

## Layman Discovers Purpose in Plumbing as Worship and Ministry

*The Wired Word* for the Week of September 18, 2022

### In the News

In a [Christianity Today article](#) published September 1 featuring an image of a shepherd's hook with a plumber's plunger on one end, Nathaniel Marshall described how he stood at a crossroads ten years ago, trying to discern the path forward for his family and his future. He had prayed and dreamt for years about becoming a pastor, but couldn't see how he could afford seminary and provide for his growing family's needs.

Then Marshall was offered the opportunity to learn plumbing. Viewing the opening as a gift from God, he prayed: "God, make me the kind of person who can one day be a pastor in your church." As he practiced his trade, he discovered that through manual labor, he was learning the skills church leaders need. "Rightly understood, work is the training ground where good Christians are made," he affirmed.

Marshall has become a Benedictine oblate (dedicating himself to God while living in secular society).

"I've discovered that practicing being in God's presence and growing in the Christian life is something any of us can do in virtually any line of work, not just as pastors or church leaders," Marshall explained. It's possible to be in prayer "even when turning wrenches," he wrote.

*The Wired Word* team member, Joanna Loucky-Ramsey, recalls that her father, Lou, who had studied for the ministry in Czechoslovakia prior to immigrating as a refugee to the United States, was unable to finish his journey toward ordination or to secure employment as a pastor. To provide for his wife and six children, Lou worked whatever jobs he could find, as a heating and air conditioning specialist, language teacher and housing provider.

One day he opened a trash can at one of his rentals to discover it full of maggots. Angry, despondent and frustrated, Lou asked God, Why was he relegated to such repulsive manual labor when he had prepared to be a pastor and dedicated himself to serve the Lord?

Then God brought Christ's suffering to Lou's mind. How could he complain about his own challenges, after all the Lord had endured for him?

Lou said God also opened his eyes to see that there were people in the neighborhoods he served who might never enter the doors of a church, but God had planted him in just the right place to reach them with the gospel.

Afterward, Lou didn't complain anymore, but considered the manual labor he was doing the ministry God had provided and the people he served outside the church walls his congregation.

When we approach God through prayer, Marshall suggested that we take on "the characteristics of God" and become "partakers of the divine nature" in and through Christ (2 Peter 1:4, ESV), the way a cool copper pipe takes on "the characteristics of the flame as it is made ready for the solder."

Marshall referenced the fourth-century bishop, Basil the Great, who taught that "love for God and love for neighbor" is the heart of the Christian life. "He who loves the Lord loves his neighbor in consequence. ... On the other hand, he who loves his neighbor fulfills the love he owes to God, for He accepts this favor as shown to Himself," wrote Basil.

"Doing one's work for the sake of one's neighbor is arguably itself a form of prayer, both because Christ is near in our neighbor receiving the service, and because of the disposition of our hearts to please God in our service," Marshall asserted. Following Basil's guidelines, Marshall wrote that while we work, we can pray, thanking God for the strength he gives to our hands to perform our tasks and for the ability to acquire the knowledge and skills we need to do our work in ways that please God.

Marshall said that manual labor has taught him two things: "In Christ, I am praying precisely because I am working, and I am becoming better at being a pray-er because I am a worker."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Instead of Becoming a Pastor, I Minister as a Plumber. \*Christianity Today\*](#)

[The Basics of a Biblical Theology of Work. \*The Gospel Coalition\*](#)

[10 Key Points About Work in the Bible Every Christian Should Know. \*Theology of Work Project\*](#)

[9 Essential Points on the Theology of Work. \*Institute for Faith, Work & Economics\*](#)

[The Theology of Work. \*Kingdom at Work\*](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

One Bible scholar wrote that work in its different forms is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible, more than all the words used to express worship, music, praise and singing combined.

According to "The Theology of Work" page (which is adapted from excerpts by Hugh Welchel, author of *How Then Should We Work? Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Work*) on the *Kingdom at Work* website, "The Ancient Hebrews used the same word ... *avodah* ... [to mean] work, worship, and service. ... God's original design and desire is that our work and our worship would be a seamless way of living. ... *Avodah* is a picture of an integrated faith, a life where work and worship come from the same root, the same foundation."

