

A child in a white astronaut suit stands in the center of a futuristic, brightly lit hallway with white walls and floor. The child has their arms crossed and is wearing blue sneakers. The perspective is looking down the length of the hallway, which is flanked by white structural elements.

EVERY JOB A PARABLE

WHAT WALMART GREETERS, NURSES & ASTRONAUTS
TELL US ABOUT GOD

JOHN VAN SLOTEN

Deeply thoughtful about the most important things while also drawing on the best of the Christian tradition, *Every Job a Parable* is for every man and every woman who cares about the work of work.

STEVEN GARBER

Principal of the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture and author of *Visions of Vocation*

A greatly needed resource that pastorally weaves together biblical teaching and rich theology in the context of a wide diversity of occupations.

DAVID H. KIM

Executive director, Center for Faith & Work

John Van Sloten gives us eyes to see that our work is not only designed to serve others but is also essentially formative on our journey to greater Christlikeness. I highly recommend this book.

TOM NELSON

Author of *Work Matters*

All work is meant to be God honoring. I have long believed that and taught it. But in this marvelous book John Van Sloten brings it all alive for me in new ways. I will be ready to read a parable from the Lord every time I see a sanitation worker or a Walmart greeter!

RICHARD MOUW

President Emeritus, Fuller Theological Seminary

John Van Sloten's book presents a wide-ranging and deeply practical theology of vocation, helping readers see how God speaks and works through jobs we might never have thought were "sacred." A treasure trove of insights and a great resource for the church.

BRETT McCracken

Author of *Hipster Christianity*, *Gray Matters*, and *Uncomfortable*

Filled with startling insights and fascinating characters, Van Sloten's book will help you see that what you do Monday through Friday truly is a sacred calling, one in which God wants to speak to you and to the rest of the world. Highly recommended!

DREW DYCK

Senior editor of CTPastors.com and author of *Yawning at Tigers*

Here are stories of regular people who are discovering the bubbling ferment of God's Kingdom in their callings and vocations. Read this and be encouraged that the Spirit really is out ahead of us in our work lives and callings.

ALAN ROXBURGH

President of The Missional Network



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Every Job a Parable: What Walmart Greeters, Nurses, and Astronauts Tell Us about God

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INTRODUCTION

Finding God at Work

They will not work in vain.

ISAIAH 65:23, NLT

God is more present at your work than you know. And I think he wants you to know that. God wants you to see that he is there and that his Spirit is moving *in* you, *through* you, and *all around* you as you do your job. God wants you to know him in all you do—including the third of your life that you spend working.

Over the past five years, I have preached Sunday sermons on many different vocations: on astronauts, auto mechanics, emergency room doctors, hairstylists, investment bankers, Walmart greeters, engineers, firefighters, accountants, electricians, forensic psychologists, city mayors, painters, musicians, parents, carpenters, composers, glass blowers, Olympic swimmers, hockey players, major-league pitchers, emergency response helicopter pilots, geophysicists, nephrologists, geologists, audiologists, optometrists, florists, epigenetics researchers, neuroscientists, residential landlords, real estate developers,

software developers, oil industry executives, molecular biologists, radiation physicists, police officers, photographers, journalists, bakers, nurses, restaurant servers, teachers, human resources managers, development workers, sanitation workers, custom automobile restorers, and farmers.

As I have engaged all of these jobs, I have realized that each is a kind of *parable*—a lived-out story within which and through which God speaks in multiple ways. Parables were a key aspect of Jesus’ teachings—he depicted God’s Kingdom through stories about laborers, farmers, jewel merchants, kings, judges, managers, builders, general-store keepers, landlords, and vineyard owners. He used these stories, the Bible tells us, as a kind of advanced class for his most responsive audiences: “To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them” (Matthew 13:12, NLT).

For years my view of how Jesus’ parables worked was limited. I understood them to be narrative tools for the conveyance of moral and ethical truth, stories with a built-in spiritual lesson. I still believe this. But lately I’ve come to realize that the *created elements* of his stories—the down-to-earthness, the real-life content, ordinary people doing ordinary things—also carried revelatory weight. Jesus was telling stories filled with things he made (soil, seeds, agriculture, and farmers), things that revealed something about their maker. Parables, in many ways, pointed to God’s revelation via creation. When Jesus wrapped a parable around a particular vocation, he was affirming the creational goodness of that job.

