

Work That Is Really Important • 1 Corinthians 3:8-9

Charleen and I were married in June and moved to central Illinois in August. We lived in an eight-foot-wide mobile home along a river bank that sometimes flooded us out. When we first moved into this mobile home a lot of things weren't hooked up—like water, sewer and gas. We had to go to a nearby gas station to use the bathroom.

Our old Chevrolet gave reliable transportation as long as we stopped every 50 miles to fill up on oil. It used a lot of oil!

Charleen was the first to find a job—as a copy editor at the local daily newspaper. I applied at lots of different places but no one was hiring.

We visited a large local church where the pastor's prayer expressed gratitude for our jobs. His prayer was all I remembered from that Sunday service—because I didn't have a job.

Finally, I was hired by the service department of the local mobile home dealer. It was a hard job. I didn't know anything about repairing mobile homes and I didn't have any of the tools I needed, but I learned. In the summer one of my assignments was to dig ditches and lay sod for a new sales lot. Then I was sent with teams to deliver and setup mobile homes. I bought some tools and learned a lot about hydraulic jacking, leveling, sheet metal work, repairing gas and oil furnaces, installing air conditioners, plumbing, electricity and more. In the winter I was given the worst assignments—like thawing frozen sewer lines under mobile homes with a blow torch in sub-zero temperatures.

My co-workers were a mixed lot. Some were skilled; others were incompetent. Some were decent while others were difficult. Profanity and obscenity was part of the atmosphere. Pornography on the shop walls was standard. Company Christmas parties were wild, drunken events.

My boss was a man named Jim, the brother-in-law of the owner. He was kind and gracious and treated me well. He was not a believer. I tried to live a Christian life before him and the others, but it didn't make any noticeable difference. I

even corresponded with Jim and talked with him on the phone in recent years.

Where do you think I rated in world order of job importance in the jobs of America? I doubt that the IRS even has a category to classify someone who works for minimum wage servicing trailers and mobile homes. It didn't generate a lot of respect in the community.

I wondered what I was doing there. I wondered if my job was important. I wondered if I was important. After all, it seems to me that job descriptions are not only important to us; they are also important to God. They must be since so many people in the Bible are identified by the jobs they had. Cain was a farmer. Abel was a shepherd. Joseph was a slave, then a prisoner and finally Prime Minister. Aaron was a priest. Rahab is described as a prostitute. Solomon was a king. Esther was a queen. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king. Ezra was a scribe. Daniel was a government employee. Matthew was a tax collector. Luke was a physician. Peter, Andrew, James and John were all fishermen. Jesus was a carpenter and eventually a rabbi. Pilate was a governor. Cornelius was a soldier. Lydia was a textile merchant. Paul was a tentmaker. And that's only a few.

Most of the major and many minor characters in the Bible are identified by their occupations.

There are some people in the Bible that all we know about them is their name and the job they had. No other details of their biography or story are given. So, we have to conclude that God must

care a great deal about the jobs we do. Never think that God doesn't know what job we have or that God doesn't care. Our job descriptions may not be the most important thing to God, but they are clearly important to him.

Not only do we have jobs here on earth, we will also have jobs in heaven. Revelation 22 starts out by saying that those who are in heaven will serve God and reign over the universe with him. As we have jobs and job descriptions on earth we

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will all have jobs and job descriptions forever in heaven. Job descriptions are important to God.

God uses different jobs for his purposes. So there is a sense in which Christians are like players on a team. The pitcher is not more important than the catcher. The quarterback is not more important than the receiver. The center is not more important than the goal tender. All are essential. The goal of the game is to win and a lot of different players and positions are needed to get a victory.

