

Living as a Called Person

Rich Nathan

April 27-28, 2002

Work: Christians in the Workplace Series

I've been doing a series on Christians in the Workplace. Today I want to continue that series by dealing with the whole issue of calling and vocation. The word "vocation" simply means "call" or "calling." People used to talk about their careers or occupations as callings. Sometimes they would call them vocations.

But one of the most common feelings that people have in America today in a post-industrial economy is the sense of living without a grand purpose, without a big central point to life. It is very common for an individual to feel that they just go through the motions. The question that is in a lot of people's hearts is, "Does what I do from day to day really matter? Do I make a difference to anyone or anything? What difference do I really make?"

You manage a department at Bank One or you work at Legislative Services, or for the state, or you work at home by taking care of your family, cooking meals, cleaning up. You are a student; you work for the Limited in their Accounting Department, or you work at Riverside Hospital. But in any ultimate sense, what is the grand purpose of your work or of your life?

Sometimes we convince ourselves of little meanings, little purposes – "Well, I make a few people happy." "I assist this individual to get their job done better." Your business provides jobs, income, and food for someone else. But ultimate meaning? Most of America lives without that. And I would say most Christians, most followers of Christ, live without a sense of a grand purpose.

Os Guinness in his book titled, *The Call*, cited a historian who said there have been in the history of mankind twenty great civilizations. I don't know how he came up with that number, but this historian said there were twenty great civilizations. He said the secular West – Europe and America - is the first great civilization ever in which people lived without a grand sense of meaning or purpose. There's no overarching story to their lives.

Friend, you cannot live well without a sense of meaning. Some people try to acquire meaning in their lives through acquiring possessions. We call them materialists. "The central meaning of life for me is purchasing. I am a consumer? You've seen the bumper stickers: I Live To Shop. This Car Stops At Garage Sales. The Person Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins. I love the old response to that bumper sticker that says "The Person Who Dies With the Most Toys Still Dies." You never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul.

The apostle Paul says in 1 Tim. 6: “We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” We leave the same way we came, carrying nothing.

Some people try to find meaning in life through multiplying experiences of pleasure. We call them hedonists. I recently read a statement by a famous baseball player who said, “I try to play like an all-star, party like a rock-star, and have sex like a porn-star.” That’s a central meaning in life – to try to multiply pleasurable experiences.

Some people try to find meaning in life by exploring their pasts, their hurts and their traumas, places where they’ve been wounded. “Perhaps if I just go back and explore my life, my family of origin, my life experiences, I will find meaning.” They’ve succumbed to the lie of therapeutism. “Therapy will provide me with meaning.” Therapy may provide you with healing, which is very legitimate - to deal with wounds and places of hurt so that you can move forward. Going backward, searching your past will never provide you with an ultimate framework of meaning.

The most common way in America that people try to find meaning and a central purpose to their lives is through their work. I don’t think it’s too bold a statement to say that most Americans gain the bulk of their identity and self-worth from their jobs. If work is going OK, we’re OK. And if work is not going well, then we’re miserable. I call this last lie careerism. “My career gives me meaning.” And, of course, this is much more acceptable: to try to find meaning, the central meaning of life, through your career than being labeled a hedonist, a materialist, or a therapist.

But friends, our careers, our jobs, where we work, for whom we work, how much we make, what our positions are, none of these things was meant to be the central organizing principle of our lives. And when career, when job, when your occupation really becomes the source of your meaning and purpose, then you have all of these distortions that naturally take place. You see, you can’t live a lie; you cannot center your life on an idol and not have it create downstream problems for you. It will. It will create some sort of distortions. Our idols will always let us down.

And if you are looking to your career for meaning, there are a number of traps waiting for you – workaholicism – Oh, you’re not a workaholic, you just enjoy your job. You are just a hard worker. And so when you take work to bed; when you are sitting in bed at 11:00 at night typing away on your laptop, working through some spreadsheets or typing a brief, it’s not because you have committed too much to your job, there’s something dreadfully wrong. No, not for you.