All work done for God and by the power of God's Spirit is sacred. Dr. Art Lindsley, of the *Institute for Faith, Work & Economics*, asserts that "the ministerial calling is not higher than

other 'secular' professions" and that "God's kingdom can be advanced from all valid professions. We are all 'priests' called to offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim his excellency in a world of darkness ([1 Peter 2:5, 9](#))."

Lindsley points out that "Jesus was a carpenter, or general contractor, for about eighteen years" ([Mark 6:3](#)) before beginning his public ministry at about the age of 30 ([Luke 3:23](#)). It would have been understandable if Jesus had spent all his time in the temple, discussing theology with religious scholars. But he did not hold manual labor in contempt. Instead, he honored the hardworking laborer.

From the *Kingdom at Work* website also comes this declaration: "There is no distinction between spiritual and temporal, sacred and secular work. All human work, however lowly, is capable of glorifying God. Work is, quite simply, an act of praise -- a potentially productive act of praise."

### **The Big Questions**

1. What is the purpose of labor?
2. Marshall believes that work can make people better Christians. In what sense might that be true? Why might that not always be true? How might work help us become better Christians?
3. What are some ways people can participate in the work God is doing?
4. Do you view your work as a job, or as a calling? How is a job different from a calling?
5. What difference, if any, does your Christian faith make to the way you work?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Psalm 19:1**

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.* (For context, read [Psalm 19:1-4](#)).

#### **Genesis 2:1-3**

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude. On the sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.* (For context, read [Genesis 1:1-31 -- 2:1-4](#).)

Bible translator Eugene Peterson wrote, "The Bible begins with the announcement, 'In the beginning God created ...' not sat majestic in the heavens. He created. He did something. He made something. He fashioned heaven and earth. The week of creation was a week of work."

Amy L. Sherman, Director of the Sagamore Institute's Center on Faith in Communities, wrote: "Human beings are made in the image of God, and God is a worker. Human labor has intrinsic

value because in it we 'image,' or reflect, our Creator." In her book, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*, Sherman says God's labors include:

- Redemptive work (God's saving and reconciling actions)
- Creative work (God's fashioning of the physical and human world)
- Providential work (God's provision for and sustaining of humans and the creation)
- Justice work (God's maintenance of justice)
- Compassionate work (God's involvement in comforting, healing, guiding and shepherding)
- Revelatory work (God's work to enlighten with truth)

Before sin entered the picture, God also invited the first humans to work in the garden, to care for the plants and animals that God created. Work was intended to be a joy and a blessing.

"Work is a gift from God. Work is something we were built for, something our loving Creator intends for our good," Sherman declared. "Work is not evil, nor is it a side effect of sin. It's certainly true that the curse of Genesis 3 brought toil and futility into work. Ever since, our experience of work involves pain as well as pleasure. But work itself is good. It has intrinsic value."

**Questions:** How does thinking about the fact that God is a worker impact the way you see your own identity as a person made in God the laborer's image? What human occupations might reflect the various aspects of God's work named by Sherman? Where does your own labor fit into these categories?

### **Amos 7:12-15**

*And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet nor a prophet's son, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' (For context, read [Amos 7:10-17](#).)*

When Amaziah, priest of Bethel, presses Amos to leave Israel and go back to Judah, Amos makes it a point of honor that he is not a member of the clergy, but a layman whose day job was tending flocks and herds and caring for orchards.

Many, if not most, people are not called to leave their profession or career to serve God in a formal role as a preacher or evangelist. Instead, they find that God may inspire them to serve God through their work, as opportunities arise in the everyday experiences of life.

When John the Baptist was asked how people should live after being baptized, he didn't tell tax collectors to quit their jobs, or soldiers to resign their commissions. Instead, he counseled them how to work their jobs with honesty, charity and fairness ([Luke 3:10-14](#)).

While Jesus did call the 12 disciples, he didn't call most people to give up their everyday jobs. He called Levi (Matthew) from his job as a tax collector ([Mark 2:13-15](#)), but left Zacchaeus in his position ([Luke 19:1-10](#)). After Jesus cast demons out of the Gerasene man, he didn't expect him to join him in his itinerant ministry, but encouraged him to return home, where he could tell everyone all the good things God had done for him ([Luke 8:38-39](#)).

