

## A Life of Calling

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Rich Nathan  
February 20 & 21, 2016  
The Good Life  
Matthew 3:13-17

How many of you were asked when you were children or when you were teens: “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

How old were you when you were first asked that question? Hold up the number of fingers – was it three, four, five?

I was raised in a Jewish family. When I was first asked the question at, I think, age three: “So, Richard what do you want to be when you grow up?”

My mother would answer: “He wants to be a doctor!”

So growing up I always thought, because I heard it from my mother a thousand times, I guess I want to be a doctor. Even in my high school yearbook, under my photo, regarding future goals I wrote “Medicine”.

I went to Case Western Reserve University up in Cleveland on a scholarship and was pre-med for a year and a half. During that year and a half, I discovered two things. First, I really don’t love Science at all. I love the Liberal Arts – I love History, I love Philosophy, I love Religion. I love the Social Sciences. I love Economics and Sociology and Psychology. Second, as important as my lack of love for Science, I don’t like hospitals. Medicine wasn’t exactly a good fit for someone who doesn’t enjoy Science and who doesn’t really love being around sick people. Once I gave up Medicine as a goal, the question was “Now what?” How do I figure out what I want to be when I grow up?

In David Brooks’ book, *The Road to Character*

Picture of Book cover

He tells the story of Frances Perkins, who was the first female member of a Presidential Cabinet. Frances was raised in a very genteel old New England family. She was living in New York City lobbying to end child labor. On March 25, 1911, as she sat down to tea with a few of her friends in New York they heard a commotion going on outside as people were running. A butler rushed in and announced there was a fire near the square. The ladies ran out. Perkins lifted up her skirts and sprinted towards the fire. It was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, one of the most famous fires in American history.

## Photo of the fire

Perkins stood below. She could see the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the building ablaze. The workers on those floors were crowded near the windows. People below thought that they were watching bundles of fabric being thrown from the windows. But as the bundles fell, they realized that they weren't bundles of fabric at all. They were women hurling themselves from the burning building to their deaths. These women were holding on as long as they could on the windowsills, being crowded from behind by others. The fire was pressing in closer and closer, and then they began to jump.

47 people ended up jumping. All of them died. The horror of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire traumatized the city. There was not only anger at the owners of the factory, but realization that the city had done nothing to regulate the conditions that these mainly immigrant women were working in.

Watching the fire changed Frances Perkins' life forever. Up to that point, she was content to lobby for better working conditions and against child labor. Now, moral indignation seized her. Her career turned into a calling. Her desire to provide for workers shaped the trajectory of Frances Perkins' choices for the next nearly four decades.

There is a biography written about Frances Perkins titled *The Woman Behind the New Deal*. She was one of only two members of Franklin Roosevelt's cabinet that stayed on to serve him through the 12 years of his presidency. As Labor Secretary, she was behind the push for minimum wage laws, for the creation of Social Security, for the abolition of child labor, for job and public works programs, for overtime pay. In the moment of watching women jump to their deaths from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, Frances Perkins knew that she had received her calling. She had an answer to the question: "What are you going to do when you grow up?"

Last week, I started a six weeks series on The Good Life, living the life God created us to live. Last week I mentioned to you that we're inviting the entire church and many in our community to walk together with us as we explore different aspects of The Good Life. Everyone from toddlers to elementary school kids, middle schoolers, high schoolers, young adults, older adults – we're all looking at what The Good Life is and how we can personally experience it.

This weekend is the very last weekend to join one of The Good Life small groups. We now have over 700 small groups going through this Good Life series. After this weekend, the groups will be closed so that people will have an opportunity to form together into a small group. If you are not currently connected to a small group, this weekend is your

last chance. Go out to the lobby following the service and sign up to join one of our small groups, it'll be your last opportunity until Easter.

So, what do you want to be when you grow up? How do you discover the fundamental purpose that God has for your life? As I continue to explore the meaning of The Good Life, we're going to find today that one aspect of living The Good Life is living "A Life of Calling". Let's pray.

Let's read Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Last week, I said the prevailing philosophy in America today is something called:

Expressive Individualism

To live a good life, you need to be true to yourself. You need to be authentic. You don't want to be a fake. You don't want to live a lie. I said that there's something really right and good about the desire to be authentic, to be real, and to not be conformed to someone else's notion of what you should do or be. There's something really right about that, but what is wrong with expressive individualism is how we find that authentic self. Expressive individualism says that you look inside.

