

What Is Your Calling in Life?

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Twenty-five years ago my dad dropped me off at Deseret Towers for my freshman year at BYU. I felt lonely in my dorm that first night, so I took a walk around campus at dusk. I remember looking at all of these stately buildings and envisioning their walls reverberating with great thoughts and words of wisdom. I was awestruck. In fact, I think that was the night I fell in love with BYU.

Now, as a BYU professor, I have the humbling responsibility to be one of the voices reverberating within the hallowed walls. I often question whether I measure up. But I'm unspeakably grateful to do the work I do and to do it here at BYU. I believe I have found my calling in life, and it brings me immense joy.

I'd like to ask each of you a personal question. What is *your* calling in life? If you don't know yet, how will you find out?

I have asked those questions to hundreds of students over the years. Usually, it creates a lot of anxiety. Some of you lose sleep over which class to take next semester, let alone what you should be when you grow up. Some of us grown-ups haven't really figured it out either. For many, deciding what to do with your life can feel like a personal crisis that doesn't go away.

As I begin my remarks, I want you to understand that finding my calling in life was not easy. My career path was circuitous, and I often felt great anxiety about it. I always knew I wanted to care passionately about my work, but for years I had no idea what that work should be. Several times I felt utterly adrift, as if I had somehow missed the path I should have taken and could never get back on it. In hindsight, those moments are important parts of the tapestry of my career. Each thread that felt out of place at the time now provides structure to the pattern of my life. They helped me distinguish and define my calling. I learned, to quote Romans 8:28, that all things do indeed "work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the *called* according to his purpose" (emphasis added).

My aim today is to encourage you to think about your future life's work *without* the anxiety—because when we ponder our calling in life through the lens of the restored gospel, we don't need to feel anxious.

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First, we need to explore what we mean by a “calling in life” to see whether the idea fits within the framework of the restored gospel. Actually, the idea of a professional calling is not ancient. It was brought into focus by Martin Luther, who revolutionized how the world looked at work. Prior to Luther, people viewed work as a necessary evil at best. The ancient Greeks considered work a galling distraction from the more sublime pursuits of the mind—a view that allowed them to justify slavery so that the elite class could focus on thinking great thoughts. Some early Christian traditions believed that work kept men from the holier pursuit of contemplating God’s greatness, and thus justified a monastic life devoid of labor, and sometimes even service.

Luther, however, saw the fallacy in these beliefs. His study of the Bible convinced him that work is how we participate in God’s providence toward His children. Lee Hardy, a scholar of Luther’s teachings, noted, “As we pray each morning for our daily bread, people are already busy at work in the bakeries” (Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990], 48).

Luther also taught how to find your calling. It was pretty simple: your calling was to do whatever your station in life dictated. If you grew up in a cobbler shop, your calling was to devote yourself to making shoes. And doing so, you participated in the work of God by covering the feet of His children. Luther believed that virtually any type of work could be a calling, so long as it rendered service to mankind.

John Calvin elaborated on Luther’s ideas in a way that may make them seem a little more applicable to us today. For Calvin, it wasn’t our position in the social structure that determined God’s calling for us. Rather, he argued that God endows each of us with particular talents and gifts, and that it is our calling to discover

those gifts and to seek out ways to use them in the service of our fellowmen. As he put it, “For as God bestows any ability or gift upon any of us, he binds us to such as have need of us and as we are able to help” (quoted in Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 62; also in *Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians* [London: Lucas Harison and George Bishop, 1574], 307; translation modified).

So the very roots of the idea of a professional calling are distinctly religious. Ironically, the world still embraces the notion of a professional calling, but it has almost entirely abandoned the spiritual roots of the idea. As sociologist Max Weber put it, “The idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs” (Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons [New York: Dover, 2003], 182).

