

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Growing in Vocation**

John 17:1-11a

Last Sunday, in our series of sermons on Christian maturity, we focused on wisdom as one of the key marks of a growing follower of Jesus. Living a wise and godly life, grounded in the fear of the Lord, is a sign of spiritual development. As we acknowledge God's presence, plans, and purposes in the world and in our lives, we grow in discerning and doing his will, what is right and just and fair. This is living wisely and well.

Today, we'll shift our attention from wisdom to vocation. By vocation I mean how our work, in all its forms, participates in the work of God in the world. Work can include our duties and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, in school, in the church, and other areas where we live out our calling to follow Jesus. In and through Christ, the God who is Creator and Redeemer has summoned us to be involved as workers in what he is doing to make all things new. So maturing as a Christian, making progress in holiness, is tied to how God is calling you and me to live our lives within his larger project of salvation.

In his book, *Who Switched the Price Tags?*, Tony Campolo tells the story of a church that was having its annual student recognition day. Young people in the church who were students at colleges and universities were giving reports on how their educational experience was going.

After several students had given their reports, the pastor got up and delivered some closing words. "Children," he said, "you are going to die! You may not think you're going to die. But you're going to die. One of these days they're going to take you out to the cemetery, drop you in a hole, throw some dirt on your face, and go back to the church and eat potato salad."

"When you were born," he said, "you alone were crying and everybody else was happy. The important question I want to ask you is this: When you die are you going to be happy, leaving everybody else crying? The answer depends on whether you live to get titles or you live to get testimonies. When they lay you in the grave, are people going to stand around reciting the fancy titles you earned, or are they going to stand around giving testimonies of the good things you did for them? Will they list your degrees and awards, or will they tell about what a blessing you were to them? Will you leave behind just a newspaper column telling people how important you were, or will you leave crying people who give testimonies of how they've lost the best friend they ever had? There's nothing wrong with titles. Titles are good things to have. But if it ever comes down to a choice between a title or a testimony—go for the testimony."

There's nothing like facing your own mortality, the prospect of the end of your own life, to help you gain clarity about how you're responding to God's call in the present, and to reflect on whether you're choosing titles or testimonies. In other words, whether you've done the work that God has given you to do.

In today's text, Jesus, as he nears the end of his life, turns to God in prayer. Recall that this passage is part of a larger section of John's Gospel in which Jesus has taken his disciples aside and is preparing them for his departure. He's instructing them, warning them, and equipping them. This whole discourse is sometimes described as Jesus' farewell prayer. Jesus turns from talking to the disciples to talking to God. And early in his prayer, Jesus says, "[Father], I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (v. 4).

Jesus' work, which culminates in his death, resurrection, and ascension, is to reveal the glory of God. That is, to make God's identity and purpose visible. God sent Jesus to give eternal life. And in his prayer, Jesus gives a one-sentence definition. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (v. 3). To know God means to respond to his summons to come into the loving unity that the Father and Son share with each other, and to be part of the work of revealing God's saving love to the world.

At the end of today's text, Jesus prays, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you" (v. 11a). Jesus knows that he's passing the baton to his disciples, who will continue his work of revealing God to the world. This may seem strange, in view what Jesus has already prayed about having completed the work God gave him to do. If Jesus will soon finish his assignment to save the world, to unify it to God, then why do his disciples need to pick up the task and carry it on after Jesus has returned to the Father? John's use of tenses can get confusing. But the bottom line is that viewed from God's perspective, the outcome, a redeemed world, is already certain. So followers of Jesus, then and now, can live as sent people, commissioned to do our part in revealing what's already been accomplished. That's what gives us our vocation.

We live out this calling, this vocation, in different settings, with different fields of training and expertise, under different conditions, at different stages of life. The new graduate who's on the verge of college or career is in a different phase of the journey from the retiree who's seated a little further down the pew. But their faith in Christ joins them to the same God who summons us to service, and gives us a shared vocation. The territories of life where we live out this calling will vary widely, but what binds us together is a shared task of making known the love of God, revealed in the Son.

I mentioned last Sunday's focus on the importance of wisdom. From a Christian standpoint, this means wisdom as a gift of God. This is important to keep in mind, especially as we journey through graduation season, when wisdom is being dispensed all over the place, especially in commencement ceremonies where speakers offer inspiration, motivation, and direction. Find your passion. Follow your dreams. Aim high. Reach for the stars. Though there's some truth in these admonitions, for followers of Jesus, the primary voice speaking into our lives, especially when we're at stages involving crucial decisions, is the voice of the Father. And through the Son, the Father has addressed us with a message of redeeming love, which includes the call to a life of service to God and others.

Commentator and columnist David Brooks once noted:

Commencement speakers are always telling young people to follow their passions. Be true to yourself. This is a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self. But people on the road to [character growth] do not find their vocations by asking, what do I want from life? They ask, what is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world's deep needs?<sup>1</sup>

Brooks had previously surmised, "Most successful young people don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life."<sup>2</sup>

Having a vocation means living a summoned life. Not primarily a life that you create, but a life that begins and ends in God the Creator, the Father who sent the Son, who sends you, equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit, to make the love of God visible to the world. You can't do this on your own. It only happens as you live in union with Christ, joined to him by faith, and joined to the community of his people, the church, where we help each other discern God's calling.

In one of his books, Parker Palmer, a Quaker, tells the story of how God used some of his friends to shape his vocational path. Palmer had been offered the opportunity to become the president of a small educational institution. He was certain the job was for him, but he honored the tradition of the Quaker community, which is to call on a dozen trusted friends to participate in a "clearness committee," a process in which "the group refrains from giving you advice but spends three hours asking you honest, open questions to help you discover your own inner truth." According to Palmer, the initial questions were all very easy, until someone simply asked, "What would you like most about being a president?" He writes:

The simplicity of that question loosed me from my head and lowered me into my heart. I remember pondering for at least a full minute before I could respond. Then, very softly and tentatively, I started to speak: "Well, I would not like having to give up my writing and my teaching. . . . I would not like the politics of the presidency, never knowing who your real friends are. . . . I would not like having to glad-hand people I do not respect simply because they have money. . . . I would not. . ."

Gently but firmly, the person who had posed the question interrupted me: "May I remind you that I asked what you would most *like*?"

I responded impatiently, "Yes, yes, I'm working my way toward an answer." Then I resumed my sullen but honest litany. . . .

Once again the questioner called me back to the original question. But this time I felt compelled to give the only honest answer I possessed, an answer that came from the very bottom of my barrel, an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it.

"Well," I said, in the smallest voice I possess, "I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word *president* under it."

I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence—a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan.

Finally my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up—and cracked me open: "Parker," he said, "can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life—so obvious that when the clearness committee ended, I called the school and withdrew my name from consideration. Had I taken that job, it would have been very bad for me and a disaster for the school.<sup>3</sup>

I can still hear that preacher telling those college students that when it comes to a choice between a title or a testimony—go for the testimony.

And you yourself, go for the testimony. Join your life to the Son, who is joined to the Father, and let your life be a living testimony to the redeeming love of God in the world.

Let who you are be determined not by your career but by the call of God, bringing you into service to him and to others. Come first to the very person of Jesus Christ, by faith live in communion with him, and your learning, your vocation, your work, in all its forms, will flow out of that relationship, bringing glory to God.

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, "The Moral Bucket List." *The New York Times* (April 11, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Brooks, "It's Not About You." *The New York Times* (May 31, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 45-46.