostle Paul introduces himself at the beginning of many of his letters by saying he has been “called as an apostle.” For example, Romans 1:1 says (NASB95) – “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.” So, in his case, he did have a calling to engage in a certain task: to be an apostle, someone who is specifically chosen by God to spread the gospel message.

But most of the time, the Bible isn’t using this word to refer to a particular task or occupation. When we look at the New Testament usages of this word “call,” we find a variety of Greek words being used for it, and in a lot of those cases, the word is simply used for *calling somebody’s name* or *calling somebody to come over here*. However, we can also find several uses of this term to mean something more specific, something closer to what we have been thinking that a call from God would mean.

Let’s look at a few verses.

As Paul continues his introduction at the beginning of his letter to the Christians at Rome, he addresses them this way, Romans 1:6-7a (NASB95) – “Among whom you also are **the called** of Jesus Christ; <sup>7</sup> to all who are beloved of God in Rome, **called** as saints...” OR: “**called** to be saints...”

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:9 (NASB95) – “God is faithful, through whom you were **called** into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

What we are called to is not a task but an identity, a relationship. We are “called into fellowship with Jesus Christ.” We are “called to be saints,” to be God’s holy ones, set apart unto Him. Set apart from the world. God calls all of us to be in relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ.

This is what “calling” primarily means in the biblical context.

Acts 2:39 (NASB95) – “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will **call** to Himself.” The Lord God calls people to follow Him.

This is the starting point of what we term “A Theology of Calling.” Primarily, God calls us into relationship with Him, through His Son Jesus Christ. He calls us to be Christians, to be Christian disciples.

An Old Testament example of calling can be seen with the call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 (NASB95) – “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; <sup>2</sup> And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; <sup>3</sup> And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed’.”

Abram has been set apart to God and given a promise that God will make his descendants a great nation – these are the Chosen People, the nation of Israel – and that through them, all the families of the earth will be blessed. In Genesis 15 and Exodus 19-20, God enters into a covenant relationship with Abraham and with the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, this covenant relationship is extended to the Gentiles – in places like Ephesians chapter 2 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 1, we read that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been torn down. As I read for you last week, in the Great Commission in Matthew 28, we are told to make disciples of all nations. The gospel message is an invitation to all peoples to enter into a relationship with God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, one of the Greek words translated “call” is *klētos* (κλητός). There are two definitions given in my Greek dictionary: **1. called**, implying relationship and/or task (Ro 1:1, 6, 7; 8:28; 1Co 1:1, 2, 24; Jude 1; Rev 17:14+; Mt 20:16 v.r.); **2. invited** (Mt 22:14+). This is the word used in my quotation of Romans 1:1 and 1:6-7 a few minutes ago.

Another Greek word used for “call” is *kaleō* (καλέω). This is the one that was used in my quotation of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:9 a few minutes ago. My dictionary gives five definitions for this word, but I won’t read them all. Among the definitions are these: to **name** something, to **summon** someone, to **invite** someone, to **call** to a task.

[**1. name**, to refer to the proper name of something (Lk 2:4); **2. call**, give attribution (Mt 1:23; Jas 2:23); **3. summon**, tell a person to come and gather (Mt 25:14); **4. call to a task** (2Th 2:14); **5. invite**, offer an invitation to someone (Lk 14:8; Col 1:12 v.r.).]

Notice how both of these words are used for an invitation to somebody, as well as to a call to a relationship or task. We are invited into a relationship with the living God, through Jesus Christ. After that, there is some task to do.

One week ago, I told you that for my seminary course, I have been watching some video lectures on Discipleship. Well, beginning this past week, I am now watching some video lectures from a different course, one entitled *Theology of Everyday Life*, taught by Dr. Daniel Doriani. Let me quote something he says in his lecture:

If you want to get a biblical theology of calling, the first thing we need to notice is that the word “call” or “calling” is actually not used primarily of our place in life. The main way that the Bible talks about a

call, especially in the New Testament, is God's call to Himself—God's call to believe in Christ and to live faithfully in union with Christ. And after that general call in which all humans are summoned to come to Christ in the gospel, then there's a particular call to our place in life. So work is not our main or first calling. The first call is to Christ—the general call to be holy, to be like God. For example, in Romans 1:6 Paul says, "We're called to belong to Christ." ... And over in 2 Thessalonians [2:24] Paul says, "We're called to share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." And, finally, Paul says in 1 Corinthians [1:9], "We're called into fellowship with Jesus Christ our Lord." That's the main call. It's a call we all share. We should come to God and live in Him. Then we can seek the particular callings we have in life.<sup>1</sup>

We are called to come to Christ and have fellowship with Him. We are called to be holy, to live God-honoring lives.

