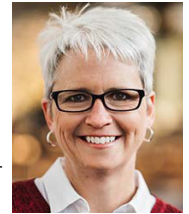


The Calling Process – Part I



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The Nature Of Calling

Let's look a little bit next at the nature of calling. According to a 2013 Barna survey, only 40 percent of practicing Christians said that they have a clear sense of God's calling on their lives. So, as we kind of explore the nature of calling, I hope these next sessions bring you some clarity about your own calling as we explore what calling is and the process of discernment.

As we are seeing, calling is very powerful. It's God-given, it's a deep conviction, it has a potential to change your life. It can also be very complex, which makes it difficult to understand and discern. I believe calling has kind of a both/and characteristic and several either/or possibilities. So, let's talk about some of that.

First, the both/and. The first call is really a call to follow Christ and then a call to personally join His work in the world. So that's the both/and. There are various terms that can be used for that. It's kind of our general calling is to follow Christ, and then a specific calling is how He's inviting us to join His work in the world. Primary calling or secondary calling is another way. Another term sometimes is ordinary calling and special calling or vertical calling, calling to follow Christ, and then horizontal. How do we live that out in the world?

My friend and colleague, Halee Gray Scott, here for the seminary, wrote, "We are first called into the family of God; then we are called out into the world to bring others into a relationship with God." So, in this sense, this both/and, no one is without a calling. The call to follow Christ is at the root of every other calling. It involves a shift in identity, which goes back, actually, to when we looked at definitions of calling, to change your name. So, it actually gives you a new identity.

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- DR. HALEE GRAY SCOTT

I want to give you examples of my own primary and secondary calling, or general and specific calling. When I was growing up, I was eight, almost nine years old, in the church I was growing up in in Wisconsin at that time. And I, for whatever reason, was sitting, not in children's church, but in big church with my parents. And something the pastor said, I don't recall exactly, but he said something about living with Jesus forever and gave an invitation for that. And I felt the Holy Spirit tugging at my heart, and at that moment I wanted to respond to that invitation.

A little thing about that though, I was painfully shy as a child. And so that church tradition they gave was called an altar call and asked people to come forward and to pray, to give your life to Christ and to accept that invitation. And so, I was very nervous and asked my mom to go with me. And again, I was just a young girl. So, I went forward, and my stomach just started churning and trembling, and I was shaking. I was sure everybody was watching me. I was also just aware of the momentousness of the moment. So, my mom went with me. We met a deacon there at kind of the altar rail. And he said, "Would you like to pray? Or I can pray, and you can follow," you know, repeat. And I said that sounded great. So, he did, he led me in a prayer. My stomach the whole time was churning and churning. And he said, "Amen." And I bubble over, and I threw up right there, on the altar at our church. So, I tell people, "Jesus cleansed me from the inside out."

So that's my story of how I responded to Jesus' primary calling. Not all of us have such a gross or dramatic story. So that was my initial where I followed Christ, and that began the journey that brings me to where I am today. Then about 12 years later, I was working as a sportswriter. I was working at a sports desk at a local newspaper, and I distinctly, I say heard, but it was not an audible voice. I felt clear words, though, intended for me. And so, I felt God saying, "I want you to work with people, not just write about them." And that had special meaning for me, for my journey at that point. I had been using my writing kind of a way to stay distant from relationship with people. And so that's one of the first times I clearly sensed God's call to me specifically. And it literally changed the course of my life. That set me on a journey toward ministry, youth ministry, leadership development, and where I ended up today. So that's my story.

So that primary calling is both individual and corporate. So as part of following Christ it also is joining the body of Christ. So, it's not just an individual calling. God may give us individual as

part of our secondary calling, but that primary calling involves a community component to it. So that's the both/and, the two parts of the primary, secondary.