I suggested to you then and I'll remind you again that when we look inside we're not really marching to the beat of our own drummer. Instead, we're just echoing a beat that is increasingly sold to us by some marketing machine or big business. I was reading a story just this past week about a 13-year old boy who wants to think of himself as radically countercultural – a real rebel. His mom just bought him a \$200 skateboard that's covered with graffiti-like slogans and it says across the skateboard, "Anarchy".

Picture of the skateboard

This kid didn't look inside and think up that skateboard. Even though he doesn't realize it, he's following some marketer. The marketer has come up with an edgy, angry-

sounding design of what 13-year old's ought to be into in order to get moms to shell out \$200 to buy skateboards for their kids.

We all are followers. We are all imitating some model. I suggested to you last week that much of the good life turns on who you're going to choose as your model for life. Who have you chosen as your model for living well? Who is it that you could unreservedly follow? If you imitated their life, you could say, "Ah, that would be The Good Life."

I believe there's no better model for living life the way it ought to be lived than Jesus. He was the most giving, the most forgiving, the most loving, the most joyful, the most peaceful, the most patient, the most kind, the most truthful, the most free, the most amazing who ever lived. Before we explore the issue of our calling, we need to begin with the foundation on which our calling is built. That is knowing our identity.

### I. Knowing our identity

Let's read Matthew 3:17 again

Matthew 3:17

17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

There is a famous story told about Margaret Thatcher during the time that she was Prime Minister of England. She was visiting a senior citizen center, going from one room to another, meeting the old people who had lived there a long time. One older woman showed no particular sign of recognizing that she was shaking hands with a world-famous politician. So, Margaret Thatcher said to this old woman, "Do you know who I am?" The old woman answered, "No, dear. But I would ask the nurse, if I were you. She usually knows who we are." It is a terrible thing to not know who you are.

Who am I? Who are you? Beyond our names and our jobs or what year we are in school, beyond our roles in our families or in the church, beyond our collection of memories, who are we? The importance of identity, of knowing who we are, has been the subject of repeated discussion by the greatest Christian thinkers in church history.

John Calvin, one of the great fathers of the Protestant Reformation began his most famous work, The Institutes of Christian Religion, this way:

Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

He said these two things are connected.

Without knowing yourself, you cannot really know God. Without knowing God, you really can't know yourself.

In other words, without being in a life changing relationship with God, you will forever be a mystery to yourself. Only by getting to know God better, will you know yourself better because you are made in God's image. Until you know God and until you know yourself, you can't live a good life. You'll just be walking through the world blindly – un-self-aware, because you are un-God-aware.

If Jesus is our model, how did Jesus find his identity? What he didn't do was find his identity by listening to what people said about him, because we know what people said about him. People around Jesus accused him of being demonized. They called him a "Samaritan." In those days, that would be like calling someone a "liberal." Conservative Pharisees said to Jesus, "You are a liberal. You are a Samaritan. You are demon-possessed." In John 10:20 we read this:

John 10:20

20 Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?"

You are a raving lunatic, Jesus. Some people said, "You are a drunkard; you are a glutton." "You are not orthodox in your faith. You are a deceiver of the masses. You are illegitimate. You are a bastard because your mother, Mary, got pregnant out of wedlock."

Where did Jesus get his identity from? It wasn't by listening to what people said about him. It was by listening to what God his Father said about him. When Jesus was baptized, here is what we read again in Matthew 3:17

Matthew 3:17

17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

The anchor for Jesus' soul was that he knew himself to be the beloved of God, the infinitely loved Son of God. Jesus wasn't searching for identity by the size of the crowd that was following him. Jesus didn't find identity by competing with the other religious leaders of his day and discovering that he was more popular. He didn't lose a sense of identity when the crowds began to dissipate, and he lost market share and business. Jesus didn't form his identity around how much he knew or even how much he prayed. The anchor for Jesus' soul was this rock solid faith that he was loved by God.