In 1 Corinthians 3:8-9 we are told, *“The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers. . . .”*

From 1 Corinthians 12:14-21 we can see how God thinks about different jobs and roles:

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But, in fact, God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

Sociologists call this “division of labor”. If ten of us decide to go on a camping trip we can all try to be self-sufficient, bringing what we need individually for the 2-week camping trip. Or, we can divide up the responsibilities. So, different people will bring wood, food, tents, medicine and a GPS or map. One is not essentially better than the others. Without a map you could get lost and die, but without food you could know exactly where you are and starve. It’s similar with different jobs we do in society

The principle is simple and powerful: “different” does not determine personal value. It’s a profound concept rooted in the very nature and es-

sence of God. God is a trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—each with different jobs. Each has equal worth. Each has equal importance. The Father sends the Son. The Son comes to earth to become human and die on the cross. The Father and the Son send the Spirit to live inside believers. Different jobs for different purposes.

The problem arises with human pecking orders. Like chickens in the barnyard that peck each other until one is first and another is last, sinful humans exaggerate the importance of some workers and minimize the importance of other workers.

We know how that game is played. We try to say that we are more valuable because we have titles, degrees, salaries or positions. Sometimes people ask me what I want to be called and I say, “Leith, that’s my name.” I find that often what people want to do is add an academic title or a position, but I tell them, “If Jesus and Paul could go on a first name basis, so can I.”

Jesus himself is the best example of flattening the pecking order. We find this in Philippians 2:5-8:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

The eternal Son of God says, “I’ll just be a servant. It’s okay. I’m even willing to die if that’s what it takes to do the job that has been assigned to me.”

The other end of the pecking order point is made by Jesus’ brother in James 2:1-4:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not dis-

criminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Let's be realistic and honest. We live in a pecking order world. India has an established caste system with Brahmins at the top and untouchables at the bottom. Even where you work, some people are revered and some people are rejected.

As Christians we seek to treat everyone with equal respect regardless of the jobs they have. We know that our jobs are honorable and important to God regardless of the way others may treat us.

As Christians we all see ourselves as God's co-workers. Let's go back to 1 Corinthians 3:8-9: *"The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers. . . ."*

The Bible teaches that the ultimate outcome of life and work is determined by God. Work is a team effort. God assigns different jobs to different people. God is the captain of our team and our co-worker on our jobs. We work hard for God and not primarily for the outcome. It is a fantastic privilege to team up with God.

Some years ago Wooddale Church sponsored a mid-winter picnic in the Metrodome. Part of the event was a softball game in which I was assigned to be pitcher. I'm not a very good pitcher (probably really bad!—especially by Metrodome standards). But I wanted to do a good job. At least I didn't want to do a bad job. I threw the ball as hard as I could and as accurately as I could. My team won! But there is a story behind the story—the teams were assigned. Some of the players were major league professional athletes. They were very good! The bottom line is that the team didn't win because of me; my team won because of them.

And so it is in the work that we do. We are on a team with God. We do the very best we can. We put in every effort to get it done right, but we fully recognize that the outcome is not primarily because of us; it is primarily because of God.

How does all this add up? Well, whatever your job is, consider it to be your current assignment on God's team. Work hard. Work well. Know that you and your job are important. Don't let the

world's pecking order peck you down. Never become selfishly proud of your job and never be ashamed of any honorable job you do for God. Find your worth in your relationship to God and the honor of serving on his team. Then, trust him for the final outcome.

I started by telling you about my years as a mobile home repairman. It was a long time ago. But something quite amazing happened at our house this past Tuesday. We received in the mail a longhand letter from a woman I have never met. She is the granddaughter of my old boss, Jim. She wrote to say that Jim, a heavy smoker, had just recently died of lung cancer.

The week before he died she led him to faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior. She wrote to thank Charleen and me for our influence and Christian witness in her grandfather's life that, she said, resulted in his eternal salvation. She explained that when she went through his belongings in the days after his death she found that he had saved all of

my letters and that was how she found our address and wrote to us.

So here's the question: Was my minimum wage job as a mobile home serviceman for De-

luxe Mobile Homes in Peoria, Illinois, important to God? I think it was the most important job I could have had. It turned out to be the most important job in the world.

You may be rich or poor, famous or completely unknown, powerful or powerless—president and CEO or mobile home park ditch digger. Whatever it is, count your job to be of the highest importance. God does . . . and so should you!

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