The second, there's some either/or possibilities to calling. So, God can use many ways to reveal our secondary calling. It could be broad, or it could be detailed. Broad, we see Abraham. God says, "Go, leave your family and your people and your country, and go to the land that I will show you." So, He doesn't give it to him all up front. Then to Jonah, He says, "You need to sail, go to Nineveh." Very specific for a very time. My broad calling is to identify, develop, and encourage ministry leaders. At times, He gives me more detail about where to do that and what that looks like. For example, right now I'm working at Denver Seminary with our Doctor of Ministry students. I want to note that the lack of detail does not mean a calling is less legitimate. And so just because you don't know exactly the details, that doesn't mean it's less important or less from God. Henry Blackaby writes that "Our job is to follow what we have been given, not to worry about what we have not yet heard." So that's one of the either/or.

Another either/or is it could be patient, or it could be urgent. It could be a gentle nudge, or it could be a fire alarm. With Joseph, there was a long journey of him having a dream and being sold, and this long journey to where he finally ended up being second-in-charge in Egypt. There's Moses, spent forty years in the wilderness and then saw the burning bush, and then God moved him to lead the people out of Egypt . . . the Israelites out of Egypt. And then there's urgent. In the New Testament we see that Paul has a vision of a Macedonian man saying, "You must come to Macedonia at once." And Paul felt that was God's direction, very urgent direction. The important thing is that we trust God's timing and are ready to respond as soon as that calling becomes clear. So that's another either/or, is it patient or urgent?

A third [either/or] is that God's secondary calling could be time-limited, or it could be long-term. It could be a particular task for a short time, or it could be a lifetime assignment. In the Bible, in Acts, we see that it says to Ananias . . . God says to Ananias, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." So, a very time-limited, very specific, very urgent instruction from God. Compare that to what we see in the

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ACTS 9:11-12

Old Testament prophets, where it's a long-term calling to be a spokesperson for God to His people in a particular time.

Sometimes a time-limited can open doors or a desire for a longer term, and kind of what your interest, or, you know, open that door. So, for example, taking a short-term mission trip. Sometimes people experience that and feel God opening a door for a longer-term service. Sometimes volunteering somewhere can turn into a job. You know, it could be . . . I have some friends who have done respite care for children in need, and that then turns into what they feel is a calling, an invitation to longer term foster care or adoption. The bottom line is that God can call us in any way He wants to anything He wants. And we shouldn't put limits on that, but there's a lot of different ways that . . . that can look.

Biblical Examples of Calling

As we continue to look at what calling looks like and how God calls people, let's look some more at biblical examples of calling throughout Scripture. So, in the Old Testament, God primarily called human beings by speaking directly to them. We see that with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David, Solomon, almost every prophet. The Bible describes God's voice as thunderous and mighty, and still or small. So, we don't know exactly how it sounded, but we do see that it was generally clear to the intended recipient. For example, Samuel heard God's voice when he was a young boy under the service of Eli, but Eli didn't, and Samuel kept going to Eli and thinking that Eli was calling him. So, Eli hadn't heard the voice, but recognized that Samuel was hearing the voice of the Lord.

God also in the Old Testament used signs and wonders, divine messengers and dreams. So, Moses, we know that He spoke to Moses through a burning bush. We see in the Bible that messengers came to Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob, to Moses, to Gideon. And then there were dreams. Abraham had dreams, Jacob, Joseph had dreams, Solomon, many prophets had dreams or images or visions. And then God also spoke through human beings. So, Esther, we see that her uncle Mordecai kind of suggested perhaps this is what God is using you for in this time and put you here for this time. So that's how we see God in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Jesus comes, and Jesus gave in-person invitations and instructions. So, first of all, He called to the

disciples and said, “Follow me.” But then, as far as secondary calling, He sent out the twelve and then later the seventy, and He gave them some instructions about where to go, how to go, how to interact when they were in the different towns and villages and walking among the people.

We also see visions in the New Testament. So, Ananias, you know, in a vision, God said to meet Saul. Peter was told in a vision that the gospel was meant for Gentiles and Jews. And then, as we already saw, Paul received an invitation via vision from this man from Macedonia to go to those people.