Because society has drifted from the spiritual moorings of calling, it has developed some odd and distorted doctrines about *finding* your calling. In fact, I would like to refer to a few of these doctrines as heresies. That may seem like a strong word, but I believe it’s fitting because if we were to embrace these worldly doctrines, they would lead us far afield from how the Lord intends us to view our life’s work. I submit to you that these heresies are the very things that cause us so much anxiety when we are trying to decide what our calling in life is. So if we appeal to the restored gospel to dispel these heresies, we can replace anxiety with faith and hope.

The first heresy I’d like to discuss gets right to the heart of our anxiety. It is: “You might have a calling if you are lucky, or you might not.” To dispel this heresy, let’s look at a scripture I use as the theme for many of my classes. You have heard it many times, but I’d like to point out something that you may have missed. In D&C 58:27, the Lord asks His children to “be anxiously engaged in a good cause,

and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness." You might be tempted to think, "Well, that scripture refers to church work. It's not really relevant to my career." Are you sure about that? Would the Lord so pointedly command us to be *anxiously* engaged in good causes if he wanted us to spend a huge portion of our waking hours—eight to five, for instance—simply punching a clock? The Lord asks us to do "many things" in service to good causes. Why should our work not be one of them?

Now, here's the part you may not have thought about—I certainly hadn't until a few years ago: After the Lord charges us to anxiously pursue good causes, the next verse begins: "For the power is in them" (D&C 58:28). Think about that. The Lord hasn't just told you to pursue good causes, He has equipped you with power to do so. You—you personally—are full of divine capacities to do good that you probably don't even fully appreciate.

These verses testify that you are *not* part of a lottery system for life callings. You have a calling in life: to pursue good causes. And you have been given power to do just that.

But knowing that you have power to do good works is one thing; knowing specifically what you ought to do is quite another. How do you find your *particular* calling? That's the burning question for many of us.

Some are lucky enough to know at an early age what they are meant to do. Doctors, writers, and artists, for instance, often realize during childhood that they have a gift and never have to agonize about what work they will do. Most of us are not so fortunate, though. We are perplexed by a dizzying array of college majors, service opportunities, and job choices—many of which seem interesting, but perhaps none of them speak definitively to our souls. That was how I felt as an undergraduate at BYU. At various times I seriously considered becoming an attorney, a businessman, a linguist, a federal government official,

and a seminary teacher—never a professor, by the way. I liked all of those ideas but was overwhelmed by uneasiness every time I got close to committing to one of them.

The anxiety you might feel about choosing a career brings up the second heresy that we can dispel through an appeal to gospel truth. It is: "You have to find your one true calling in order to be fulfilled."

This heresy should remind you of your favorite fairy tale in which the princess finds her "one true love." Let's consult the scriptures again to see if they support the idea of a unique perfect fit.

D&C 46 enumerates many spiritual gifts that you might have been given—gifts of teaching, healing, or language. Some of these gifts don't seem particularly relevant to choosing a profession. But let's see what else the Lord tells us about spiritual gifts. Verses 11 and 12 read:

For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God.

To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby.

Note that there are many gifts, that they are distributed differently among us, and that they are given so we can bless one another. But the Lord does not say that He has listed every possible gift. In fact, Elder Bruce R. McConkie said that "spiritual gifts are endless in number and infinite in variety" (Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985], 371). Could this endless and infinite list include spiritual gifts relevant to our professional lives? We know that all things are spiritual to the Lord, so yes, of course our spiritual gifts have everything to do with our professional callings.