I think Jesus is still doing the same today—through the parable that is your job.

That's what this book is about: understanding how Jesus is speaking directly *to* you (via your personal experience of work) and how he is speaking *through* you (to the broader world). It's about hearing God's creational words through created things: the rocks a geologist explores, the cars a mechanic fixes, the lights an electrician installs, the customers a retail worker serves. The "stuff" we work with interacts and commingles with the "stuff" of our work itself, leading to an enriched vocational experience of God.

As you read this book you'll encounter God's revelation through various vocational parables, as shared with me by the people I interviewed. You'll learn how a firefighter's passion is like God's, how the nature of automotive restoration uniquely reflects the renewing mind of God, how the cultural product of the culinary arts reveals something of the hospitable heart of God, and how a geophysicist's search for subterranean truth informs humanity's collective search for God's truth.

And you'll start to see how these present-day job-based parables are a lot like the New Testament parables Jesus told.

Throughout the Bible, in fact, God accomplished his will and made himself known through real people doing real work: creating, building, tending, leading, managing, restoring, and filling the world with good things.

This is how God worked in the past. This is how God works today!

Jesus is speaking the parable that is your vocational life right now—a *word* from God that is meant to be *read* by

others and *experienced* by you. Imagine your job charged with this kind of mystical, God-revealing potential.

Sacred.

Holy.

A RENEWED VOCATIONAL IMAGINATION

The purpose of this book is to help kindle a new kind of vocational imagination, to help you experience God at work more, and to help you read the parable that is your job.

It is for people who trust that God is at work everywhere.

It is for those who believe that God is the Maker of heaven and earth; that he holds human history in his hands; and that the sociological, cultural, scientific, and technological developments of our age have been brought to this time and place with intent.

This book is for those who believe that the kind of work they do, the talents they have been given, and the things they will accomplish are held in God's hands, and that he has a purpose for it all—even if that purpose is unclear, appears to be falling short, or is seemingly out of reach.

I believe God intended work to be a means through which we can know him, experience him, and relate to him—all in the context of his providential unfolding of history.

After all, we are made in the image of a God who works.

He is the one who first imagined the cosmos: quarks, muons, and atoms; basic elements, chemical bonds, and genetics; germination, photosynthesis, and capillary action. The God who creatively designed the universe and in whose mind the complexities of all physical reality first took shape.

The God who holds and mysteriously guides all of the ways of culture: business, government, education, science, agriculture, the arts, service industries, sport, and leisure—all in accordance with his good and perfect will. The God who providentially cares for human culture, seeding in us the capacity to flourish and presiding over our innovations, our language, art, and math and all their extrapolations, to “fill the earth and govern it” (Genesis 1:28, NLT). The God who inspired early iterations of arithmetic, knowing that they would one day become calculus—and then a suspension bridge! The God who led the ancient Greeks to ponder human nature so that the science of psychology would one day have a footing and that organizational behavior principles could later develop and enable business to thrive.

God made everything out of nothing. Now he is taking what he has made and making more out of it. One crucial means by which he is accomplishing this is through *work*.

His work and ours.

As you read these words, you might be thinking that all of this is a bit of a stretch. Is God really *that* involved with everything that fills creation? Are all things really playing out on purpose and for a greater good? What about corrupt governments, businesses, and cultural practices, and all of the other twisting, polluting, exploiting, and perverting impacts of sin? What about those who endure terrible working conditions? What connection could all of these broken things possibly have with God’s revelation? Isn’t there a line between what God does and what human beings do? How do you separate the two? How in the world can you claim to discern God’s revelation through all of this confusion?¹

By doing the same thing you do when you read the Bible.

In the Bible, God is *very much* present in even the most broken circumstances. Through messed-up people living in a damaged world, God's redemptive plan is still very much playing out. The Scriptures tell a story about a God who gets his work done despite these complexities—through murderers, betrayers, chronic liars, adulterous kings, prostitutes, leaders of unbelieving nations, and countless hubris-filled hearts. Through broken people and cultures, God's will is done and he speaks his word: freeing slaves; saving people; building up nations; judging others; developing good communities, cities, and cultures; and even celebrating the fruit of those cultures.

