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## IN SEARCH OF A CALLING

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*Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves. Only such a larger purpose can inspire us to heights we know we could never reach on our own. For each of us the real purpose is personal and passionate: to know what we are here to do, and why.*

OS GUINNESS

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A *USA Today* poll found that if people could ask God just one question, most would want to know, "What's my purpose in life?" Periodically, we find ourselves questioning who we really are and what we are supposed to do in life. These thoughts may nudge us gently or they may launch a season of upheaval in our lives.

We may feel unsettled and restless, sensing that there are truths about ourselves to uncover and mysteries to unravel about why we are here on earth. We dare to believe that there *is* something special within us, and that we *do* have a life mission to find and fulfill. We may not be sure how to discover this purpose but feel driven to do so. Although we may describe our quest as a search for our calling, we may not be entirely sure what it is that we seek.

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### Looking for Our Place

"Most of us are looking for a calling, not a job," says Nora Watson in her interview for Studs Terkel's classic book *Working*. "Most of us . . .

have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people.” Nora speaks for those who feel trapped in work that provides a paycheck but gives little room for using their gifts or doing something that is personally meaningful. She compared her job with that of her father, who had felt his work was “a profession of himself” and a calling.

Throughout our lives we try to find our place in the grand scheme of things. Marianne, age twenty, voiced the struggle to find her identity in life: “I believe God is calling me to use my gifts, but I don’t know exactly what they are. I’m trying to figure out what he wants me to do, but feel rather lost.” John, thirty-five, described his need for a new direction: “If I died tomorrow, my years of work will have had little meaningful impact in this world. Success isn’t enough anymore. I know I should be doing something different, but I have no idea what that would be.” At forty-eight, Jackie was taking a new look at herself: “My children are grown and I want to find out what I should be doing now.”

## Secular View of Calling

The American culture encourages us to look to our work for our sense of purpose and calling. Today, “work is fast replacing religion in providing meaning in people’s lives. Work has become how we define ourselves. It is now answering the traditional religious questions: Who am I? How do I find meaning and purpose? Work is no longer just about economics; it’s about identity.”<sup>1</sup> We have been told that finding our calling is the same as getting our dream job, doing what we love, or finding our right livelihood. Therefore we are left feeling “uncalled” if we are not using our gifts within work we value.

Equating calling with work is not new; it began hundreds of years ago with the Puritans. In his book *The Call*, Os Guinness describes how “such words as *work*, *trade*, *employment*, and *occupation* came to be used interchangeably with *calling* and *vocation*. As this happened, the guidelines for callings shifted; instead of being directed by the commands of God, they were seen as directed by duties and roles in society. Eventually the day came when faith and calling were separated

completely.”<sup>2</sup> From this secularized perspective of calling, we are led to believe that we have no more significant purpose than to work.

Without a doubt, work *is* important. Most of us spend 60 percent or more of our lives working. At its best, work uses our unique gifts and abilities and provides opportunities to make a difference in the world around us. Discontentment with work can be agonizing, affecting every area of our lives. Helping you discover your giftedness and find your calling within work and volunteer activities are key goals of this book.

The Bible, however, reveals that work is *not* our central calling. There are no biblical examples of someone being called to paid employment.<sup>3</sup> Although God has designed each of us for special tasks and assignments, his calling for us is much greater and more soul-satisfying than a summons to work.

## Called to Know the Caller

Before being called to something, we are called to Someone. Before we are called to *do*, we are called to *be*. Our *primary calling*<sup>4</sup> is to be in a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that God has *called* us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> God created us and knows our strengths, weaknesses, dreams, and fears. In spite of our imperfections, God loves us perfectly and completely. He wants us close to him. He calls us to belong to him.

Garrison Keillor recalled painful childhood memories of being chosen last for baseball teams. He dreamed of just one time being picked first—of hearing the team captain say, “‘Him, I want *him!*’ . . . But I’ve never been chosen with much enthusiasm.”

In contrast, the gospel message is that God chooses each of us with great enthusiasm. None of us is a last pick, or chosen grudgingly. To each of us God says, “You! I want *you!*” God has created us to be his and to have a significant place in this world.