In fact, finding our calling in life involves the same process as discovering our spiritual gifts. Elder Robert D. Hales has provided some insight on this process:

To find the gifts we have been given, we must pray and fast. . . . I urge you each to discover your gifts and to seek after those that will bring direction to your life's work and that will further the work of heaven. [Robert D. Hales, "Gifts of the Spirit," *Ensign*, February 2002, 16]

As you consult your spiritual gifts, you may find that you don't feel an urgent pull to practice medicine or educate children, for instance. Maybe instead you just like working with people. That is the most common thing I hear from students who are perplexed about what type of work they should do. If you think your spiritual gifts lie somewhere in that ambiguous area, I challenge you to delve much deeper into what your specific gifts are. *How* do you like working with people? Our strongest gifts tend to appear early in life, so it might help if you think back on your childhood and about how and what you played. Were you the kid that always got the neighborhood baseball game going? Maybe you have a spiritual gift for organizing others into collective action. Were you a natural storyteller? Maybe you have a spiritual gift for presenting ideas in a compelling and dramatic way. Were you the person who other kids always sought out for sympathy and acceptance? Maybe you have a spiritual gift for listening and discerning others' emotions. Other types of gifts that you may notice in yourself include the ability to praise others effectively, to identify and encourage others' talents, to organize information in a concise manner, and to see a problem from multiple angles.

These sorts of gifts may not suggest a particular career path to you, and that may seem like a disadvantage. I challenge you to try thinking differently. The gifts I have just listed have market value. They are also highly portable. You might express those gifts in many professions or organizations. Consequently, finding your calling in life *may not* be a matter of finding the one right job. Instead, it may

be that your calling is to bring your unique spiritual gifts to whatever position the Lord blesses you with.

If you exercise faith in the Lord, follow His spirit, and seek to amplify your gifts, you will be led gradually to a place where you are well equipped to serve. I have seen it happen over and over. I have a colleague, tremendously respected in his field, who became an auditor—not by long-term planning, but by a series of minor circumstances that led him gradually and unintentionally to his profession. He could never have predicted the fulfillment his career would give him. We usually can't predict exactly where our gifts will lead us. But in retrospect, we will see the hand of the Lord leading us from door to door and opportunity to opportunity as we exercise and hone our spiritual gifts.

This principle is particularly important in today's economy. We faculty are keenly aware of how challenging it is for our students to find jobs today. You cannot control the economy. As a result, there is a temptation to feel like a victim or to give in to despair. When you are negatively affected by unstable economic conditions, focus on your gifts, which *are* stable. You may have to take a job that is below your level of qualification. If so, perform the work with drive, and use your gifts to put your unique stamp on your contributions. Doing so will increase your chances of finding better employment later.

You may even suffer joblessness for a time. Research shows that unemployment can have a devastating long-term impact on self-confidence, on health, and on happiness. I submit that having a sense of calling is part of your inoculation against the vicissitudes of the job market. Know yourself. Know what your gifts are. And define yourself by your gifts—not by your lack of a job. Contrary to what the world might tell you, you don't have to have a job to express your calling in life. If the world at present is not willing to pay you for what you can

do, then donate your spiritual gifts to worthy causes—perhaps through public service or volunteering—until the value of those gifts becomes so evident that people want to pay you a fair wage for them. Even in a booming economy, you may have to create your own opportunities to fulfill your calling in life. Despite what most fairy tales imply, real-life princes and princesses don't just wait around for their dreams—or dream jobs—to come true.

Speaking of dream jobs brings us to the third heresy: “When you find your calling, work will be bliss.” This is a particularly pervasive heresy today. The media implores you to build a career that is exciting and intensely fulfilling. Now, I am certainly an advocate of enjoying your work! But it is a distortion of the idea of calling to think that work should always be fun.

As an example, let me share with you the story of some people I have recently studied: zookeepers. I chose to study zookeepers because they are passionate about the work they do, even though they make little money and have few opportunities for career advancement. Learning about what “calling” means to zookeepers was eye-opening. As you might expect, zookeepers find their work very meaningful. They care for their animals as if they were their own children, and they feel great satisfaction when they can enrich their animals' lives and maintain their health. They believe deeply in conservation and see themselves as educators of the public about species preservation. By and large, they are almost outrageously satisfied with their work.

