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Business as a Calling / The Journey of Life

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Ambrose University College
Chapel
October 18, 2011

C. William Pollard

“Business as a Calling / The Journey of Life”

As we come together this morning, we all have something in common. Regardless of age, background, gender, race, nationality, skills, talents, or interests, we are all on a “journey of life”.

I have found that this journey is often better understood looking backward. Therefore, the gray hair of your speaker this morning may provide some benefit to you as a group of young people in gaining a perspective of what this journey is all about.

A reality that most of us, if not all of us, will face in this journey of life is that our work, whatever that may be, will consume much of our waking hours. We have different names for it. Some may call it a job, or a profession, or a career, a vocation or a ministry, or some may describe it as being a breadwinner or a homemaker.

So how does God fit into this major task of life? It is this subject that I would like to talk to you about today and as I do so to begin with some biblical principles as a framework for our discussion.

First: As Christians we are all God's workmanship and he has prepared in advance the good work He has for us to do. Eph 2:10

Second: Whatever this work might be we are to do all of it to the glory of God. 1 Cor 10:31

Third: In so doing, we are to be ambassadors for Christ with God making His appeal through us to a lost and needy world.
2 Cor 5:20

Fourth: As we do our work, we please Him by integrating the claims of our faith with the demands of our work. Phil 2:13

Now as I talk about this subject of work, I am sure that many of you, as I did when I was your age, are somewhat weary with questions like "What are you going to do when you get out of school?" or "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

Listen to this letter I received from a graduate of another Christian college. It reflects what may be some common understandings or misunderstandings of how God works and calls us to a purposeful life.

“I am very happy to report that, by God’s grace and fullness, I actually did graduate. For the first time since age five, I am not a student.

“It’s been a good four years of learning. I was an English literature major and a Bible minor. I can now read in the Greek New Testament. I know phrases like: inaugurated eschatology and hermeneutical fallacy. My interpretation of scripture has increased in both caution and confidence. I have seen God in His work and in his people.

“I have made wonderful friends here, in breakfast Bible studies and noon prayer sessions for missions, in afternoons in the fall playing football and in the spring playing baseball, and late nights in the dorm having fun. The farewells will be very difficult.

“So, what’s next? I am moving to Kansas City where I will be closer to my family. I’ll find a job and pay off my student loans. What kind of a job? I really don’t know – construction work or some type of administrative work for a business? I also will apply to various mission agencies. I feel called to the mission field and in a year or two, I hope to be in full-time Christian service. Where, I don’t know. Ethiopia? Papua New Guinea? India? I will wait for God’s call to the right place.

“Please pray for me in the next couple of months. It is going to be quite a transition and, frankly, **I am not looking forward to it.** For the first time, I am leaving a Christian community to live among **ordinary, working people.** I am expecting a considerable amount of uncertainty and loneliness, but I hope to develop some friends at the local church I will be attending.”

So, what is this student saying to us?

Is there some form of hierarchy in God’s calling and the work we are to do with a special place for what people often refer to as “full-time Christian service?” Will we somehow miss out if we don’t do something that fits into this category? Should we think of God’s call in the context of a location or special place of service? Is it only about what we should do and the place where we should do it or is it more about who we are and who we are becoming in our relationship to God? And where does ordinary work with those ordinary people fit in -- the ordinary people that God so loves and for whom Jesus died?

As I ask these questions, I am reminded of a friend of mine who put this message on his voicemail at work and on his cell phone: Hello? This is not an answering machine. It is a questioning machine. There are only two questions in life

that are relevant: “Who are you?” and “What do you want?” Please give your answer after the tone.

Who are we and what do we want? Every one of us is a special creation of God with a dimension of freedom to make choices about how we shall live and what work we shall do. God has both a temporal and eternal purpose for our life and for our work.

The basic and most important choice we have in this journey of life is whether we will respond to God’s gift of salvation and choose to be a follower of Christ. In the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his address to the graduating class at Harvard University: “It is this choice that splits the world apart.”