When you bring a bag full of books to the beach just so you can catch up on really important reading while the kids swim, when you are never not working, when you are always multi-tasking, you are talking on the phone while you read

and while you eat lunch – maybe you are finding too much meaning in life through career. And, of course, if meaning and purpose is derived from career and job, then you are headed for a major crisis when you are laid off or when you retire.

What's your life about? What's the central purpose, the central meaning?

Let me suggest to you from scripture that the central meaning of life is to live life in response to God's calling of you. Life is a response to the call of God. That's the meaning of life. God calls, you respond. There are literally hundreds of examples in the Bible of God calling a nation, a tribe, a family, or an individual. It's in God's calling of you that you find the central purpose of life.

I've called today's talk, "Living as a Called Person." Let's pray.

Now, if you say that the central meaning and purpose in life is found in the call of God, then we need to immediately define what we mean by calling. And here there is lots of confusion. For much of the history of the church there has been this dualism that I've talked about between the sacred realm and the secular realm so that when the word calling was used, it was always used to refer to sacred calling, spiritual callings – callings to be a monk, or a missionary, or to be a priest or a pastor. In the evangelical church, in the stream that we are in here at the Vineyard, that's mainly the way people talk about calling. I've been called to ministry. I've been called to preach. I've been called to missionary service. Other people have jobs. Full time Christian workers have callings.

Well, it's no wonder that most Christians operate with a sense of meaninglessness when most of your waking hours are spent doing a job, performing some task, but not responding to the call of God on your life. Is it really the case that only 1-2% of all followers of Christ, those whose jobs are in the church, or on the mission's field, or in a para-church organization – only they get the joy and the sense of purpose from knowing that they respond to God's call on their lives, but the rest of you don't?

You know, the great Protestant Reformers, particularly Luther and Calvin, and Puritans following in their wake, really aimed their guns right here at the issue of calling. The Reformers said that there was no sacred/secular distinction in life, no dualism, but that all of life was of concern to God, not just what you did in your religious obligations, your church attendance, your Bible reading, your prayer and devotions, but all of life. The way that you relate to your family, the way you handle money, your eating habits, your work habits, your career, your plans for retirement – all of those things are of concern to God. The Reformers, Calvin and Luther, said there was no such thing as higher callings – monks, priests, pastors; and lower callings – everything else.

To Luther and Calvin being a farmer, being a tradesman, making shoes, building houses, a mother sweeping a floor – all of work can be done to the glory of God and as a response to the call of God. The Reformers used to say that our everyday work has deep spiritual significance.

An English poet named George Herbert expressed the spiritual significance of work this way:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it as for Thee.
A servant with this cause
Makes drudgery divine.
Who sweeps the room
As for Thy laws
Makes that and the action fine.

Do you ever think about vacuuming a room for the glory of God?

Unfortunately, even when Christians start talking about breaking down this sacred/secular divide and believing that all legitimate work can be done for the glory of God, even when we try to gain our sense of living as called people, we don't understand the word "calling" in its proper biblical sense. For the most part, people restrict calling to their jobs.

Listen to me now. If you want to find the central purpose of life, to live as a response to the call of God, then you have to expand your thinking beyond your job, your career. In fact, calling to a particular job, or career, or occupation is really the concern of just a few scriptures in the Bible. Your calling begins not with a call to do a specific job. Your calling begins with a call to belong to God and to belong to God's family, the church. You don't start with a call to do. You start with a call to belong.

Listen to some of these verses on calling, on how the Bible uses the word "call":

1 Peter 2:9 – "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful life."

You have been called to belong to God. Called out of darkness and into light.

Or how about this one:

Romans 1:6 – "And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ."

Or 1 Corinthians 1:9 – “God who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord...”

Or Jude 1 – “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ, and a brother of James, to those who have been called who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ.”