Our primary calling is not tied to our employment. We don’t lose our calling if we lose a job. We can live our calling even if we are unemployed or in work that doesn’t fit us well.

we are, not for what we can produce or achieve within work. God's call to us is an eternal one that encompasses and transcends our temporal activities. (See "Your Most Important Calling" on our Website, [www.LiveYourCalling.com](http://www.LiveYourCalling.com), if you would like to know more about your primary calling to a personal relationship with God.)

When one of us responds to God's call to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, he or she enters into a new relationship with God<sup>6</sup> and a brand new life.<sup>7</sup> Jesus then calls us to become his disciples, or students, so that we can learn from him how to grow in the knowledge and power of our new life.<sup>8</sup> (See Appendix C for information about the spiritual disciplines and other resources for spiritual growth.) In the New Testament, *calling* represents the life of faith itself. We are exhorted to "walk worthy"<sup>9</sup> of the calling we have received. Dallas Willard describes the crucial idea of discipleship as "learning from Jesus to live *my* life as he would live my life if he were I."<sup>10</sup>

As disciples, we seek to live as God's people wherever we are and in whatever we do. God thus works through our individual lives to do the work of his kingdom. This was beautifully illustrated at a conference on spiritual renewal when a group of participants shared how they had seen God's Spirit at work in their lives in the preceding week.

One woman described how she believed God was using a column she writes in her company's newsletter to bring healing to the disension-torn organization. Two men brought God's kingdom into a restaurant by praying with their waitress about her fear of developing a debilitating physical condition. A college student taking a class in Eastern religions found that his teacher and classmates were curious about the Christian spiritual disciplines he practiced and were asking him many questions about his faith.

As each person spoke, we were given snapshots of how God was active in the world through the day-to-day lives of his people. God has chosen to do his work on earth through us. He knows who we can become as we follow Jesus. Our primary calling is to travel through life with God, living each day as called people. We live our calling as we walk with God.

## Your Individual Calling

Imagine getting a letter from the White House saying the president of the United States needs you for a critical assignment. He has determined that you are the only person in the world who can accomplish the mission. No doubt you would experience a flood of emotions, among them feeling highly valued.

Someone far greater than the president has already sent you this message. The Bible tells us that God has brought you into this world for specific purposes in his eternal plan. You have been born for such a time as this. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." God has been ahead of us, getting everything ready for our accomplishing what he calls us to do. He is "manipulating all the resources of the universe in order that the work you do may be a part of his whole great and gracious work."<sup>11</sup>

The life of faith opens our eyes to see ourselves and the world around us differently. The closer we walk with God, the more we understand God's agenda for humanity and our part in it. Incredibly, God calls us to be his "fellow workers."<sup>12</sup> Embracing us as his partners to help fulfill his purposes on earth, God calls us to various tasks and life roles. These are our *secondary callings*, which include such life roles as parent, spouse, family member, worker, student, church member, citizen, friend, and neighbor. Our secondary callings provide the contexts in which we can live our primary calling to follow Jesus.

Your work, or *vocational calling*, is one of your secondary callings. It is inextricably connected to your primary calling to be in relationship with God. The English word *vocation* has its origin in the Latin word *vocare*, which means "to call." Your vocational calling is a summons from God to use your gifts in the world, whether it be within paid employment, the home, or volunteer activities.

Guinness explains the crucial distinction between our primary calling and secondary callings: "We can therefore properly say as a matter of secondary calling that we are called to homemaking or to

the practice of law or to art history. But these and other things are always the secondary, never the primary calling. They are 'callings' rather than the 'calling.' They are our personal answer to God's address, our response to God's summons. Secondary callings matter, but only because the primary calling matters most."<sup>13</sup>

Johnny Hart's story illustrates how his vocational calling is an expression of his primary calling. Hart is called to be a cartoonist. He has used his long-running comic strips *B.C.* and the *Wizard of Id* to communicate God's truths to people who might never read a Bible or visit a church. At times, the impact has been dramatic. One woman wrote him that a *Wizard of Id* strip saved her from committing suicide. Johnny also finds opportunities to share the hope of Christ with fellow cartoonists and others with whom his work brings him into contact.<sup>14</sup>

## God of Possibilities

Like Johnny Hart, we also have been gifted in specific ways, equipping us for particular vocational callings. When God allows us to glimpse our potential, however, we are often tempted to retreat behind the wall of our perceived limitations ("Gee, God, I'd love to do that . . . but you know, I just can't"). We forget that God has never let human limitations get in the way of his plans for a person. It has been said that God doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called.