If we can read our jobs as we read our Bibles, then we'll be able to discern what God is revealing there. If we can move past what many of us believe in theory—that God is present everywhere, mysteriously getting his will done via human agency (despite the reality of evil) in a redemptive and self-revealing way—and if we can listen for God's very specific word at work, then I believe that with the Spirit's help, we'll hear it.

If God speaks through all of the brokenness in the Bible, then surely he does the same today, speaking through our work and culture. Imagine letting God be God at this level of detail in your life!²

THE PARABLE OF AN ASTRONAUT

One of the most beautiful stories to rise out of the ashes of 9/11 came to us through the at-work words of American

astronaut Frank Culbertson. As smoke was pouring from the Twin Towers on that fateful day, Commander Culbertson was looking down on Manhattan from the International Space Station, filming what he saw. While he knew something horrible was happening on the ground, he also saw something more. Through a crackling NASA communication link he spoke these hopeful words:

I just wanted the folks to know that their city still looks very beautiful from space. I know it's very difficult for everybody in America right now. The country still looks good, and for New Yorkers, your city still looks great from up here.³

Those words were comforting. And they were true! If you look at the NASA video, you can see that most of Manhattan was still standing; the ocean, rivers, and tributaries were still beautifully held within their boundaries; the sky was brilliantly clear; and millions of people on that island were still alive and safe—along with hundreds of millions more in the rest of the country.

That perspective could come only from someone who saw things from above.

As I watched that video and listened to that astronaut's words, I couldn't help but wonder whether this is how an omniscient, omnipresent, all-powerful, and eternal God sees our world. Could it be that if we just stood back far enough and had more of his perspective, we, too, would be able to see that there is still good going on in our lives, families, and jobs—even when it doesn't seem that way?

EVERY JOB A PARABLE

From heaven the LORD looks down
and sees all mankind:
from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.

PSALM 33:13-15

Surely God suffered with us on 9/11. But perhaps he also had this other view of reality to share: through an astronaut bearing his image, seeing the whole picture from above and speaking encouraging words from above, his job a kind of parable spoken by God for just such a time as that.

When the 1968 Apollo 8 mission to the moon first turned its camera back on Earth and humanity saw an earthrise for the first time, everything changed. The moment was so compelling that the astronauts could do nothing less than read the creation account from the book of Genesis via live broadcast. This was the first time a human being saw Earth as a planet, as a whole. This view brought us new perspective, awareness, and humility. One astronaut said, “That may well have been the most important reason we went.”⁴

It’s called the “Overview Effect”: a kind of God’s-eye view of reality. While God certainly sees our physical planet from a perspective that is beyond ours, I’m thinking that the same is true when it comes to seeing reality in relation to our environment, economic and social structures, and vocations. There is more going on than meets our eyes.

This kind of *seeing* is foundational for this book: a larger perspective that sees what work was originally meant to be

and what it will one day fully be, even as things may be tough on the ground right now. A deeper look into the creational good that makes up what you do, a longer view on the significance of your job, all leading to a richer experience of God at work.

After all, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). Our world belongs to God, and even though it is fallen, none of it has fallen beyond God’s reach. Because God is good, Saint Augustine tells us, there “cannot be a nature in which there is no good.”⁵

It’s this vocational good that this book is seeking out. The process may feel a bit idealistic at times, but it has to. To name where God is at work in our vocations *is* to name what’s still good, true, noble, and right in this world. So allow yourself some intentional naïveté as you engage the ideas in this book. When you start to name God’s good at work, it will grow, displacing all that is currently falling short.

God wants this for you. As any good boss or mentor would, he wants to come alongside you and show you the way. You are an apprentice of the greatest artist, engineer, planner, mathematician, assembler, analyst, scientist, laborer, administrator, and server imaginable. Just as a novice watches every move of a journeyman, you are called to fix your senses on your Master—learning at every turn, observing his ways, smiling at the way he thinks, being astonished at what he knows, feeling gratitude for the patient way he teaches, getting excited about the beautiful thing, the necessary thing, or the ordinary thing you are making together.⁶

THE COMMON GOOD?