We are called to belong to God. Friends, the central meaning of life is not found in your job, however much you love your job or hate it, if you find fulfillment there, or are constantly grumbling and discontented. The central meaning and purpose in life is found in God. When you ask basic questions of someone, “What are you ultimately looking for? What do you hope to get out of life? What are you seeking? What is your longing?” the biblical answer is that the longing of people is belonging to God.

As the great Augustine once said at the end of the fourth century, “Lord, You have made us for Yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in You.”

Douglas Coupland, the best-selling writer who coined the term “Generation X,” wrote a book called *Life After God*. And in this fascinating book, he talks about the pilgrimage of the first generation of Americans raised after God – after the collapse of the dominance of Christianity in America. He talks about this first generation of young adults who grew up without church, without Sunday School, without confirmations, many of who grew up without baptism. Douglas Coupland talks about the search, the yearning for God’s presence.

At the end of Coupland’s book he writes:

“Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”

From Augustine to Doug Coupland – the 4th century to the 21st century – our longing is to belong to God. That’s where all the self-help books go off the rails. Self-improvement, reinventing yourself, healing yourself, being your own best friend, that’s not the central meaning of life. The central meaning of life is for you to discover a deep relationship with God.

Friend, do you belong to God? Is the first thing that you say about yourself is not that I am a physician, I am an accountant, or I work for the government, but rather, I am a son of God; I am a daughter of the living God. I belong to God. Wherever I’m placed, whatever I do, my calling is to belong to God.

And my calling is to belong to the people of God. As we read in the book of 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. And it will happen in this very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people’ that they will be called sons of the living God.”

Jesus said in John 10, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, they too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.”

One of the most popular TV shows in the last ten years has been the show “Friends.” This group of young men and women who live across the hallway from one another don’t have any real visible means of support, and yet are able to live in NYC, wear great clothes, and drink coffee all day. But the central message of “Friends” is this message of belonging to a group of people. The “Friends” theme song is “I’ll be there for you.” It’s a promise from one group member to another – I’ll be there for you. Why? Because of the last line of the song, “Because you’re there for me too.”

See, we’ve been sold a bill of goods in the US that, on our own, we can construct meaning and purpose for life. We cannot. We have been called by someone, to something bigger than us, someone and something beyond ourselves more wonderful than us alone. We have been called, we who are children of God through faith in Christ – and contrary to the politically correct message that everyone in the universe is a child of God by virtue of your birth – the Bible says you become a child of God through a second birth, through the new birth, through the work of the Spirit of God, who must be received into your life by faith. You become a child of God by trusting in Christ, his work on the cross for you, and by receiving the person of Christ into your life.

Then having become a child of God, God calls you to belong to the people of God, the church. Go beyond the Friends jingle of just having a group of people that you are going to rely on and that will be there for you. Rather, you have a community from which you derive your own identity, your point of reference. “How do I interpret life?” You are called by God to interpret life not from the point of reference of being an American, or from the point of reference of being a Buckeye, or being a healthcare professional, or being part of a racial group, or merely being a man or a woman. Your frame of reference, the way to think about life, is “I belong to the church – to God’s people.”

Church isn’t a place that I go to. Church is my people, my community, and my family. Is that the way you relate to the church?

Your calling is to belong – to God, to God’s people. And then your calling is to be. Before you talk about being called to a specific job, you are called to be.

And according to Matthew 5, which I would like to read with you, you are called to be salt and light.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Work is not, according to the scripture, primarily about what you are doing, the product you are producing, the service you are giving, the money you are making. Work, according to the scripture, is primarily the context in which you exercise your calling to be salt and light. You are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. You are called to respond to the command of Jesus, “Follow me.” Where you get to do that, where you get to be salt and light, is your particular job, your profession and your occupation.

Now, there is much debate over what Jesus meant by his call to us to be the salt of the earth. At least a part of what it means to be salt is to preserve this world from its tendency towards increasing corruption and decay. The ancient world didn't have refrigeration, and so, in order to preserve meat, people used to rub salt into the meat. It had a preserving effect.