God says that his power is made perfect in our weaknesses.<sup>15</sup> He calls us to do things that we cannot do in *our* own power so that we will draw on *his* power. Although he is an award-winning cartoonist, Johnny Hart has only a high school education. He says, "I have always been stupid. I don't have a good memory . . . I've looked up every word in the dictionary almost twenty times." His difficulty with words continuously discouraged him. Even when his career was skyrocketing, he would sit down to read "just a normal book . . . and in one paragraph I'd have to look up five words. And I'd think, man, will I ever have a vocabulary?"<sup>16</sup> Yet God has called him to work that depends on the skillful use of words. God . . .

God is greater than any obstacle. Each of us has our own personal set of doubts, fears, insecurities, and challenging life circumstances. Some people may feel that they have waited too long and are too old to do what God has called them to do. Lois Prater's story challenges our perceptions about limitations to living our calling at any age.

As a young teen she had promised God she would serve him overseas. But instead she entered into a difficult marriage and never acted on her promise. When her husband died, she once again experienced the desire to serve God in a foreign country. She resisted, however, feeling that at age seventy-six her opportunity had come and gone. "I said, 'Lord, I'm too old to go now. I can't do this,'" Lois admits. But she found she couldn't turn down this second chance to fulfill her childhood promise to God.

So at eighty-seven, Lois Prater has become God's unlikely choice to build an orphanage in the Philippines and rescue thirty-five children from neglect, poverty, and abuse. Lois lives with the orphans in a two-story, two thousand square foot white stucco home. They call her *Lola*, meaning "grandmother" in Tagalog, their native language. Lois says confidently, "I serve a mighty God. He's in control. I feel I'm not talented enough to do any of this. But God enables me. My responsibility is to do what I can."<sup>17</sup>

## It's Not Too Late

Many people fear it is too late to do anything of significance with their lives. They may be filled with a profound sense of despair and regret because they feel they have already wasted much of their lives. In our work, clients have made comments such as "I wish I had done career planning twenty years ago. I could have done so much more for the Lord!" or "I really have buried my talents. It's too late to do much now." They find themselves burdened by guilt, remorse, and fear about how God will judge their lives.

Lois Prater's life witnesses to the fact that as long as we are alive it is never too late to live our calling. If we are still alive, we know that

we have not yet completed our mission on earth. God can use everything in our lives. When we turn to him and seek to live our calling, he can take all of us—our life and work experiences, our successes, our supposed failures, our strengths, our weaknesses, our past, our present, and our future—and use it for his purposes and our good.

## The Invitation of Grace

Jesus told a parable about workers in a vineyard.<sup>18</sup> In the story, an estate manager hires workers at five times throughout the day. The first come early in the morning; the last are not hired until 5:00 P.M. An hour later the workday is over and it is time for all the men to be paid. Those hired at five o'clock are paid first. Each is given a dollar (in the Message version of this story). When the men who were hired in the early morning see that, they think, "Great! We'll get paid more." When their turn comes, however, they are also paid a dollar. "That's not fair!" they grouse. "Those guys only worked an easy hour while we slaved all day under the hot sun." But the estate manager reminds them that they agreed on the wage of a dollar. "I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?"<sup>19</sup>

In this parable Jesus shows us the grace of God. Dallas Willard defines *grace* as "the action of God bringing to pass in our lives good things which we neither deserve nor can accomplish on our own."<sup>20</sup> Grace is God's love in action. Willard writes, "God has a plan for each of us in the work he is doing during our lifetime, and no one can prevent this from being fulfilled if we place our hope entirely in him. The part we play in his plans now will extend to the role he has set before us for eternity."<sup>21</sup>

Our gracious God invites each of us to come to work in the vineyard. It doesn't matter if it is the morning, afternoon, or evening of our lives. Come, you who are weary and heavy-laden. Come, you who feel unworthy. Come, you who have been worshipping other gods. Come, you who have denied me. Come, you who are burned out by

all you have been trying to do for the kingdom. Come, learn from me and find rest for your souls.