One of my favorite verses is Ephesians 4:1 (NASB95) where Paul says this – "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the **calling** with which you have been **called**." We have a high calling – therefore, our lifestyles should reflect the Lord we that we say we love and serve. The reason I like this verse is because we all still have to deal with our imperfections and with temptations to stray from the Christian path. This verse exhorts me to keep focused on Christ and to be sure to live a life that honors Him.

In the video lectures I've been watching, Dr. Doriani goes on to focus on 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:17-24. Let's read the first verse in that passage, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:17 (NASB95), where Paul says this – "Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has **called** each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches."

It seems that the Lord has assigned us a place, and then we are to walk faithfully within that sphere. Here is what my video lecture says about this verse:

Now, that's kind of an amazing statement. First of all, he says that God has assigned a place, and God has called people to a place in life. But that call is influenced by our past. ... In other words, our family, our past, our history, the work perhaps that our father or mother or other relatives performed, can shape who we are, and that should not be viewed as an accident."

The last portion of that quote intrigues me: "...our family, our past, our history, the work perhaps that our father or mother ... performed, can shape who we are, and that should not be viewed as an accident." Our family background, our history, our ethnic background shapes who we are and where we are. You could be Jewish or Gentile, or American or Japanese or Filipino or European – that shapes you and provides certain types of opportunities for you. And that is not an accident, says the teacher of my course. God is in sovereign control of everything, and He placed you in that situation where you grew up.

About eight or ten years ago, I began reflecting on the wonderful privileges I had while growing up. I had a faithful Christian mother who put her kids in the best Sunday School program in our town – it was at a church that was very different than the denomination that she grew up in, but she wanted her kids in a good Sunday School program. Indeed, I think the Lutheran church does an excellent job at education. My mother also sent her kids to some summertime children's Christian programs ... and later to YMCA summer camp. And then later my parents got their sons involved in the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. And my father could afford to send his sons to one of the top universities in California. And there were some excellent Christian campus ministries at that university. A few years ago, as I reflected on those privileges of my youth, I marveled. According to what I heard in that video lecture last week, this is no accident, but the hand of God is involved in our upbringing,

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *PC151 Theology of Everyday Life*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014). Segment 16.

shaping us and our opportunities. A few years ago, as I reflected on my youth, at that point our former pastor, Pastor Alistair, asked me to start preaching occasionally. Well, I was shy and I had not planned on being a public speaker, but I calmly said yes to him. I couldn't refuse such a request – I have had a lifetime of consuming Christian instruction, and now my pastor and my church asks me to share this knowledge with my church family. Now, looking at this quotation, I see how God shapes our upbringing to ready us for a place of service in the future.

Your background has some significance in your life, whether you are Jew or Gentile, Asian or European. Let's continue reading in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 7, where Paul makes some comments on Jewish and Gentile backgrounds

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:17–20 (NASB95) – “Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has **called** each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. <sup>18</sup>Was any man **called** when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been **called** in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. <sup>19</sup>Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. <sup>20</sup>Each man must remain in that condition in which he was **called**.”

If you were born a Jew, don't try to be something different. If you were born a Gentile, don't try to be a Jew and get circumcised. Circumcision was just a sign of the covenant with Israel. This outward mark doesn't matter. What matters is keeping God's commandments. Be content to stay in whatever circumstance you were in when God called you to be a Christian. And be a faithful, obedient disciple in your current circumstance.

Let's continue reading. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:20–24 (NASB95) – “Each man must remain in that condition in which he was **called**. <sup>21</sup>Were you **called** while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. <sup>22</sup>For he who was **called** in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was **called** while free, is Christ's slave. <sup>23</sup>You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. <sup>24</sup>Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was **called**.”

Slavery was a part of the ancient world. Some slaves became Christians. They might think that if they were free, they could serve Christ more than if they were still in their condition of slavery. But Paul says no. You can continue to be a faithful and active Christian disciple even if you are still a slave. In fact, you can be a good witness to your masters and to fellow slaves by being a faithful Christian while still in your present condition. You need not seek to get out of that condition. However, you are also not forbidden to change your circumstances if a legitimate opportunity for freedom is available to you. The principle here is that you need not change your circumstance – you can still be a faithful witness of Christ where you are at.

So, what we have said up to this point is that a **call** to the Christian life is primarily a call to a relationship with God and a call to be a faithful disciple of Christ. The **place** where you are at is a secondary consideration. It is not unimportant, but it is secondary. In fact, your current place is influenced by the circumstances of your upbringing, which is under the umbrella of God's sovereignty.