Now nothing is plainer in the scripture than that the world has an built-in tendency to putrefy, to decay, to get more and more rotten. Over against the modern evolutionary theory that men and women are getting better and better all the time, that we are just advancing as a race, that the spiral is going up and up and up, the Bible is very clear that without the preservative effect of God's people being rubbed into the world, the tendency of the world is to spiral down, to putrefy.

And all you need to do is look at the early chapters of Genesis beginning with the fall in Genesis 3 and our first parents' rebellion against God. We have a murder in chapter 4, revenge at the end of chapter 4, and then this statement in Gen. 6, “The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”

Read Romans 1, “The tendency of the world unchecked by God's people...”, unpreserved by the salt, is to putrefy.

And you, friend, are called to be salt. You have been strategically placed in your job, in your occupation, in your office, in your family, in your neighborhood, to preserve that little portion of the world from further decay. You are a corporate executive or are a politician, your company or the city is making decisions on

healthcare benefits in their insurance plan. “Do we include abortion in our health plan?” “Do we further blur the distinctiveness of heterosexual marriage by including in homosexual partnerships?” I mean the business of the city government is saying, “What’s the difference, really, between a marriage and any other kind of committed relationship – homosexual, heterosexual, live-in partners without marriage? Marriage is just a piece of paper. People should have a ‘right to choose’ which trumps marriage.”

But you are salt. You are there to preserve that little part of the world from further decay. And when you rub salt into something, it often has a bite to it. It’s not very popular to be salt. Helmut Thielicke once said, “We Christians are not called to be the honey pot of the world, but to be the salt of the earth.” We think sometimes our job is to be like honey, to sweeten everything around. We are called to be salt and sometimes salt has a bite. It stings.

When I was down in Houston recently, I heard the story behind the collapse of Enron and the collapse of Arthur Anderson, their accounting firm. There was an Arthur Anderson auditor, a woman, who was doing some work on Enron’s books and was very troubled by what she found. She went to her supervisor in the Anderson office and inquired about this. Basically, his approach was, “Let it go. I’ll take care of that. That’s not your concern.”

But the more she looked into it, the more troubled she became. She discovered major financial irregularities, major departures from generally accepted accounting principles. She was caught in a moral dilemma because she belonged to God. That was her primary calling. She belonged to God and God’s people. And she was called to be salt.

She went to her small group in Houston, a Bible study group, and she spoke to a few of the small group leaders. She described the dilemma that she was in, that she was getting no support from her supervisors at Arthur Anderson, that there was a lot of pressure on her to bury the issue. Her group said to her basically, “You know what the right thing to do is. You need to blow the whistle.”

And so this courageous woman stood up against massive corporate pressure, this courageous Christian, and she lit the fuse that blew up the whole web of fraud and deceit that was at Enron and Arthur Anderson down in Houston.

You know the preserving affect of salt is not just for executives, for huge policy decisions, for whistle blowers. You act as salt by having a great work ethic in the midst of a group of people that just want to skate by and do the minimum necessary. You act as salt when you challenge your group in college to not cheat on a group project, but to do the work honestly. You act as salt when you speak encouragement in an environment where everyone gossips, when you reconcile relationships, when you have a positive attitude.

There is nothing, friends, more powerful than you being a Christian and acting as a Christian. You are the salt of the earth. And, you know, sometimes it can seem like the environment that you are working in is so bad; there's just little you there, and it's easy to want to throw in the towel. You hate the decay; you want to leave the rottenness behind you, and go to work for a Christian organization, or go home and just work at home.

A young adult in our congregation had a smell in her apartment. It was a bad odor. So she looked around to see where it was coming from. She couldn't find the source, so guess what she did. It was a small little apartment, and it smelled so bad that she decided she would just move out. So she went back home to live with her parents.

Well, I think it was in the summer. Her roommate was away and came back a week later, and the apartment reeked. The smell was overwhelming. Her roommate discovered that the source of the odor was some raw meat that was rotting in the garbage.