Let me ask you an honest question, of those of you who are followers of Christ, I know not everyone here is a follower of Christ, but if I may speak to Christians for just a

moment. How often do you allow yourself to sit back and bask in the reality that God loves you? I'm not asking how successful you are, how many people you're serving, how many folks you've helped, what degrees are on your wall or how your family is doing. I'm not asking these questions. I'm just asking the simple question: how often in the last week, in the last month, in the last six months, have you sat back and allowed yourself to bask in the reality that God loves you? It almost feels self-indulgent, doesn't it? With all the needs around us. And yet, the good life springs from this continual soaking in, bathing in, drenching of our souls in the love of God.

To know you that you are loved by God. Not because you were promoted, or your boss recognized your work, or you got into your first choice of colleges, or you made Varsity on your high school team, or you make a lot of money – to know you are loved by God, not even because of your spiritual practices, the fact that you prayed this morning or read your Bible, or you're being faithful to your Lenten disciplines (whatever you said you were going to do for Lent), or you're leading a Good Life group – to come to a place to say "None of those things are at the foundation of my identity".

Let me drill a little deeper here. We need to get to the bedrock of living the good life by discovering of the only sure foundation for identity. The foundation for healthy identity is the gospel. You might immediately respond and say, "The pastor is getting religious on us now!" I would immediately answer and say, "The Christian gospel is completely different than religion."

## II. Knowing the Gospel

Here's what we read from the Bible in Romans 5:6

Romans 5:6

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

What the Apostle Paul, who wrote this, is saying is that at the very moment when we are at our worst, when if somebody watched us on video, if they saw what we were doing or heard our language or watched us freaking out, they would think we were lunatics or hypocrites or disgusting. The Apostle Paul says that at the very moment of our worst failures, our biggest embarrassments, when we've been the world's most colossal fools, at that very moment Christ chose to die, to pay for our sins. At the moment of our greatest helplessness. At that moment, Christ died to save us.

Religion says:

I make a sacrifice – therefore I'm accepted

The Gospel says:

I'm accepted – because Christ made a sacrifice

Let's just pause for a moment. Why do you believe you are accepted by God, right now, or at any given moment over the last week or month - because you sacrificed something for God? Because you gave money to charity? Because you work with underprivileged people when you could make a lot more money in business. That's religion. The reason we're accepted, friend, is not because of our sacrifice, but because of Christ's sacrifice. Because he lived a perfect life. Because he died a sacrificial death as our substitute to pay for our sins – that's why we're accepted.

Religion says:

When circumstances in my life go wrong or I fail in my career or in school, I am angry at God or myself, since I believe that anyone is good is owed a successful life.

The Gospel says:

When circumstances in my life go wrong I struggle, but I know that while God may allow this difficulty for my training, my Father in heaven always loves me!

Let me ask you question. How do you interpret difficulty? Are you mad at God or mad at yourself because you're going through difficulties? That is religion. Because you believe that by your performance you are owed something by God. If you are living from the Gospel, you say "This is really hard. This really hurts. But I know that God loves me and I can trust him with my future."

Religion says:

My identity and self-worth are based on whether other people believe that my career is prestigious, my house is beautiful, and my children are successful.

The Gospel says:

My identity and self-worth are centered on the One who died a shameful death on a cross because he loved me. Therefore, I am free to pursue callings that may not be "high status" or "prestigious" in the eyes of the world.

And if your identity and self-worth is based upon how some other person or group perceives your accomplishments, you are enslaved by always having to appear successful in every area of your life. But if your identity is based on the gospel, you are free to be real, to allow others to see you as you are, and to pursue career and life choices based upon the person God created you to be.

So, knowing our identity and knowing the Gospel is the bedrock foundation for living the Good Life. Let's now consider the issue of knowing our calling

### III. Knowing our calling

Again, since Jesus is our model, let's look at his calling

#### A. Jesus' calling

Matthew 3:5-6

<sup>5</sup> People went out to him [John the Baptist] from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. People came to the Jordan River confessing their sins, repenting, getting right with God, and then followed that up by getting baptized by this prophet, John.

In contrast, here's what we read about Jesus in verses 13-14

Matthew 3:13-14

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus did not come to the Jordan River confessing his sins, repenting, getting right with God in order to be baptized. Jesus had no sins to confess. He didn't need to repent. He was already right with God! So, for Jesus, baptism was not an outward sign of having his sins washed away by God through confession and repentance. Why did Jesus get baptized?