While reading these verses, I wondered if I should have sought to live abroad, outside of my home country. Should I have stayed in America? Well, my upbringing has influence on my life opportunities, and my father loved travel and he took his family on long trips through the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. I grew up rather adventurous. After listening to last week's lectures, I see that my adventuresome spirit is a part of my upbringing and that has influenced my decision to live abroad.

I have been discussing **calling**. We have moved our discussion to the topic of **place**. You should seek to be faithful in whatever place or circumstance where you are at, and you need not change it, but it's not necessarily wrong to change it. Next, I would like to move to the topic of **task**. What exactly should you do with your life? Do you have a calling to a particular occupation or ministry position? Is it better to go into a full-time ministry position or is a secular job OK?

Actually, that last question delves into an issue that we call the sacred and the secular divide. Are some jobs, some tasks, more sacred than others? Is a ministerial position more spiritual than a secular job? Actually, Protestant Christians have traditionally said no: we should not divide jobs into sacred vs. secular. Any particular job can be a God-glorifying job if you execute it with the right spirit, if you can be a faithful Christian while performing it.

Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, famously said that the job a farmer can be just as spiritual as the job of a clergyman. As long as you are fulfilling your calling, it makes no difference if you have a so-called secular job or a full-time ministerial job. Both kinds of callings are important.

Back at the beginning of time, in Genesis 1, God created mankind and He gave man a **task** to do.

Genesis 1:26-28 (NASB95) – “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”<sup>27</sup> God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.<sup>28</sup> God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’.”

God gave men and women a **task** to do. He put them in charge of being stewards over the earth. Work is therefore something that is ordained by God. Whether it is farming or herding or construction or being a housewife or being a Christian pastor, all work is important and all of it is ordained by God. We need not make a distinction and say some jobs are more spiritual than others.

But we have all been given certain **gifts** from God. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12, we read about the various gifts that God has given to different Christians to accomplish the various ministries that we have in the church. It is in the discernment of our spiritual gifts that we find what task the Lord would have us be doing.

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:7 (NASB95) – “But to each person is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Ephesians 4:7 (NASB95) – “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

Verses 11-12 – “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup> for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

You and I are the saints and you and I are to be doing the works of service in the church (the works of ministry) to build up the Body of Christ. Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to the church in order to equip you and me – the saints in the church – to do the work of ministry.

That is our **calling**. To be faithful followers of Christ in the **place** where He has set us and to do the **task** which He has gifted us to do.

But what is your gift? This is a question many Christians ask: what is my gift?

Well, we have some lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament, such as in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and Romans 12. It seems that each of these lists is a representative list and none are exhaustive of all possible gifts. Some eager Christians have made a questionnaire you could take to answer a bunch of questions on your interests and abilities in relation to each of the gifts listed in those three chapters I just told you about, and through this questionnaire you could maybe discover what your spiritual gift is. But I'm a bit skeptical of such questionnaires. I don't think they are especially helpful. Actually, many years ago, a former pastor of OIC was likewise skeptical of these spiritual gifts questionnaires. His advice was to simply try out working for one of the ministries you see here at church and see if you have some aptitude in that area and if you get some positive or some negative feedback on your performance – if the feedback is not positive, then go ahead and try out a different ministry task. There is nothing wrong with leaving one ministry task and trying out a different one that might be more suitable to your gifting.

In the lectures I listened to last week, I heard about an outline of how to discern what your gifting might be, and it closely parallels what I have already discovered in my own life. Let me close today's sermon with a look at that outline. It comes from a theologian named John Frame. He says knowledge of what our calling and gifting might be comes from four sources:

First, we know that God gives gifts to humanity, and that includes giving gifts to God's people. Second, the Holy Spirit works in us to help us begin the process of discernment. We might not get it right at first, but with some feedback from other people, we may approach a knowledge of what our gifting might be.

Third, God provides opportunities for us to exercise and develop our gifts. Again, feedback and advice from mentors are useful at this step.

Fourth, God gives us wisdom to use our gifts in ways that will glorify Him and bless our neighbors.

Let me close with one more quotation from the lectures I listened to last week. Here it is:

Again, a good question is “What do wise people who know the world and know you and love you and care about you—people without a selfish agenda—what do they ask you to do, not once but over and over again?” Or—this is the same thing but in a different way—when you do something, do people ask you to do it again? When you are invited to perform a task, do they say “Please come back and do that again”? If that happens, you're probably near your vocation, your calling, your gifting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *PC151 Theology of Everyday Life*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014). Segment 18.