Now that's a picture of your work environment without the salt of your preserving presence. Do not, friend, bail out just because the atmosphere you are working in is really uncomfortable. You don't like these smelly pagans with all of their smoking and all of their dirty jokes. You don't like their politics, and their affairs, and their flirting. You think things are bad now? Imagine what it would be like if the salt was gone. The place is just going to reek more.

And by the way, you can trust me on this, the Christian workplace is not heaven on earth, contrary to some of your idealistic views. Some of you have worked for Christian companies, you've been in para-church organizations; a few of you have been out of the mission field, and some of you have worked for a church or this church. You know the reality. The Christian workplace is not heaven on earth. There are still relational problems to hammer through, misunderstandings that people have, and folks still come to work with marriage problems, and sloppy work habits, and immorality.

But even if it is better than what we find out there, and I think it is better in most instances, "you can't have all the salt," as Becky Pippert once said, "in the saltshaker." The salt needs to get out of the saltshaker and into the world. You can't have all of the Christians teaching at Christian schools and working in ministries and attending Christian colleges, because the world will further putrefy. We are called as Christians to be rubbed into the culture everywhere.

The second function of salt, briefly, was to flavor food. You know, friends, so much of life in this world is so boring. You go to work, and you listen to people's conversations. You watch the way people live. It is the same discussions every day about the same problems, the same parties. I mean, is there anything more boring than life without Jesus Christ?

When Marlene and I go to a restaurant, sometimes we will walk by the bar and see the bar scene of some guy going through the same little ritual again with some girl. You watch the awkwardness and the sheer awfulness, the dullness of the bar scene: the same conversations, the same relationships, women going with the same losers who just have different names.

Life without Christ is so boring. Look at what people watch on TVerse. Folks watch infomercials. They watch sitcoms that are so inane. Or they watch reality TV showing some people in the wilderness eating maggots.

One of the reasons I was attracted to Christianity was that I was so bored with my own life. It was the same thing every weekend: the same parties, the same trying to meet some girl, the same sitting around drunk, and the same stupid conversations. I discovered, with Christ, I don't have to watch someone else's life. I've got a life. You don't have to sit around and watch other people live; you can have life. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and that more abundantly."

If you are bored, if you are tired of the same old, same old all of the time, how about responding to the call to come to Christ?

Now, it is important that, if you are salt, you don't lose your saltiness, Jesus says. It is important that you preserve your distinctiveness, that your work habits are different than the work habits of those around you, that you aren't flirting, even if they are. It is important that you aren't gossiping, that your character is more and more resembling the character listed in the beatitudes. It is important that you are a peacemaker, that you are a merciful person that you are not always asserting your rights, that you are meek, that your thirst and hunger is for righteousness, not just for a promotion. You are different.

Back in the ancient world, salt was mostly taken from salt marshes. The salt had a lot of impurities in it. There were no refineries. And because salt is more soluble than the impurities, the salt tended to leach out, and all that was left was a saltless white powdery substance that looked like salt, but wasn't salt. And so what they would do in Jesus' day was take that white powdery substance and scatter it on the soil of their mud roofs. It would harden the mud so that people could walk on it. It was no longer good for anything other than to be trodden under foot.

Christian, if you just sort of fade out, if you are a faded-out Christian, if you don't live from your sense of identity of belonging to God and belonging to God's people, if you aren't regularly stirring up your fervor in Jesus, if more and more you don't look any different than anyone around you – just washed out and faded out, you are living the worst of all worlds. I don't think there's anything more miserable or more useless than a Christian who is not living like a Christian. You

aren't going to be happy in the church. You aren't going to be happy in the world. You aren't going to have any impact for God. You need to maintain your saltiness, your intimacy with God.

And we are called to be light. Jesus said, 'You are the light of the world.' It was always the calling of God's people to show the world outside Israel, outside the church, what God is like. See, people around discover who God is from the reflected light of Christians. That's a scary thought, but that's your calling, to go into your work place and reflect Jesus so that people can find out who God is by looking at you.