All other choices of life fit under the umbrella of this basic choice, including choices of friendships, of a life partner, or of a job or profession. So as we make this basic choice to follow Jesus – how do we sort out the choice of our work as we seek to follow God’s calling?

Think for a moment with me about what Jesus was seeking to teach His disciples that night He was betrayed as He took a towel and a basin of water and washed their feet.

Picture the scene. It is Thursday night, Jesus' last time to be alone with His disciples. Later that evening, He would be betrayed, arrested, and the next day crucified. For the message of the Gospel to go forth – for His Church to be established, His disciples would no longer be learning from the physical presence of His teaching. They would have to, (so to speak), graduate, and become leaders who would assume responsibility to spread the good news of the Gospel across the then-known world and to establish His Church in many different locations and cultures. The time would soon come when they would no longer be called disciples but, instead, apostles. They would be assuming positions of title and authority over others.

The first and most important thing for them to learn was that their calling started with the Caller, not the call. It was about a continuing relationship with God and His Son, Jesus Christ. It was about the person they were becoming as they made choices about what they should be doing. It was about their willingness to serve each other and those who would follow.

There was no room for self-gratification or positions of power. Jesus was, in effect, telling them that their job - their work - their leadership position was just a means - to what end was the real issue and the end was the people who would follow and the direction they were headed.

Their leadership was to be a position of responsibility and service, not a position of privilege. They were being called to be servant leaders. As they served others there would be room for tent making as well as preaching, all as part of the ministry of being ambassadors for Christ. Or as Martin Luther would later put it – “the works of monks and priests, however holy, do not differ in the sight of God from the works of a laborer in the field or that of a maidservant in the home.”

Servant leadership has been and continues to be a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I did to understand was to learn what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I joined the ServiceMaster team, now over 30 years ago. Before joining ServiceMaster, I had practiced law for eight years and had served in the administration and as a faculty member of Wheaton College.

As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited by Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of ServiceMaster, to consider joining the firm.

During the recruiting process, he had shared his vision for the future and inferred that maybe someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen’s office waiting to sign the final

documents of employment, I decided I needed to know more about what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

So I started pressing Ken on what needed to be done and how long it would take for me to be President and CEO of the Company. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: "Bill, the interview is over."

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I'd blown my opportunity and this was God's way of directing me back to the practice of law.

Two days later, Ken called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken's words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute to others, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position that would promote yourself, you'd better forget it. Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company.

As I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes

of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a Senior Vice President, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks we perform for our customers. In so doing, I learned not only how to do the jobs of our service workers but also how it felt in doing those jobs and how some people viewed and treated you. I was learning to understand the *reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people* I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 10 million customers.

The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as the results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules or satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance – a result that was real – a result that our customers could depend upon. A result that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

At ServiceMaster, our corporate objectives were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We did not use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's world.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task.

It was about treating people as the subject of work – not just the object of work – about recognizing their dignity and worth – as created in the image and likeness of God and so to raise the question of God and His role in their life.

For me, the world of business became a high calling of God – a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that reached from a janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who did not believe the way I did, but whom God so loved and who, by my words and actions, should be able to see the reality of His love.

As Joshua came to the closing days of his leadership of the nation of Israel, he challenged the people to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . but for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and also can mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – the work of our life, whatever that may be – can be a worship to the God you love as you serve and live your faith. The work of our hands, our minds, and our hearts can become a center of our worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as Lord and Savior.

As Christians, God has called each of us to be in the world but not part of it. He has called us to be excellent in what we do, whether we call it a job, profession, or ministry, and when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, business person, minister, missionary, or educator, and live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored, we have the platform to proclaim and share our faith. The choice is ours.

Now, as you are preparing for that next chapter of your Journey of Life, know that the One Who has all the answers to life will be with you as you seek to serve

Him. He is calling each of you to be His ambassador. Whatever path of work you choose can become a high calling of God. The choice is yours.

* * *

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