

A Life Worthy of Your Calling

Ephesians 4:1-16

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Bob Buford was a pioneer in the cable television industry, owned a lot of TV stations, and became a very wealthy and successful man. In mid-life, though, he began to reevaluate his priorities and what he was wanting to do with his life.

He wrote a book called *Half-Time: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance*. He says in his book that the first half of our lives is driven by questions like: What can I achieve? How high can I climb the ladder? How much stuff can I accumulate?

And then Buford says the second half of life is often driven by a different set of questions, questions such as: What do I want to be remembered for? How much is enough? Am I living a life that is consistent with what I say are my values and beliefs? What really matters in life? What is the purpose of my life?

Half-time is that time in life—sometimes coming in the form of a mid-life crisis—when we begin to take stock of our lives and how we want to finish. It's a time when we make the transition from success to significance.

At least some people do. Many people, of course, never make that transition and end up stuck in that first half pursuit of success. And it is a never ending pursuit. It is a pursuit that never ends in catching the thing you are pursuing. And if you don't ever make that transition, you never do find a life of significance.

Some of you will remember a few years ago when Bill Moyers did a series of interviews with Joseph Campbell. Campbell talked about vocation and how what God wants from us is connected to our own deepest gifts and longings and leadings. He talked about what he called following your bliss.

Campbell referred to Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Babbitt*, and pointed to the last line of the novel. There Babbitt speaks and says: *I have never done the thing that I wanted to do in all my life*. Campbell says, *That is a man that has never followed his bliss*.

And then Joseph Campbell tells this story. Before he was married he had already begun his teaching career at Sarah Lawrence. He ate out virtually every night. One Thursday night in his favorite Greek restaurant, there was a mother and a father and son, about age 12, sitting at the table next to his.

He couldn't help overhearing the conversation. He heard the father say, *Drink your tomato juice.*

The boy said, *I don't want to drink my tomato juice.*

The father then said more loudly, *Drink your tomato juice!*

And the mother says, *Don't make him do what he doesn't want to do!*

And the father says, *He can't go through life doing what he wants to do. If he does what he wants to do, he'll never accomplish anything! Look at me. I've never done a thing I wanted to do in all my life!*

And Campbell said, *And I thought, my God, there's Babbitt incarnate!* I have never done the thing that I wanted to do in all my life.

["Calling, Identity, and Bliss," Dr. James W. Fowler, 30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1996.]

What about your life? What will you say at end of the last chapter of your life? Have you followed your deepest gifts and longings and leadings? Have you discovered how those are connected to your vocation, to God's calling on your life? Have you made that transition from success to significance?

Here in the first verse of Ephesians 4 Paul speaks to this. He challenges us with one sentence. He says, *Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.* Lead a life worthy of the vocation to which you have been called.

Sometimes when we use the word "calling" we slip into thinking that this pertains only to people like ministers and missionaries—people who are "called." But we know that's not true, and remember that Paul is writing this letter not to the ordained ministers in

Ephesus (there weren't any); he's writing to the church—all the Christians—in Ephesus. And he's saying to all of them: *Lead a life worthy of the vocation to which you have been called.*

And he says the same to the church in Memphis.

And then in verse 7 Paul continues with this topic of calling and vocation when he talks about the specific gifts granted to each and every believer. He says: *Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

Then in verse eleven he gives some examples—not an exhaustive list—some examples of the different gifts that God has given to different ones of us: some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, some teachers. There are other passages in the New Testament, such as 1 Corinthians 12, where we have a more comprehensive list of the different spiritual gifts that each of us are given. Gifts like: wisdom, faith, healing, discernment, administration, mercy.

As Paul says here in verse 12, there are different gifts for different people, but they are all given for the

purpose of equipping each other for the work of ministry. Our gifts exist to enhance and build of the larger work of God in the world.

So this month in our church we are focusing on the theme “Fulfilling the Vision.” By “fulfilling the vision” we mean fulfilling God's vision for each one of us individually and fulfilling God's vision for our church together. And one important part of that is each of us discovering what our gifts are. And for those of you who were in Sunday School this morning, that's what you talked about. And I think you are bringing home with you today some type of inventory to help you figure that out.

Tests and inventories are helpful tools. But I think most of the time we discover our gifts naturally. You find spiritual gifts like you find natural talents.

[thanks for this insight to Ray Stedman, The Power of His Presence, March 16, 2007]

Musicians, how do you know that you have the gift of music? Athletes, how did you ever discover that you had an unusual physical coordination and were able to

do things athletically that others could not? How did you discover that?

Well, you discover spiritual gifts in the same way. Sometimes you are attracted by seeing certain people exercising a gift, and that draws you to them. You like what you see. Sometimes you say to yourself, *Maybe I can do that.*

You enjoy some activities more than others, and this is a possible indication. Your deepest longings and the things you want to do and enjoy doing the most are usually an exercise of your gifts. Living out your spiritual gifts is a joyful thing to do.