Recently there has been a lot of talk about the idea of working for the *common good*—for the good of your neighbor, society, classmate, environment, and world. A lot of people think this is the ultimate objective when it comes to work.

While working for the common good is an important part of a balanced vocational worldview, it is not *all* that work is meant for. In fact, sometimes it can get in the way and become an impediment to work's chief purpose: a real-time knowing and experiencing of God. When this happens, our jobs can become nothing more than a “works-based” means of vocational salvation. Work becomes something that is based on *what we do for God*, as opposed to *who we are before him*.

This is not to say that our work and faith shouldn't materially impact our world or that we can't know and experience God in the *doing*—they should, and we can. But all of our good works must be born out of a more primary and gracious starting point, out of a place where we intimately relate to and experience the person of God: *on* the job. Our good work is meant to be a grateful response to a grace-filled encounter with God.

Jesus taught that there are basically two laws we need to keep in order to flourish as human beings: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Love God first and foremost, with all you've got; then, *out of that love*, work for the common good.

These two laws are not mutually exclusive. They are symbiotic—mutually fulfilling and interdependent. Love of God shapes and informs love of neighbor. You can't fully love your neighbor (or yourself) unless you are in a loving relationship with God. You won't know *why* and *when* and *how* to work for the common good unless you are doing it out of a "right then and there" *working* love of God, out of his "just in time" ethical, wise, creative, and mindful presence.

The reverse is true as well: Only by loving your neighbor (working for the common good) will you be able to fully love God. Work concretizes your faith; it puts God's words into action. We need to be doing both at the same time—loving God and loving our neighbor—to be fully alive.

And it all starts with a loving, knowing experience of God.⁷

MAKING ROOM

In order to make room for that experience, we need to keep God's priorities in order.

Knowing God at work is more than just believing that God gave you your job, more than just understanding that he is the source of vocational morals or ethics, and more than just viewing him as the one you witness about or ultimately work for or give a portion of your earnings back to. He is more than just a God whom you serve. To know God at work is even more than just working for the common good.

While all of these ways of connecting faith and vocation are valid, none get to the *core* of where God meets work—those real-time experiences of God when "out of the blue" inspiration hits you, when a huge challenge confronts you and

you find another physical or cognitive gear, or when you are so caught up in the flow of what you are doing that you lose all sense of time and space.

If you are already experiencing God on the job this way, put this book down and get back to work! But if not, or if you want to have a deeper experience of God at work, then read on.

My hope is that, through the stories of many workers from various vocations, this book will provide you with a set of spiritual practices (a *lectio vocatio*) that will teach you how to read your job and will enable you to discern where God is speaking to you, through you, and through others at work.

A person in a white astronaut suit stands in the center of a brightly lit, futuristic corridor. The floor is a light-colored grid pattern, and the walls are also light-colored with a grid-like structure. The person is wearing a white helmet and a white suit with a backpack. The overall scene is clean, modern, and high-tech.

PART ONE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO IMAGE GOD?

ALL WORK MATTERS

WHAT A FLYER DELIVERY PERSON, A WALMART GREETER,
A FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST, AND A RESIDENTIAL LANDLORD
TEACH US ABOUT THE VALUE OF ALL WORK

Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.

JACOB, IN GENESIS 28:16

.....

In the book of Genesis, there is a story about the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, who, while on a journey, stopped in a seemingly ordinary, middle-of-nowhere place to rest for the night. He slept on the ground, using a rock as a pillow. And there he had a dream in which he met God.

In that dream, God made hope-filled promises to Jacob: that he would be Jacob's God, give him a place to make a life, and bless him in such a way that everyone around him would be blessed through his presence. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16-17).

Far too often people journey through their vocational

FEATURED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Flyer delivery person
- Walmart greeter
- Forensic psychologist
- Residential landlord

lives with no expectation of ever meeting God there. For one reason or another, they have lost sight of God's everywhere presence. Some think their jobs are too insignificant, ordinary, and middle-of-nowhere. Others think that what they do couldn't possibly connect to the ways of God and that there is nothing of God's goodness in their jobs. Some have never even considered or imagined connecting with God at work. Work is work; God is at church.