Matthew 3:15

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

Jesus is saying: "I'm not here to deal with my own sins, but to respond to God's call on my life to identify with sinners, to die for sinners and to satisfy God's demand for righteousness and perfect obedience."

Jesus was called to identify with sinners. Did you know that the Jordan River where John the Baptist was baptizing is the lowest place on the earth? That it's hundreds of feet below sea level? There's no place on land that's lower than where John the Baptist was baptizing. You see, Jesus' life calling was a call to identify with sinners by getting on the down elevator and always going lower. Jesus traveled to the lowest place. The Son of God stepped out of heaven, and lowered himself by becoming a man on earth. Not only a man, but Jesus went even lower. He allowed himself to be tried on trumped up charges, to be found guilty even though he was innocent, and then lower still, to be beaten, spit on, and crucified naked on a cross.

Why did Jesus do that? In obedience to God's call on his life to identify with sinners – to be our substitute, to pay the penalty of our sins by dying in our place, in order that we might be forgiven. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness, which includes God's demand for



perfect obedience and God's requirement that sins be paid for by death. That was Jesus' calling.

Why did he not opt for a calling that was more prestigious? More successful in the eyes of the world? Higher paying? Again, because his identity was not based upon what others thought. Jesus lived the good life – he was constantly aware that he belonged to God and was loved by God.

What is our calling?

## B. Our calling

In America today, and much of the Western World, we begin with our goals – what we want to accomplish with our lives – and then we strategize toward the achievement of our goals. But if Jesus is your model as we've just seen, we don't create our destinies, the path that we're designed to walk on in our lives. The Good Life is not self-created by looking inside ourselves and figuring out what we want. The Good Life is a response to the call of God.

To quote David Brooks from his book *The Road to Character*,

You don't ask, What do I want from life? You ask a different set of questions: What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do? In this scheme of things we don't create our lives; we are summoned by life. The important answers are not found inside, they are found outside.

I might just modify that to say that the question is not What do I want from God? The question is What does God want from me? What's God calling me (and you) to?

So, what is God summoning us to? What are we called to? Our first calling is not to a career or job, an activity. Our first calling is

### 1. We are called to relationship with Christ

Listen to these verses,

Romans 1:6

And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:9

God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are called into relationship with Jesus Christ. Friends, the central meaning of life will never be found in the job you do or the career you want. However much or little you love your job, the central meaning and purpose of life are found in your relationship with God. The most basic question you could ask of human beings is what are you looking for? What are you longing for? What will satisfy the deepest desires of your heart? The answer, whether you know it or not, is the only thing that will satisfy the deepest desires of your heart is a life changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

As the great Saint Augustine said at the end of the fourth century

“Lord, You have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.”

As our first and primary calling, our relationship with Christ needs to take priority over everything else. You know, when Jesus called his disciples, Peter and Andrew, he said to them

“Come, follow me!”

At once, they left their careers as fishermen and followed him. Then he called James and John. It was the same thing.

“Come, follow me!”

And, right there, they left their father, and their families and they followed Christ. To traditional cultures where there’s nothing more important than loyalty to your family, Jesus says “I want your relationship with me to take priority even over your relationship with family.”

And to our contemporary Western culture, where’s there’s nothing more important than our jobs and our careers, Jesus is saying, “I want your relationship with me to take priority even over your job and your career.” Our first calling is a calling to an unconditional, unreserved relationship with Christ.

And second,

## 2. We are called to relationship with God’s people

Here’s what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 9:25 & 26

Romans 9:25-26

25 As he says in Hosea:

“I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people;  
and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,”[a]  
26 and,  
“In the very place where it was said to them,  
‘You are not my people,’  
there they will be called ‘children of the living God.’”

Being part of a small group where you are known and others know you is part of living out The Good Life. It is incredible to experience the support of others who are not our blood relatives, but who choose as an act of love to come alongside of us, to help us in this often very difficult journey called life. If we’re going to learn to follow Jesus and live out our primary calling, we won’t be able to do that without the secondary calling of walking arm in arm with God’s people. Are you involved in a small group of folks who are all together pursuing a relationship with God?

Church isn’t a place that we go to. Church is our people, our community, our family. It’s in the context of a small group that you begin to discover more and more who you are and what you’re made for. So, you can begin to answer the question: What do I want to be when I grow up?