It doesn't matter what you have been doing up to this moment. God calls you to be a part of his great work in this world, and thereby become the person he created you to be. God is choosing *you* for his team. God has plans for your life; plans that will prosper and not harm you; plans to give you hope and a future.<sup>22</sup> Place your hope entirely in him and respond to his calling to come work with him today. As you grow closer to him and participate more fully in the work he calls you to do, you will find and fulfill the central purpose of your life.

## Personal Application

1. Why do you think so many people struggle with the question, "What's my purpose in life?" What is your response to the question?
2. What is your reaction to the idea that your primary calling is to a relationship with God, and that work is one of your secondary callings?
3. In what way can you see yourself being God's "fellow worker"?

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## CALLED TO BE YOU

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*Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. . . . Vocation does not come from a voice "out there" calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice "in here" calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.*

PARKER PALMER

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A central part of answering the question "What is my purpose in life?" is finding your vocational calling. Within you resides a special combination of gifts—talents, interests, skills, personality traits, and much more—that is the foundation of your vocational calling. There has never been anyone else like you in human history, and there never will be another you again. You are called to be "you": the unique, gifted, capable person who was designed by God and created to fulfill a divinely appointed purpose with your life.

Discovering your design and your vocational calling can be challenging, however. We are complex, multilayered beings who develop over time. In addition, the world around us changes rapidly and presents us with a staggering number of choices. How do we know what we should do? How do we know the direction in which God wants us to go?

Our vocational calling emerges out of our relationship with God, so inevitably there is a dimension of mystery to it. God's interactions with us are not wholly understandable, predictable, confinable, or controllable. In trying to discern our vocational calling, therefore, we

may feel as though we are in unfamiliar territory. When we are unsure of which way to go, it is helpful to have both a compass and a map.

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### Compass Principles for Finding Your Vocational Calling

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A compass points to true north,<sup>1</sup> which is an objective, external reality that we depend on for direction. Where we *think* true north is or how we *feel* about it does not affect its veracity. Similarly, there are eternal truths that impart a true-north orientation for our lives. We present three biblical "compass principles" here that guide us in the search for our vocational calling.

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#### Life Calling Compass Principle One: God Calls Us to Keep Our Primary Calling Primary

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God calls you to be the "you" he created you to be. He knows, however, that you can only become your real self if you give yourself to him. C. S. Lewis wrote, "The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. . . . It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own. . . . Sameness is to be found most among the most 'natural' men, not among those who surrender to Christ."<sup>2</sup> Within our relationship with God we can be transformed into the extraordinary individuals he intends us to be.<sup>3</sup>

If we keep our relationship with God at the center of our lives, he also can equip and empower us to do the extraordinary things he designed us to do. The things to which God calls us usually are challenging. In *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby says that moving from our way of thinking or acting to God's way of thinking or acting requires us to make major adjustments. We cannot stay where we are and go with God at the same time. We have to be willing to make changes in our lives.

Sometimes the problem in finding our vocational calling is not that we are unclear about God's calling to us, but rather that we are unwilling to do what he is asking. For many of us, financial concerns get in the way of our following where God is leading. Over the years, we have had many people begin their career counseling with us by expressing their desire to do *whatever* God wants them to do with their lives. If their new vocational calling would necessitate living on less income, however, their tendency often was to stay in the same job or field in order to maintain their lifestyle. Living our calling may require confronting some difficult money issues that have no easy solutions.

We also have seen stunning examples of God's faithfulness to people who choose to trust him to meet their financial needs as they pursue their vocational calling. Jim and Jan believed God was calling them to leave their positions in higher education and join Wycliffe Bible Translators, a nonprofit organization. One large obstacle stood in Jan's way, however. She was afraid that if they made this career change, their reduced income would be inadequate to fund a dearly held dream: to send their children (then ages three, eight, and ten) to a Christian college.