Time doesn't permit us to mention all of the biblical figures who served God in "ordinary" jobs. Here are a few: Dorcas, a seamstress ([Acts 9:36-39](#)), Lydia, a merchant ([Acts 16:14-15](#)), Cornelius, a centurion, and Simon, a tanner ([Acts 10:1-8](#)), Luke, a doctor ([Colossians 4:14](#)), and Priscilla, Aquila and Paul, tentmakers ([Acts 18:1-3](#)).

Each of us can give glory to God through our occupation, as long as it is honorable work. Whether we labor in a religious setting or in what some define as a secular environment, we can all do our work in a manner that reflects the fact that we have had an encounter with Jesus.

**Question:** Think of a person who is not in "professional" ministry, who has had a profound impact on your life by the way his or her faith shone through the way he or she worked. What impressed you most about the way that person lived and worked?

### **John 13:13-17**

*[Jesus said,] "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."* (For context, read [John 13:1-17](#).)

When Jesus gathered to observe the Passover with his disciples for the last time before he climbed the hill of Calvary, he modeled how the most menial labor could be elevated to a sacred sacrament, when done in a spirit of great love for others. The task of washing the dusty, smelly feet of guests at table was normally left to the lowest slave. But it is just this task that Jesus, the host at the head of the table, the leader and teacher of the disciples, voluntarily took on (vv. 4-5).

Peter didn't understand why Jesus would perform such a task (vv. 6-11). "Do you know what I have done to you?" Jesus asked his disciples (v. 12). As Jesus was so fond of doing, he had turned another table over, flipped their expectations, pulled another "the last shall be first and the first shall be last" fast one. How were they supposed to interpret his actions?

So Jesus laid it all out for them. He acknowledged and accepted his role as their Lord and Teacher, but demonstrated that he embodied that role in the guise of a servant who was willing to work for their well-being. If he as their Master took on the role of a servant, then those who followed Jesus as Master should do the same. In so doing, they would be blessed.

The plumber in the news discovered that learning to fix toilets and install plumbing fixtures was actually great training for a ministry of service, which involves gutty and gritty work, as exemplified by Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples. Lou learned the same lesson from a garbage can full of maggots.

**Questions:** While many aspects of work are enjoyable, there are times when the tasks assigned to us are necessary, but much less pleasurable, and even distasteful. What motivated Jesus to serve the disciples in this way (v. 1)? How are you preparing to handle less palatable work responsibilities with a Christlike spirit?

### **Colossians 3:17, 23-24**

*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. ... Whatever task you must do, work as if your soul depends on it, as for the Lord and not for humans, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.* (For context, read [Colossians 3:12-25](#).)

Any work that does not harm people or the rest of creation can be done to the glory of God and for our Lord. Normal, everyday work can be sacred and honored by God. God can sanctify our work wherever it is performed. We are called to offer our work to God as a form of worship.

**Questions:** How does working "as for the Lord and not for humans" change the way we approach our work? What tasks are included in the phrases "*whatever* you do, in word or deed, do *everything*" and "*whatever* task you must do"? What does it mean to do your tasks "in the name of the Lord Jesus"? What difference does "giving thanks to God the Father through the Lord Jesus" make in the way you handle your work?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. A woman recalled how she used to tag along while her mother did the household chores. Her mom was a Christian and often sang while she worked. The little girl particularly liked the song her mother sang while bringing in the laundry from the clothesline.

It wasn't until several years later that she realized that her mother was singing the hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves," not "Bringing in the Sheets"! The girl misunderstood the words, but she did not misunderstand her mother's attitude toward her daily tasks.

What attitude toward your daily tasks might an observer pick up from watching you work?

2. There's a 17th-century devotional classic titled *The Practice of the Presence of God*, written by a lay monk named Nicholas Herman but known in the monastery as Brother Lawrence. He was assigned to work in the monastery's kitchen, and while there, he decided to try to pay attention to God's presence while going about his duties.

As he developed the ability to do this, he found, "That time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I enjoy God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."