But is every day fun for them? Hardly. When zookeepers talked about their work as a calling, they spoke not just about satisfaction but also about sacrifice—caring for sick animals in the middle of the night, doing unsavory work, foregoing a comfortable living, and the list goes on. I learned something tremendously important from my study of zookeepers. For them, the pain and burdens and sacrifice were

not threats to their sense of calling—they were *part* of it. The work was meaningful *because of* the trials and burdens. That is an important lesson. We can't expect deep meaningfulness from our calling unless we are willing to assume its burdens as well.

Joseph Campbell, a professor of literature who studied and taught about hero myths, introduced the phrase “follow your bliss” back in the 1970s. The idea was that heroes don't chase money or prestige; they look into their hearts to find their passion and then pursue it (see Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers [New York: Doubleday, 1988]). Now you see the phrase “follow your bliss” everywhere. Later, Campbell developed misgivings about how people were using the phrase. It was reported that he quipped, “What I should have said was, ‘Follow your blisters.’” Brothers and sisters, you may do the most important, exciting work in the world. Nonetheless, some days will be mundane and no fun at all—kind of like the days I spend grading papers. You will be called upon to sacrifice. Don't expect deep meaning without paying the price for it.

A related heresy is: “Finding a calling means that the world will take notice.” If you expect the world to loudly applaud your calling in life, you may be disappointed. This point reminds me of one of the zookeepers I interviewed. One day when he was busily caring for an animal, a nun came by with a group of her students. Within earshot of the zookeeper she said, “See the kind of job you get when you don't finish your education!” Ironically, the zookeeper actually had a college degree.

I would like to tell you about my friend Barb, who was a custodian at my previous university. She was a tiny dynamo of a woman probably in her early 50s. Every afternoon she came into my office, a smiling flurry of activity, to take out my trash. She often asked if there was some special task she might do to make my office cleaner. I rarely took her up on her

offer, but I came to realize that it really made her happy when I did. One day I asked her, “Barb, how do you feel about your job?” She beamed. “I love it,” she said. “I’m so happy to be a part of this school and just really like making it a better place. Plus,” she added proudly, “I’m really good at it.” And she was! Barb did make the university a better place. It occurred to me that when I saw her enthusiasm, it made me want to be a better professor. I wish I had told her that, but I don’t recall ever doing so.

I challenge you to look for examples of nobility among those who do the so-called menial tasks all around you. You will find many inspiring examples of people who use their spiritual gifts to serve in quiet but remarkable ways. We do great violence to the souls of those who offer their callings in less-glamorous ways when we consider them invisible or treat them as minor cast members in the great drama of our professional lives. The Savior saw nobility in “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). And getting to know the Barbs in your life will inspire you to be your best in whatever you are called to do.

If you find your calling leads you to work that is less than glamorous, take heed to what John Calvin said: “No task will be so sordid and base . . . that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight” (quoted in Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 90; also in John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 3.10.6, 725). The Book of Mormon also promotes an egalitarian spirit about work. Among the Nephites, priests probably held more status than anyone but the king. And yet, Alma 1:26 tells us that even priests were to labor for their own support, with the priest “not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, . . . and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength.” It is a heresy that work is meaningful only when it gives us

status and esteem. When we work to impress or outshine others, we violate the Lord’s vision of work.

Now, I’d like to speak to you about the last and most insidious heresy about work. It’s insidious because it’s *almost* true. The heresy is: “Meaningfulness in life is to be found at work.” This idea has become a foundational doctrine of the world. Many people identify themselves primarily by their professions. Once again, I emphasize that I am in favor of working passionately. However, there is a danger that meaningful work might distract us from the weightier matters of eternal life. As one wise person noted, in the eternal scheme of things, our jobs will someday seem to us like playthings. Work is simply one stage upon which we can act out our service to God and our fellowmen.