A few years ago, I had a conversation with a woman who delivered flyers in our neighborhood. She was no more than five feet tall and in her seventies. Two or three times a week, she would pull a heavy, homemade wooden wagon filled with flyers through our streets—up and down the many hills; over curbs; through rain, snow, and heat. Every time I saw her working, I was amazed and also a bit saddened by how difficult that kind of job must have been for an older woman. Often I would say hi and talk to her as we passed on the street. One day I decided to stop and have a real conversation.

We talked about her work. She told me that she had been delivering flyers in my neighborhood for over twenty years; this was her last day on the job. Twenty years! Wow!

I told her that I had been watching her do her work since I had moved into the area. "I can't believe you have been strong enough to pull this heavy thing." I grabbed the handle of her wagon and pulled it a few inches; it must have weighed fifty pounds! She said that it wasn't so bad, once you got used to it.

I asked her why she had decided to stop work now. She said that over the past year, she had come to realize that

she just couldn't do the job anymore—"You just *know* these things." She was thinking of working at Walmart instead. "At least I'll be warm in the winter."

This was the day of her retirement. Was anyone going to throw a party? Present her with a gold watch? Say a few kind words? I knew I had to say something and recognize her for what she had given. Someone had to thank her.

So I thanked her. "You know, you must have helped thousands of people in this community save money over the years with all those coupons and sales flyers. Thank you for that!"

She paused, took it in for a second, and then said, "Yeah, I guess so." Then she smiled. I asked her name; she told me it was Colleen. I introduced myself, shook her hand, and wished her all the best in her retirement.

I continued on my walk, and she picked up her wagon handle, looked over her address list one more time, and pulled her stack of flyers to the next house.

Too many times over the years, I have pulled a thick wad of advertisements out of my mailbox and felt a bit of frustration with the flyer industry. All that wasted paper and recycling hassle—all that consumer pressure. But for Colleen, this was her job—her life, in some large part. After our "retirement conversation," I hoped I could engage my job with as much dignity, perseverance, and strength.

I have to admit, I was kind of surprised that I was able and willing to articulate some of God's goodness to Colleen in relation to her work. As I look back, it had a lot to do with what I was feeling in that moment: a deep compassion, bordering on love, for her as a human being. As I looked at her from that perspective, I was able to see value in who

she was and what she did. I was able to see where God was working through her.

Surely God was already in that place, and I was unaware of it.

Surely God feels a love that brings dignity to every human being doing every kind of job, no matter how big or small.

There is a Latin phrase used by the ancient mystics: *ubi amor, ibi oculus*—“Where there is love, there is seeing.”¹ God is love, so he must see everything. As maker and keeper of all people and things, God knows the real value, the eternal significance, of even the most seemingly insignificant work. “With God nothing is empty of meaning,” wrote the early church father Irenaeus.² As people of faith, we worship “a creator who loves us enough to seek us in the most mundane circumstances of our lives.”³ There is no job so boring that it would disinterest God, because there is no person whom God does not love and see.

God is whispering truth and meaning in the most ordinary and small places. In fact, those are often the places where God *especially* shows up. Given what the Bible reveals about how he came to us as a baby and was born into very humble circumstances, it seems clear that God often chooses to show up in middle-of-nowhere places. Remember the times where Jesus reached out to and included the last and least? He chose untrained fishermen to be his disciples—ordinary laborers to deliver the world’s greatest message.

So if you work at a seemingly ordinary job, don’t let that lead you to believe that it is ordinary to God. God is at work and can be known anywhere.

We humans have created a kind of vocational hierarchy:

White-collar is better than blue-collar; leading others trumps following them; high salaries outshine low salaries; managing beats out serving; highly educated is superior to less educated; high-profile is better than behind-the-scenes. While there is nothing wrong with high-level leadership, business success, or making a good salary (Jacob, for example, was materially blessed), these false assumptions undermine the vocational experience of many workers, lowering their job satisfaction and leaving them with little or no expectation of experiencing God at work. If you can't love an ordinary job, how can you ever find God there?