In spite of her concern, they made the decision to join the organization and entrust God with their children's education. Nineteen years later, their three children were all graduates of Westmont, a Christian college in Santa Barbara, California. At a time when the national average for undergraduate debt was more than \$12,000, all three graduated debt-free. Their story illustrates that God has unlimited resources he can make available to us if we trust him enough to follow where he leads.

Keeping our primary calling primary builds our faith and trust in God so that we are able to answer "Yes!" to his call despite our fears and reservations. We trust that he is calling us toward something that is the very best for us, and we have faith that he will provide what we need to fulfill that calling. Keeping our focus on the Lord also reminds us that our ultimate accountability for what we do with our lives is not to our parents, spouse, boss, neighbors, society, or ourselves. We are called to live our lives playing to an Audience of One: God.

## Life Calling Compass Principle Two: God Calls Us to Use Our Gifts to Meet Needs in the World

Your God-given design is a gift from your Creator, and it gives you essential clues about what God wants you to do in the world. Elizabeth O'Connor said, "We ask to know the will of God without guessing that his will is written into our very beings. We perceive that will when we discern our gifts."<sup>4</sup> You may already be aware of some dimensions of your design; other parts may be latent or undeveloped abilities and interests that are yet to be discovered.

God has given us gifts so that we can use them to benefit others, and to bring recognition and honor to him.<sup>5</sup> He does not call us to seek self-fulfillment, but rather to find fulfillment through seeking to serve. Frederick Buechner illuminates what makes work (whether paid or volunteer) a vocational calling:

Vocation: It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a [person] is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.

By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs 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 TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

... *The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet* [emphasis added].<sup>6</sup>

Discovering the skills you love using (“your deep gladness”) and the particular needs (the “world’s deep hunger”) you are enthusiastic about serving directs you toward your vocational calling. *Enthusiasm* comes from the Greek words *en*, meaning “within,” and *theos*, “god.” We experience enthusiasm when the God-given design inside us connects with needs in the world. Your enthusiasm about meeting particular needs can be an important indicator of the real you, and of your vocational calling.

Modupe discovered how to connect her deep gladness with the world’s deep hunger by opening a bookstore in her hometown in Nigeria. Formerly an administrative manager in a bank, she now offers books and resources that encourage self-development. “It was an area that was not being served at all where I live,” she says. “I have really enjoyed God’s favor in the business. More important, I am doing what I naturally enjoy. Being able to match my customers’ needs with particular resources is a very pleasurable part of my work.”

### Becoming Need-Focused

Our human nature encourages us to focus on our own needs. God, however, calls us to direct our attention to the needs of others. Needs come in all shapes and sizes. Every job meets some type of need.

“Need,” as used here, refers not only to fundamental human needs for sufficient food, clean water, safe shelter, adequate health care, and so forth, but also to other things people lack that they desire or find useful, such as a need for a good education or recreational activities. Need can also refer to something required by animals or other living things. Veterinarians, for example, alleviate suffering and meet other needs of pets and livestock.

A key part of finding your vocational calling is discovering which types of needs you enjoy meeting. We experience a greater sense of purpose in our work and volunteer activities when we care deeply about the needs that we are serving.

### All Work Can Be Sacred

God cares about all of the needs in this world. He doesn’t separate life into sacred and secular categories. The Bible does not support a two-tier view of work, with “full-time Christian service” being in the upper tier and everything else below it.

Christians frequently wrestle with this issue when making career decisions. People who have an intense desire to serve God often think the best place to do so is within a church or Christian organization. On the other side, pastors who feel mismatched with their jobs and are thinking of leaving the professional ministry may feel extremely conflicted as to whether a position outside of the church is a lesser calling.

We can do God’s work in the pulpit or in the factory. We are called to be full-time Christians wherever we are and in whatever we do. God calls some of us to work in churches, mission agencies, and Christian organizations. He calls others of us to work in the marketplace.