Now that's a scary thought, but Christian, that is your calling. You are called to belong to God. You are called to be salt and light. As one person a long time ago said, "You, Christian, are the only Bible that most people will ever read." You, by your conversation, by your mercy, by your willingness to reconcile, by your humility, by your graciousness, by your giving, by your generosity – you will communicate "This is what Christ is like. This is what you will be like if you come to Christ."

People look at you, and they look at me. What do they see?

C.S. Lewis once said, "The best evidence for the existence of God is looking at Christians." He said, "Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. The worst evidence for the existence of God is many Christians."

The best advertisement for God is Christians in the marketplace living out their faith, living the Sermon on the Mount. God wants His glory spread through the whole earth. The light that he is shining through you ought to draw people to God like moths to a lamp outside. Friend, that's how I came to Christ. It was through a Christian who was shining. And I was drawn. When I met Marlene in college as a freshman, I was seventeen years old. Marlene had never met a Jewish person before she went to college. She grew up in a little white Protestant enclave on the west side of Cleveland, a little suburb called Bay Village. The minority group in her little suburb were Catholics. She went across town to the east side of Cleveland to Case Western Reserve where, for the first time in her life, she met Jewish people. Her roommate was Jewish. Over 50% of Case back then was Jewish, mainly from the east coast.

And I met Marlene. What drew me to Jesus through her was not that she was an expert in my background, that she had studied how to present Jesus to Jewish people. Not that that's bad. But she represented Jesus so well. She was a living example of a Christian. There's nothing more powerful than a Christian acting like a Christian.

Sometimes people of God don't want to shine their lights out. Sometimes, like Tom Wright says, "Instead of being lighthouses for the world, we erect mirrors

and reflect the light back at ourselves and glory in our own exclusivity and our own chosenness.” We are called to be lights.

We are called to *belong*. We are called to *be*. And thirdly, only when you think about responding to the call of God, are you called to *do*, to do a certain job.

See, when you do some legitimate work in this world, you are fulfilling God’s intention for this world. There are jobs that are illegitimate, that push against God’s intention for this world. We have people who have come to this church and have been converted to Christ who worked in illegitimate jobs. We have folks who have come to this church who used to be prostitutes or strippers or drug pushers. We have folks in this church who sold worthless investments, who were involved in the occult and palm reading.

And there is some work, of course, that falls between – it is sort of in the gray zone. You wonder, “How does this particular activity fulfill the intention of God in this world?” I don’t know that I would want to spend my life manufacturing little fuzzy dice that hang off of someone’s car mirror, or producing sexually suggestive bumper stickers. It is appropriate to wrestle, to ask the question: Do I really contribute to God’s intention for this world at my job? Is my job a place where I can really express love for God and love for my fellow man through what I do?

For example, God’s intention is that people eat. We kneel down and say, “Thank you, God, for this food.” Where did the food come from? It came from the grocery store. You are fulfilling God’s intention by working at a grocery, cutting meat, working in the check out line, stocking shelves.

You are fulfilling God’s intention by driving a truck that brings the food to the grocery store. You are fulfilling God’s intention by working in a factory that cans food, or that bakes bread, or by growing the grain, or raising the cattle, providing the fuel, or building the roads that bring it all to market.

You are meeting God’s intention for your work by earning money so that you can provide for your family, so that you can feed and clothe your children, so that you can care for yourself and not be a leach on society. You are fulfilling God’s intention when you earn money to give away to the spread of the Kingdom of God around the world, when you earn money to give away to the poor. Within the broad intentions of God for you are to love Him and to love others through your job, to do good for others, to provide for your family, and to provide enough to give away.

It is appropriate that you examine your talents, and that you pray and ask God, “God, I want to do the most good that I can with the limited amount of time I have here on earth. Lead me to a place where I can really do good.”

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April 27-28, 2002

Work: Christians in the Workplace Series

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III. Called to Be (Mt. 5:13-16)

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1. Preserving

2. Flavoring

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IV. Called to Do (Mk. 12:28-34)