The first time I met Shirley, she was greeting at our neighborhood Walmart. When I asked her whether she would be willing to do a video interview for a sermon I was preaching, she initially didn't want to draw any attention to herself. For Shirley, greeting was all about others. "I like people," she said. "I want to help them find the department they are looking for, have a better day . . . by smiling or just saying hello . . . [or] by getting them a shopping cart." She loved her job, and she loved serving. Shirley did for others what she would want them to do for her. Many of the customers who walked by that morning knew her name.

Once she realized I was serious about wanting to understand more about her work, she consented to an interview. Following the interview, with the camera off, we had a more personal conversation. I discovered her deeper side. She had been through a lot, yet she seemed so content and at peace. She knew herself!

Driving home I thought, *What a wonderful human being!*
And then I felt ashamed.

The day before the interview, I had come up with the idea of asking the Walmart manager if I could be a greeter for a morning. What better way to understand the job? I quickly nixed the idea because I worried that someone I knew might see me there. Yet here was Shirley—a seventy-seven-year-old woman who didn't go to church but still believed in God—imaging Christ in a way that I couldn't.

At one point in the Gospels, Jesus washed his disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). Shirley does the same every time she humbly puts a Walmart customer before herself.

According to the Bible, God is a God who serves. Selflessness in the smallest things is indicative of his nature. So whenever anybody humbly serves another in a selfless way at their job or anywhere else, they are, in a very real sense, imitating Christ. I believe that the Holy Spirit is moving through them, giving them the humility to kneel and to look up to others. And through that humble act, they become more human. This must be why Shirley knew herself so well; God's humility was moving through her.

Theologian Cornelius Plantinga wrote,

According to God's intelligence, the way to thrive is to help others to thrive; the way to flourish is to cause others to flourish; the way to fulfill yourself is to spend yourself. Jesus himself tried to get this lesson across to his disciples by washing their feet, hoping to ignite a little of the trinitarian life in them. The idea is that if—in a band of disciples, in a family, in a college—people encourage each other, pour out interest and goodwill upon each other,

favor each other with blessings customized to fit the other person's need, what transpires is a lovely burst of shalom.⁴

For weeks after that Walmart interview, I kept seeing an image of Shirley's aged hands pushing those shopping carts—a great-grandmother doing all that physical work for other able-bodied people, standing all day, greeting customers where they were, selflessly incarnating the hospitable heart of God. She didn't judge those who walked through the door. And it made a difference.

Now, when I reconnect with Shirley at Walmart, I tell her about how her story continues to be told via online sermon video downloads, and she glows. My prayer is that through the attention I have shown her, she will catch a glimpse of a God who sees her as well. Perhaps she will even experience his smiling presence every time she smiles at another and a foretaste of his goodness in the goodness she already feels in greeting others.

There is no job too small for God's presence. But for some workers, it is not the size of their job that is the problem; it is the nature, scope, and content. What they do seems very far removed from what God would do. Aren't there just some jobs where God's goodness is unlikely to be found?

FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

A while ago, a forensic psychologist told me that while there are many jobs where God's truth and goodness are clearly evident, in work like his—diagnosing and then bearing bad

news about what is often irreparable impairment—God’s presence is a lot harder to find. How could this kind of vocation ever image God?

Later he sent me an e-mail further detailing the nature of his work: “My job essentially consists of identifying neuro-cognitive impairment (i.e., impaired concentration, memory, speech/language, decision-making) associated with brain pathology (disease or injury) and predictive of disability.” In other words, 99 percent of the time, he’s giving people bad news: “The only good news would be if an individual is less impaired than he/she thought.”

As I considered his e-mail, the words of God through the prophet Jeremiah came to mind:

This is what the LORD says:

“Your wound is incurable,
your injury beyond healing.
There is no one to plead your cause,
no remedy for your sore,
no healing for you.”

JEREMIAH 30:12-13

We live in a sin-corrupted and broken world. People’s bodies and minds and families and communities are not what they are supposed to be, not what God intended when he first made them. Life falls short—all of it, including our work.

But this psychologist’s work was not devoid of the presence of God. Nothing can be completely so. While his particular

profession may deal with more brokenness than most, God is still very much at work there.