Andy Stanley emphasizes the importance of our serving in non-religious contexts: “The truth is that our secular pursuits have more kingdom potential than our religious ones. For it is in the realm of our secular pursuits that secular people are watching. . . . It is there that God desires to demonstrate his power through those who are willing to be used in such a way. . . . [E]very role, relationship, and responsibility carries divine potential.”

### Life Calling Compass Principle Three: God Calls Us to Proactive Stewardship of Our Gifts

God calls each of us to a life of stewardship. The Bible teaches us that everything we have—our time, skills and abilities, relationships, money and material resources, and the message of the gospel itself—are gifts God entrusts to us to manage and use wisely for the good of his kingdom.

We live in a time and place of tremendous opportunity. With opportunity comes responsibility. Jesus said, “From everyone who has

been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”<sup>28</sup> We may experience seasons in our lives when we have to take “just a job” to pay the bills and provide for our family. In general, however, we have great freedom in the United States to make choices about what we do to earn a living and where we invest our time. God calls us to use our freedom and opportunities responsibly, exercising stewardship over our time, talent, and treasure.

### is’ Story About the Stewardship of Our Gifts

Jesus used the “Parable of the Talents” (found in Matthew 25:14–30) to teach us about the stewardship of our gifts. In the story, a master leaves on a long journey, entrusting his money to his three servants. He gives the first servant five talents; the second, two talents; and the third, one talent. The first two servants figure out where they can get the best return on the money and double their investment. The third servant, however, digs a hole in the ground and hides his portion.

When the master finally returns, he settles accounts with his servants. He lavishly praises the first two and rewards them by putting them in charge of many things. The third servant makes excuses for his actions, declaring that he was afraid. He hands the one talent back to the master, saying, “Here is what belongs to you.” The displeased master replies that at the very least he could have earned interest on it at the bank. He takes the one talent from the servant’s hands, and banishes him from the property.

This parable contains several lessons for us. First, it suggests that *God gives valuable gifts to each of us*. Although the servants were given different amounts of money, each was given a substantial amount. A “talent” was a unit of weight. In today’s dollars, one talent of gold would be worth more than \$500,000! The parallel metaphorical meaning of “talents” in the parable is a reference to our God-given gifts. Given that the monetary examples are large amounts, we can deduce that even a “one talent” person is given a significant measure of ability.

Second, *we only are responsible for what we have been given*. The

much as the one given five talents. On that day that each of us stands before God, we will not be compared with anyone else. The measuring stick will not be Billy Graham or Mother Teresa, or any of the spiritual giants who have lived in the centuries before us.

What we do with our lives will be judged only in light of what we could have done with the specific gifts that God chose to give us. We only have to be who God has created us to be; we are called to accomplish only what he has designed us to do.

Third, *we need to be proactive and take risks* in order to invest and multiply our gifts. The servants were not told what to do with their talents. They had to plan and make decisions about how to invest them. They also had to risk in order to achieve results that would please their master. Fear stopped the third servant from investing his talents. Fear is a normal human emotion, but it is not an acceptable excuse for inaction. We need to learn how to manage our fear so that it doesn’t prevent us from being good stewards of our gifts and living our calling.

### Assessing Vocational Fit

One means of evaluating how well you are doing as a steward of your gifts is assessing the level of vocational fit, or degree of match, between your God-given design and your work. (“Work” refers to your primary occupation, whether it is within paid employment, the home, or volunteer activities.) We discuss five levels of vocational fit here. As you read, see which level best describes where you are at this point in your life.

The lowest level of vocational fit is when a person sees his or her work as *just a job*. A level one job may provide a paycheck but little sense of enjoyment or satisfaction. Sometimes we need to get just a job to pay the bills, but most people typically want to move on as quickly as possible. Level two is *OK work* that is of some interest. Many people get stuck at this level. Although they may feel somewhat discontented, there may not be enough dissatisfaction to motivate them to make a change—particularly if they are making a good salary.

At level three of vocational fit, people find themselves in *enjoyable*

achieved competency in their work, however, they may experience a need for something more meaningful. Level four is *meaningful work*, in which people feel they are contributing to a significant purpose or giving something back. People at this level usually are in work that is a good fit for their skills, but sometimes they are most motivated by the mission of the organization. As a secretary in a large Christian organization commented, "While I enjoy my work, what's most significant for me is that even when I'm filing, I feel like I'm contributing to the cause of world evangelism."