Which leads to the third thing,

### 3. We are called to serve others

The kids who are listening to me today wouldn’t know - indeed it’s hard for us adults to even remember - but a generation or two ago there were no vanity plates on cars. People didn’t brag about their college or vacation spots with little stickers on the rear windows of their cars. People didn’t wear little ribbons to advertise what disease they had. A generation ago, there wasn’t any social media in which you could share with the world every thought that came into your head. Every feeling you had. Or a picture of every meal you ate in a restaurant. It’s hard to remember, but there was a time when folks didn’t advertise to everyone else in the entire world all their experiences and all their feelings. We live in a time of massive self-advertising. Look at me! I’m the greatest! I’m amazing!

Listen to this statistic: In 1950, the Gallup Organization asked high school seniors if they considered themselves to be a very important person. At that point, 12% said yes. The same question was asked in 2005, and this time it wasn’t 12% who considered themselves to be very important. It was 80%!

But if we are going to follow Christ, he has a revolutionary perspective concerning how we choose our jobs and our careers, how we understand our purpose in the world. According to Jesus’ model, we shouldn’t choose jobs or conduct our work in order to

fulfill ourselves or to gain more power or prestige for ourselves. Being in relationship with Christ is empowering enough! Instead, we are summoned by God to see our work as a way of serving God and a way of serving others in the world. So, the way we choose our work is not to ask the question “What will make me the most money? What will give me the most prestige? What will make others believe that I am a success?” The question instead is “How can I with my abilities and my opportunities be of greatest service to God and to other people?”

And, wherever you find yourself - do that service with excellence. Say you work in a fast food restaurant. In that context, you are called to serve others – your fellow employees, your boss, your customers. You’re at that fast food restaurant to serve God, to serve others and do your work with excellence. To serve those burgers or sandwiches with a smile. To wash that floor until it shines. To go over and above in caring about your co-workers. We are called to a relationship with Christ. We are called to a relationship with God’s people. We’re called to serve others with excellence.

And finally,

#### 4. We are called to particular tasks

God summons people to particular tasks. How do we know which tasks?

Here’s the problem. In a fallen world, many folks do not ever experience much overlap between what they are by way of their passions and the opportunity that has been provided for them in paid work. It is obviously the case that if you grow up in Africa, or most of Asia, or in South America, you may have the mind of a philosopher or the potential to be a great musician. But those opportunities are simply not there for you. You are going to be a farmer just like your father was a farmer. And even in America, sometimes we have the skills, and we may have the passion and ambition to do certain kinds of work, but the doors simply don’t open for us. Or if they open and we find the job we think is perfect, the doors might suddenly shut and we are laid off, the company closes or the company moves.

Sometimes our discontent may be the result of God nudging us to move from success to significance. The Holy Spirit may be saying, “I want you to use your gifts not to make a huge amount of money but to help hundreds of kids, or to work on behalf of women and children who are being trafficked, or to do something else that will impact the world for good that’s been in your heart for years. I want you to do something even more significant than your current successful career.”

Work is not going to be perfected until Christ returns. In the meantime, whether through your job, your school, in the context of your family life, in the context of the church, I do believe we can more and more experience what the Scottish runner Eric

Liddell said in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Eric Liddell was a Scottish sprinter. He was raised in a devout Christian family. His sister felt that his running was frivolous, it was a waste of time. Here is how Eric Liddell responded,

“God made me for a purpose... but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.”

Picture of Eric Liddell

Let me ask you in closing, friend. What is your sweet spot? Where is it that you can say: God made me what? What did God make you to be? When you do that thing, everything inside converges and you say, “I feel the pleasure of God.” In our small group this week, we went around the room and asked each other that question – what do you do that when you do that thing you feel like you are being an instrument of God? You say that’s what makes you feel his pleasure. You are a conduit, a pipe through which God is pouring his Spirit. We had the most amazing time as folks shared – not their career successes or their resumes, but something much closer to their hearts. Here’s the way God created me – when I do this thing, I experience the good life. I pray that each of you might discover God’s unique call on your life. Let’s pray.

## A Life of Calling

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Rich Nathan  
February 20 & 21, 2016  
The Good Life  
Matthew 3:13-17

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