A forensic psychologist is made in the image of a God who sometimes brings terrible news: “Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing. This won’t ever go away or get better.” Sometimes the truth is difficult to hear. Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news. And yet, there is still something very right—something Godlike!—about the act of naming fallen reality for what it is.

The forensic psychologist started to do the math himself. “Does a person whose job it is to search for pathology work in a role similar to the Holy Spirit, who convicts of brokenness, sin, and impurity?” he wrote me. “In turn, the pathologist is intimately reminded and convicted by the Holy Spirit of what is unholy and the need for healing, remediation, reconciliation, and resurrection. Unlike jobs filled with the beauty of creation, the pathologist is reminded daily of the futility of our attempts to be whole without God, never able to forget that we, and the otherwise beautiful creation around us, [are] fallen, and [remain] so without the *hope* of resurrection.”

As I read his note, what came to mind were the words of Jesus, as recorded by his disciple John:

When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he’ll expose the error of the godless world’s view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He’ll show them that their refusal to believe in me [Jesus] is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that

judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted.

JOHN 16:8-11, MSG

Wow! A pretty harsh diagnosis from Jesus! Our godless world isn't seeing things straight. Our basic sin is that we don't believe that Jesus is who he says he is and that what he says comes from God the Father. The Spirit's role is to bring judgment, trial, and conviction.

According to the Bible, Jesus is the one *through* whom and *for* whom all things were made—the one who is now holding all things together, including you and what you do. We say we believe these basic truths about who Jesus is, and yet most of the time we go about our daily work as though he is not there. We barely give him the time of day. We pay him lip service by limiting his presence at work to issues of morality, work ethic, or witnessing. In many ways, perhaps out of ignorance or willful denial or sloth, we refuse to give him lordship over our jobs. We forget that Jesus calls his followers to give their *whole* lives to him, every moment of every day. Christ loves us so much he could never be satisfied with anything less.

In order for us to really understand our vocational condition, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to convict us, to name our working shortfalls for what they are, so that we will know how incurable our wounds are. Maybe then we might be humbled and inspired enough to look beyond ourselves for some kind of saving.

How we work (and live) is falling short of the glory of God. The Holy Spirit's job is to illumine this fact, even as a

forensic psychologist's job is to incisively identify and name brokenness in our brains.

So how exactly does our experience of work fall short? If work, at its best, is meant to be a place where we experience God more fully and know Jesus for who he really is, then where exactly are things breaking down?

When it comes to getting the diagnosis right, the forensic psychologist has a laserlike focus. "I do not represent [the client]," he said. "What I do is represent brains, cognitive problems, depression, anxiety, [and] post-traumatic stress. I represent those things and will represent *them* very well." He wasn't a therapist, nor was he there to empathize or have a relationship with the client. The only reason he engaged his clients was to nail down the nature of the problem. "Getting it right is critical," he said.

Like this forensic psychologist, God isn't soft on sin. Yes, he loves us. But his holiness requires a perfect objectivity and a precise and unrelenting conviction when it comes to identifying sin's corrupting nature. God would agree with the psychologist's words: "Without conviction you can't bring about change."

And it is a conviction regarding a *condition* that is critical. Yes, sin manifests itself volitionally—we make poor choices—but sin is also very much a condition, something we don't really *do* and can't fix ourselves. Just as a brain-damaged person doesn't know any better, so too we don't know any better.

For the patient who hears the forensic psychologist's diagnosis for the first time, the news can be both unsettling and freeing—unsettling in terms of having to acknowledge the permanence of the condition, and freeing in that a person

might for the first time understand his or her situation in a new way. They may think, *Okay, there is a reason that I feel this way, that I respond to life this way! Now it makes more sense. I have a brain injury that I can't fix. But this is not all that I am.*⁵

On this side of God's new creation, work is always going to be less than it could be. Like a brain-injured person, its condition falls short in a permanent way. For those of us who are still hoping to find that perfect career, this may be hard to hear—but it is also freeing to realize. *Okay. This is why I feel the way I do. Now I can start to learn to adapt.*

By conceding that work can never “save you” or “make you” or fulfill all of your desires and passions, you free yourself from idolatrous, unsustainable, and ultimately futile pursuits.