Level five of vocational fit is *vocational integration*. At the highest level of vocational fit, a person's work is an expression of who he or she is. Some well-known people whose lives exemplify vocational integration are Mister Rogers (an innovator in children's television programs); Zig Ziglar (motivational speaker); Elizabeth Dole (senator, public servant); Charles Schultz (creator of "Peanuts"); Truett Cathy (founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants); Mary Kay Ash (CEO, Mary Kay Cosmetics); and Orel Hershisser, Michael Chang, and David Robinson (athletes).

People who have achieved vocational integration in the work world seem to earn their living by being themselves. Their unique design is clearly visible in what they do; their personal identity is merged with their work identity. They feel that they are doing the type of work they were meant to do. Passionate about their work, level five individuals make life choices that allow them to pursue additional opportunities and professional growth.

## Doing God's Work

Any job, regardless of how well it fits, gives us an opportunity to live our primary calling by being God's representative in the workplace. In any job, we are called daily to exhibit a gracious attitude of service toward our boss, coworkers, customers, and others. We are called to avoid gossiping, complaining, speaking unkindly about people, lying, and cheating by not working diligently and to the best of our ability. There may even be times that God uses us to share the gospel

and meet another's spiritual needs. In our job, as in every aspect of our lives, we are called to be God's people.

When we think about being good stewards of our gifts and finding our vocational calling, however, we do need to consider our potential within the levels of vocational fit. Moving up the levels requires effort, discipline, persistence, risk, and often sacrifice. The compass principle of being a proactive steward of our gifts directs us to consider where we are within the levels and where we need to be.

The higher we move up, the more opportunity we typically have to do *God's work* within the context of *our work*. The more we use our giftedness, the more influence we usually have in work situations and life in general. When others see a person's giftedness in action, and the person is recognized for excellence in his or her work—whether it be in running a company or managing a home—there is increased respect for and willingness to listen to that person. More opportunities present themselves. Our sphere of influence grows.

Proverbs 22:29 says, "Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men." The greater our reputation for excellence in what we do, the more we gain attention and can use our influence for God's purposes.

The enormous amount of media attention given to Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* was due largely to his stature as an actor and director in the film industry. In the weeks surrounding its release, major magazines, newspapers, and television networks ran numerous stories related to the film. We watched in amazement as Roger Ebert, the film critic, explained the message of the gospel during his film review on national TV. Jesus came to earth to die for our sins, said Ebert. "That was his mission." People who might never before have thought about the meaning of Christ's death now found themselves confronted with it everywhere. Gibson's movie made Jesus' life and death a hot topic of conversation in a culture that is usually reticent to speak his name except as a profanity.

One doesn't have to be famous, however, to make an impact. Karole Shirley worked for a national temporary services agency. The welfare recipients who wanted to work touched her heart. Investing

countless hours with each client, she taught them the skills they would need to make it in the business world. She lent them money from her own pocket and even invited some of them to her church. Not only did her clients succeed but her office's net profits also rose by 300 percent in one year as people flooded her office.

The success of Shirley's office stood out to the company's CEO and eventually came to the attention of President Bill Clinton in a discussion of welfare reform. Her company began opening new offices around the country that focused on recruiting inner-city residents. She was promoted and given a new role of helping to market the new offices and develop strategic alliances with local businesses.<sup>9</sup> Her work became a means for using her gifts and expressing her highest values. Shirley's level of commitment and excellence created the opportunity to influence decision makers for the good of others.

## Vocational Calling as a Lifelong Journey

In the movie *City Slickers*, Mitch (played by Billy Crystal) tries to find his way through a midlife crisis and discover the meaning of life by going on a cattle roundup. Curly (Jack Palance), the gruff trail boss, tells Mitch that the secret of life is just one thing. When Mitch asks him to reveal what that one thing is, Curly tells him he'll have to figure that out for himself.