After Jesus departs this earth and ascends into heaven, the Holy Spirit became the primary means of communicating calling or direction to believers in the early church. So, for example, we’ll see, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” or, “The Holy Spirit prevented us from going in a certain place.” But human conversation and cooperation are also important. So, like I just said, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” So, God in the Bible allows people to use their ability to reason about, to reflect on, and respond to a calling. The overall biblical pattern we see is one of preparation, discernment and response. And so, we’re going to take the next session to unpack those three components.

Preparation For Calling

In our last session, we saw that there is a distinct biblical pattern to calling. There’s a preparation, then there’s a discernment, and then there is a response. So, we’re going to look at those three.

The first step of that is preparation. The preparation phase, or season, it may last weeks, it could take months, it could take years. God may develop our awareness, He could develop our understanding, He could develop our compassion, our character, our knowledge, our tangible skills. Here at Denver Seminary, we have many students who are here because they feel invited to something, called to something. And part of that is a season of preparation that they feel through theological training and preparation for whatever ministry God has called them to. That preparation . . . sometimes we may not be aware that God is preparing us for a future calling.

For example, I have a friend who, when she was a young mom with young babies at home, she had a part-time job working in a social

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work office that she just needed some extra income and could do some administrative work. She never knew that, many years down the road, she would sense . . . she and her husband would sense an invitation from God to do foster care and later to adopt. And so, all of that information that she had kind of just sat in during that time, thinking she was just earning a little extra money for her household at that time, turned into some preparation for her for this future calling.

But whether or not you are aware that you're in a season of preparation, there are two truths to remember, and these are very important. One, God is always at work. And the second one is that God never wastes anything. So whatever season you're in right now, or looking back other times in your life where you wondered what God was doing in that time, He is always at work, He never wastes anything. You may not be able to see the big picture, but God does. And so, as I look back on my own life, I see even things, working a job at a fast-food restaurant, there were things I learned from that experience that I take with me to that day. There are bad experiences I've had that God has used to shape me, to grow me, and to learn from that to fulfill my calling and to learn what's not a fit for me. So, God is always at work. God never wastes anything.

So, God may be preparing us, whether or not we're aware of it, and at the same time, we can also ready ourselves for God's calling. And again, I'm talking about secondary calling here, assuming we've followed that invitation to follow Christ in the first place. So, the best thing, the best place to start in developing ourselves, readying ourselves for a calling, is by developing a posture of submission. Jennie Allen writes that “99% of being in the will of God is being wholly willing to be in the will of God.” And Claude Hickman writes, “We cannot expect to get all the detailed instructions before we are willing to begin walking the path.” So, we can be working on, are we ready to do whatever God is wanting us to do or will be asking us to do?

I've had sometimes in my own life where God said, “I'm going to ask you for something.” And I didn't know what that was, but I felt like He was preparing me. And so, I had to go, “Okay, what could that be?” And instead of going, “Well, what is it? I need to hear what it is first,” going, “Okay, I'm ready,” and developing that posture of submission.

Another thing we need to do is cultivate a listening ear for the Lord's voice. There are so many voices out there. The word discern

actually derives from the Latin root for the word to discriminate. So, we must learn to discriminate between God's voice and many others. So, the best way to tune our ears is to regularly take time to listen to God's voice. There is just no substitute for unhurried time with God, listening for that Shepherd's voice, knowing what that sounds like in your own life.

My friend, Cherie, who is an author and a speaker, says she is always going to put herself, as she calls it, in the path of God, whether that's church, listening to worship music, reading theologians and artists, mentors, prayer, Scripture. Maybe for you, you hear God best through silence and solitude. Maybe it's through community with others, or in service, or in nature, or through music or beauty. So, cultivating that ear, and how do you know it's God speaking to you, and discerning that from well-intentioned others and the voices in your own heart. So those are ways that are part of the season of preparation for calling.