The fifth heresy is almost true because our worthwhile work can indeed give us a sense of meaning. But the idea that meaning comes primarily from our work entirely misses the point, because it focuses on the self. Imagine, if you would, a great artist who creates stunning and inspiring masterpieces but then hoards them in her attic, where only she can enjoy them. Certainly she may take pleasure in her creations, but it is through enriching others that the artist makes her contribution to the world. As the fifth heresy suggests, we can indeed find personal meaning in our work, but the real point is that the Lord expects us to render meaningful service through work. True meaning, as always, comes from service.

Allow me to share a simple experience from my mission. As I was nearing my release date, I anticipated a sense of loss when I could no longer give all my time to serving God. At a zone conference, my mission president opened the floor for Q&A on any topic. I raised my hand and asked, “After our missions are over and we are no longer full-time servants of God, how can we keep a sense of purpose?” Before the mission president could answer, his wife

leapt to her feet and, literally elbowing him aside, said, “I’ll take this one.”

I will never forget her response. As near as I can recall, she said, “When I do the laundry, I am building the kingdom of God. When I scrub the floors, I am serving the Lord. When I tidy the clutter, I’m an instrument in His hands. I do a lot of mundane jobs, but if my eye is single to God and I’m trying to serve my family, then I feel as much purpose in my work as a missionary can.” Those words remind me of what King Benjamin said about laboring in the fields to support himself—a decidedly unkingly occupation. He said, “I do not desire to boast, for I have only been in the service of God” (Mosiah 2:16).

So perhaps the state of our hearts is as important as the tasks we do in determining whether our work is truly—and eternally—meaningful. D&C 117 reinforces this idea. In this section, the Lord extends a professional calling to Oliver Granger. He is called to Zion, where “he shall be made a merchant unto my name . . . for the benefit of my people” (verse 14). What’s striking is that two verses later, the Lord promises to “overthrow the moneychangers in mine own due time” (verse 16). So what is the difference between a merchant unto the Lord’s name and a moneychanger whom the Lord will expel? The work they do must look very similar. But in the case of Oliver Granger, he was called to do his work in the service of God and man, *not* in the service of himself, and certainly not in the service of his own bank account.

We need to be very cautious about our motives for the work we do. It’s tempting to say, “I serve my family when I’m at home, I serve God when I’m at church, and I serve my career when I’m at work.” This approach moves us perilously close to becoming moneychangers. We must see our work as but another extension of the Lord’s commandment to serve His children and “bring to pass much righteousness.”

How does this measure up to the world’s teaching that you have to take care of number one, climb the corporate ladder, get ahead? One of the great gospel ironies is that when we lose ourselves, we find ourselves. Work is much the same. I testify that when you focus your work first and foremost on blessing others, you will become extraordinary at what you do and will find fulfillment and success much more reliably than if you spend your time at work trying to get ahead or get rich. My brothers and sisters, work to serve! Remember the words that greet you at the gateway of the university: “Enter to learn; go forth to serve.”

In closing, I testify that our Heavenly Father is intimately involved in the doors that open for us and in the circumstances that lead us to the places we should be—the places where we are equipped, with power, to serve. Have faith that your unseen Navigator will lead you gradually to your life’s calling.

I also testify that, as with all important questions, when it comes to asking what our calling in life is, Jesus Christ is in the answer. The grace of Christ, that same power that helps us do things we otherwise couldn’t, is what will guide us to our callings and enable us to excel in them. You can call upon the grace of Christ to help you with your professional calling. In fact, He pleads with us to do so. In Alma, He invites us to pray over our flocks (see Alma 34:20). Even if we are not shepherds by trade, we all tend professional flocks, and He is mindful of them. Knowing that helps us expel anxiety.

Lastly, may I conclude with a personal word to you students here at BYU. We, the faculty, love you. You are *our* flocks. You are our calling in life. And the finest expression of our labors will be the good that you do in the world with the things you learned at BYU. My dear brothers and sisters, follow your bliss, follow your blisters, and go forth to serve. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.