People have expressed to us their desire to find that one thing they are called to do. As we talk with them, we sometimes find that they are making particular assumptions about their vocational calling. Their operational belief is that there *is* one thing (usually meaning a specific job or career path) out there somewhere (at a particular company) for them to find. Once they have found that one thing out there somewhere, they believe they will then be set for life and not have to deal anymore with troublesome questions about what to do with their lives. We find that a need for security and fear of change typically underlie these beliefs.

The problem with this perspective is that it does not fit with ei-

century. God's people have usually found themselves doing a series of things in their lives. For example, the New Testament shows us that even though Paul's job title of "apostle" didn't change, he found himself doing things and going places he could not have imagined or anticipated on his own. This seems to be a rather typical pattern when God is actively involved in a person's life.

In addition, change is the hallmark of today's workplace. Few people will work for the same company their entire lives. Mergers, closures, and organizational retooling in response to the competition and rapid-fire change in our world today ensure that most people will hold several jobs during their working years, either by choice or necessity. Even people who have reached vocational integration and are paid for being themselves have to reorient and reposition themselves at various points in their lives.

Living your vocational calling is a journey. As you grow and mature, God can use you in new and more significant ways. Your journey may take you through the levels of vocational fit one step at a time, such as progressing from just a job to OK work to enjoyable work. As you continue on your journey, investing the time and energy needed and being willing to risk, you can move up the levels of vocational fit.

When you are progressing in using your gifts to make a contribution in this world—even if you have only moved thus far from just a job to OK work—you are living your vocational calling. Although it is possible to do so, most people don't move from just a job to vocational integration in just one job change. Most of us experience a series of transitions in our lives, but each step is an important part of the process of living our calling. Our vocational calling is an ongoing journey, not a destination. Your vocational calling therefore is not about finding and doing one thing; rather, it is doing many things for God, the Audience of One.

Duane's story illustrates how a vocational calling unfolds over the years. He was working at a car rental agency when he came to us for career counseling. Although he had received several promotions and was excelling in his work, he felt what he was doing lacked sufficient meaning.

His purpose in doing career planning was to figure out where he

gifts. A natural visionary, he loved using his creativity, marketing, and networking skills to grow an organization and make a difference in people's lives. God has increasingly used him over the years because Duane and his wife, Tricia, have been willing to take risks, persevere, grow, and be obedient to what they believed God was calling them to do.

His work has included directing a nonprofit organization that taught entrepreneurship to low-income young people, founding a nationwide youth entrepreneurship company, writing a values-based curriculum about Christian youth entrepreneurship, cofounding and directing the northern California chapter of an organization that helped senior business executives make a difference in the lives of others, and helping organizations grow and fulfill their missions more effectively.

We asked him what God has taught him thus far in his life about his vocational calling. Duane responded, "He is teaching me to continue to be purposeful in how I employ my 'design,' and *not* to be afraid to leave an area where I am not using the gifts and skills he has given me, but rather to pursue leveraging those gifts, skills, talents, and passions for his kingdom! I have learned that when I do take a step of faith and go in the direction where I think I can best be used, God meets me there and multiplies my 'loaves and fishes' in ways I could never imagine."

On the journey of living your vocational calling, you will discover the truth in this equation: You + God's power = Enough. You are enough because God has designed you perfectly to fulfill your intended purpose.<sup>10</sup> You are enough because God will work through you with his limitless power.<sup>11</sup> You are enough because he loves you and can transform you.<sup>12</sup> You are called to be you, and he who calls you is at work within you. You can be empowered to be yourself today; you can become the you God has always intended you to be. The truth is that "God can do anything—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams!"<sup>13</sup>

## Personal Application

1. Life calling compass principle one is "God calls us to keep our primary calling primary." On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = little sense of connection with God; 5 = consistent focus on God), how well are you doing with this principle? What would you like to do different to deepen your relationship with God?
2. With which servant in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30) do you most identify?
3. How does thinking of yourself as the *manager* rather than the *owner* of your gifts affect how you make life choices?
4. Five levels of vocational fit (just a job, an OK job, enjoyable work, meaningful work, vocational integration) are described. Which level best describes your current or most recent job? Why?