That's why you don't want to be Babbit in the novel I talked about who looked back on his life and said: *I have never done the thing I wanted to do in all my life.* Don't let that be the last line of the book of your life. That's why St. Augustine said we should love God and do what we want.

And then finally a very important indication is to see if others recognize the gift in you, and encourage you to do it. Some people might say to you, *Look, we feel*

you have a gift along this line and would like you to take on this job. Would you do it? Listen to that.

It is very important that others recognize your gift. You want to avoid the pathetic situation of a pastor who is sure he has the gift of preaching; it's just that no one in the congregation had the gift of listening.

My whole life I have felt certain that I am called to play in the NFL or the NBA. It's just that no one else has ever seemed to recognize that. Others need to recognize your gift.

When you become aware of your gifts, you can start to see what your vocation, your calling is in the life.

The best description I've ever seen of how we hear and discover our calling comes from the great writer Frederick Buechner. Listen carefully to what he writes:

Vocation comes from the Latin vocare, "to call", and it means the work one is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to do all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out

which is the voice of God, rather than that of society, or the superego, or self-interest.

By and large, a good rule for finding this out is the following: the kind of work God usually calls you to do is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do, and (b) that the world needs most to have done.

If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing deodorant commercials, the chances may be that you've missed requirement (b).

On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you've probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by your work, the chances are you've not only bypassed (a), but you probably aren't helping your patients much, either.

Then he says, Neither the hair shirt nor the soft birth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. [Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC, pp. 118-9]

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Lead a life worthy of the vocation to which you have been called.

What about your life? Have you followed your deepest gifts and longings and leadings? Have you discovered how those are connected to your vocation, to God's calling on your life? Have you made that transition from success to significance?

In southwest Oklahoma, near the Washita Creek there is a little community named for General Custer, who massacred an Indian tribe who lived there: Custer City. A preacher I know of was pastor there for a few years. [Story told by Dr. Fred Craddock]

The population when he was there was about 450 on a good day. There were four churches: a Methodist church, a Baptist church, a Nazarene church, and a Christian church.

Each had its share of the population, and on Wednesday nights and Sundays, each church had a

small group of teenagers. The attendance at the churches rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the wheat.

The best and most consistent attendance in town on Sundays, however, was at the little café where all the pickup trucks were parked and all the men were inside discussing the weather and the cattle and the wheat bugs and the hail and the wind and whether they were going to have a crop, while their wives and sons and daughters were in one of those four churches.

The churches had good attendance some days and bad attendance other days, but that café had consistently good attendance. Better attendance than some of the churches. Men were always there.

Once in a while they would lose a member there at the café because his wife finally got him, or maybe his kids did. So you would see him go off sheepishly to one of the churches.

But the men at the café still felt that they were the biggest and strongest group in town, and so they met

on Wednesdays and Sundays and every other day to discuss the weather and such.

They were not bad men. Actually, they were good men, family men, hard-working men.

The patron saint of the group at the café was Frank. Frank was seventy-seven years old. He was a good man, a strong man, a pioneer, a rancher, a farmer, and a cattleman. He had been born in a sod house, and he had prospered; he had done well.

He had his credentials, and all the men there at the café considered him their patron saint. *Old Frank will never go to church*, they said.

One day this preacher met Frank on the street. They shook hands and visited for a minute. Frank knew that he was a preacher, and he took the offensive. He said, *I work hard and I take care of my family and I mind my own business*. He said that as far as he was concerned, everything else is fluff. He was saying, *Leave me alone; I'm not a prospect*.

So the preacher didn't bother Frank.

That's why he was so surprised, actually the church was surprised and the whole town was surprised and the men at the café church were completely surprised when old Frank, seventy-seven years old, presented himself at the front of the church one Sunday morning for baptism. They baptized him a few weeks later.

Some in the community said that Frank must be sick, that he must be scared to meet his maker. Some said, *He's got heart trouble, going up to be baptized. I never thought old Frank would do that, but I guess when you get scared. . . .* There were all kinds of stories.

But this is the way Frank told it to the preacher. They were talking the day after his baptism, and the preacher said, *Frank, do you remember that little saying you used to give me so much? "I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business."*

He said, *Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot.*

Do you still say that?

Yes.

Then what's the difference?

He said, *I didn't know then what my business was.*

Maybe it's time for you—at age 17, age 47, or age 77—to figure out what your business is.

And so you start letting your life be guided by a different set of questions. What do I want to be remembered for? How much is enough? Am I living a life that is consistent with what I say are my values and beliefs? What really matters in life? What is the purpose of my life? What are your deepest gifts and desires?

And you begin to lead a life worthy of the business, the vocation, the calling to which you have been called.