Acknowledging our vocational condition can also bring some peace when it comes to falling short of our goals and dreams. We are made to dream big dreams, but as Abraham Kuyper reminds us, there are limits to what human work can accomplish. We can shape and process things that already exist, but *only God* creates: “No human artist can create substance and splendor in reality; only God can do that.”⁶

Knowing our vocational condition can be freeing. The intractability of the problem can, of course, also offer a strong impetus to search for some external force (not affected by the condition) to free us. Free us from a world that says delivering flyers couldn't possibly matter to anybody. Free us from stigmatizing and prejudging whether a Walmart greeter's job has meaning. Free us from the voices that tell us that God is only at work at certain jobs, in the good things, and that he couldn't possibly be found in places of pathology.

A LANDLORD

When I first met Sam Kolia, one of Canada's biggest residential landlords, I was excited to explore his vocation and see what it might reveal about God. Having previously read that Sam was a man of faith, I jumped right in and told him that I believe our world belongs to God and that, in a way, we all are God's tenants.

I was saying all of this to a man who was closer than most to understanding the scope of God's home-providing heart. Who else provides housing for over fifty thousand people?

For Sam, his company was providing more than just a physical house; it provided a home, a place where people could feel a sense of belonging and community. Being a landlord was so much more than bricks and mortar to him. Sam was coming out of his chair as he spoke about these core passions and his deepest joys.

In an interview with a national newspaper, Sam said, "I was raised in an environment where you help your neighbour and you treat them like you want to be treated. That's our number-one rule as a company. It's in our policy manual and we ask everybody on our team to always think of the other person like they want to be thought of themselves."⁷ Sam embodies the Golden Rule; his entire organization does as well. In so doing, they image the love of God.

Sam told me about some of the philanthropic work being done by his company. As he spoke, he turned to look up a quotation from Mother Teresa. I can still picture Sam, with his back turned to me, looking up the quotation on one of three computers behind his desk. The other two had all kinds

of financial data, graphs, and charts on their screens. As he pulled up the quotation and read it, I distinctly remember thinking, *How does that quote from Mother Teresa connect to all of the information on those other two computer screens? What does the innate nature of the business of being a landlord say about the nature of God?*

Sam and I discussed these questions. Doing work in a loving way is paramount. God is honored when we work the way he does. And he's also honored by the passions, skills, and aptitudes that bring love to fruition. Sam's deep joy in providing a home for others (clearly evidenced in the many stories he told) images God's joy. His entrepreneurial, make-something-out-of-nothing passion reveals the God who created everything out of nothing so that we all would have a place to live. Sam's leadership of a team that manages and creates large systems enabling residents to live safely and in peace mirrors the Spirit's leadership in providentially holding our planet. Sam's passion to lead and inspire others to live out his landlording vision reflects God's world-leading heart.

As we spoke, I was taken aback by all of the unique ways Sam images God through his work as a landlord—a heart filled with the love of God for others, fully in sync with the God-given mind and skills of an entrepreneur.

God works through every good facet of a landlord's job.

He works through every good facet of *any* job, big or small, extraordinary or ordinary, hands-on or cerebral, difficult or easy. Every job is filled with pointers to his presence.

LECTIO VOCATIO

It is interesting to note how “finding God at work” can be a challenge for those on either end of the employment ladder. It is easy to dismiss the routine jobs of some workers as too “bottom-rung” to really matter to God, and for those at the top, it is easy to believe that philanthropy is the only evidence of God’s vocational presence.

Either extreme misses out—as does the belief that some jobs are just *holier* than others. The truth is that there is no job where God is not present in some way. Yet many of us are convinced of the opposite.

So what is your excuse?

My job doesn’t directly help people. (But does it image God? Check out the next chapter.)

My job doesn’t make a difference. (Be patient and make sure you read the final chapter.)

My job pollutes, or feeds consumerism, or in some other way causes anti-flourishing. (How can God use you to make this part of his world new?)

My job is devoid of anything good or godly. (Reread the part of this chapter about the forensic psychologist.)

My job is devoid of God’s presence because of how messed up *I* am. (Make sure you read chapter 7.)

My job _____ .