For some people, the hustle and bustle of a noisy, busy kitchen might be too distracting for them to devote that kind of attention to the Lord. What helps you focus on the things of God while you work?

3. While our life is more than our job, our job can be a place where we serve our Lord.

There was a man, a baker by trade, who taught Sunday school at his church and served on a church committee. One day, while riding a train, he was approached by a zealous woman he'd never seen before who was trying to evangelize people. She asked him, "What work do you do for God?"

He replied, "I bake bread."

She said, "I don't mean your trade, but what service do you do for our Savior?"

"I bake bread," he said.

She tried again, "I mean, how are you seeking to glorify Christ and spread his gospel?"

"I bake bread," he said once more.

Why do you think the baker didn't tell the woman about his work as a Sunday school teacher and church committee member?

How would you answer the woman's questions: What work do you do for God? What service do you do for our Savior? How are you seeking to glorify Christ and spread his gospel?

4. *The Wired Word* team member, Stan Purdum, wrote: "In the early 1980s, I was the associate pastor at a large church in downtown Youngstown, Ohio. At the time, steel factories, the main employers, were in trouble. Youngstown, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and to some degree Canton were fast becoming known as the Rust Belt. The U.S. steel industry had failed to modernize and was now being beaten in price by steel from foreign mills. Many people who had worked in the mills found themselves suddenly laid off, with little prospect of ever being called back.

"Some of those unemployed workers attended the church I served. One of them, a man named Tony, was a deeply committed Christian. Jobs were hard to come by, but after some hard looking, Tony finally found another job in a small factory. He was earning half of his former wage, and under those circumstances, some people would say, 'Well, then, I'm not going to work that hard.' But Tony didn't feel that way. As a Christian he said, 'I agreed to work for this company for this wage, and I'm going to do my best.'

"So he went at it. In less than six weeks, he received a 50 cent per hour raise. After six months, he was promoted over employees who had been there much longer. His employer told him he wished all his employees worked as conscientiously as Tony did. Now obviously, Tony also had the skills that qualified him for the promotion, but his attitude reflected his faith."

How does your commitment to Christ affect your approach to your work?

5. Discuss this, from theologian John Calvin: "According to the scriptural perspective, work becomes a way-station of spiritual witness and service, a daily traveled bridge between theology and social ethics. In other words, work for the believer is a sacred stewardship, and in fulfilling his job he will either accredit or violate the Christian witness."

6. When Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899) was 18, while working as a boot salesman in a Boston shoe store owned by two of his uncles, he received a visit from Edward Kimball, his Sunday school teacher. Kimball was "determined to speak to [Moody] about Christ and about his soul."

Kimball felt that he made "a very weak plea for Christ. ... I simply told him of Christ's love for him, and the love Christ wanted in return." That was enough. Moody immediately decided to follow Jesus.

Six years later, he gave up a lucrative business as a traveling shoe salesman to devote himself full time to preaching, evangelism and Bible teaching. Moody once said: "The preaching

that this world needs most is the sermons in shoes that are walking with Jesus Christ."

When God called Moses from keeping sheep, he gave him the task of leading the Israelites out of slavery, through the wilderness.

When Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him, they left their business as fishermen, to learn to fish for people ([Matthew 4:19](#)).

How might God want to use your education, training and job experience to accomplish spiritual goals?

### **Responding to the News**

You may wish to sing [Sermon in Shoes](#) (lyrics [here](#)), by Ruth Harms Calkin, as a reminder that as you walk with Jesus Christ, in your everyday, working life, you are sermons in shoes, and you are called to proclaim his good news to those you meet.

Sing the song four times, with each different ending, and then sing one more time, using all four endings together ("so walk it and talk it, and live it and give it, and teach it and preach it, and know it and show it, you're a sermon in shoes").

**Prayer** Suggested by [Psalm 92:1-5](#); [Ephesians 2:8-10](#)

It is good to give thanks to you, O Lord,  
to sing praises to your name, O Most High,  
For you, O Lord, have made us glad by your work;  
at the works of your hands we sing for joy.  
How great are your works, O Lord!  
We also are your handiwork.  
You have created us and recreated us in Christ Jesus,  
that we might do the good works you prepared for us to do.  
How great are you, Lord! Hallelujah! Amen!

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