

We're starting a new series on a year-long practice of vocation. Over the past four years, we have been introducing what we call a rule of life. Note that it's not the rules of life, but the rule of life. One way to define a rule of life is simply a set of practices that guard our habits and guide our lives. This is deep within the tradition of Christianity in which communities would organize around these shared sets of practices that would help counter the moment in which they lived. It guarded their habits and guided their life.

So about three years ago, we started with the practice of attentiveness, and then we moved to renewing the mind, and just this past year, we practiced hospitality. Today, we start this fourth practice, the practice of vocation. The way we word this commitment is,

We practice vocation in contrast to a world that seeks meaning at the altars of accomplishment and accumulation, and we do so through the habits of openhandedness and contribution.

I believe that there's something to the way we understand our work. The ordinariness of our life that we must invite and understand what it means to come along into the presence of God in all of those areas. Our English word, vocation, comes from the Latin word vocare, which means to call.

Tim Keller, in his great book, *Every Good Endeavor*, says, "A job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it, and you do it for them rather than for yourself." So our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests.

We have this strange thing in this modern world, and I would argue it's largely due to pastors like myself, in which we spend the majority of our time in church teaching people how to spend the minority of their time. All that's really important. I really believe in that. But most of the time, I'm teaching you how to encounter and live a life with God, which largely takes place, as far as the real estate of time in one's day, in a minority of your time.

There's a diversity of roles and jobs, and whether you're in the workforce or retired, or before the workforce in school, and all those sorts of things. But the reality is most of us spend eight plus hours a day doing what we've called "other things" or normal life or regular life. But the fault of the church often is that we spend so much time teaching you how to do the "God stuff."

One of my other convictions is that there is this arbitrary divide that we've created, this idea that there's a secular space and a

religious space, and somehow, they're not supposed to mingle. But rather, what if God gave you a skillset, a desire, a passion, a calling to do the work that you do? And what if that was a part of a larger story that God is doing within the world? What if all of it was sacred work? Because that's what I believe. All of it, regardless of whether it's up here with the Bible or in your workplaces or in your homes, all of it is sacred work.

We need what I would call a theology of work or vocation, because if we cannot understand how our relationship with God intersects with the very work we do, then we are excluding God from the majority of our lives. What we're trying to get at is how do we talk about all of life? How do we integrate our following of Jesus with our ordinary, Monday through Saturday, work?

What does it mean to be an apprentice of Jesus and a software engineer? What does it mean to be an apprentice of Jesus and a graphic designer, a kindergarten teacher, a stay-at-home mom or dad, a corporate executive, a lawyer, a doctor, or a grandparent? My hope is that part of this series will reintegrate these two things that we often think of as separate, to try to understand this false divide between the "spiritual life" and the "normal life."

Rather, in all of it, Jesus has invited us into this broader story. So as we begin this practice of vocation this week and next, we're going to talk specifically about that. Then, after those two weeks, we're going to spend four weeks on this idea of openhandedness, of developing a habit of living free with our talents, times, and treasures, to understand the way in which God is leveraging who we are and inviting us to participate in that grand story.

I want to give an overall picture of what technically would be called biblical theology, where you trace a theme from Genesis to Revelation and see what's in there. We're going to look at Genesis, the beginning of the story. Then we're going to look at Revelation, the end of the story, because I believe how we understand the start of the story and how we understand the end of the story dictates how we live within the story. Those are very important for us to understand. That's why we often come back to these core texts.

So flip in your Bibles to Genesis. This is right in the midst of the creation poem in which God is speaking creation into being. Over and over, he creates it and calls it good. Then we eventually land at Genesis 1:26.

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the

livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Genesis 1:26-31

Did you catch it right at the beginning? The answer to the question that I posed at the start: why was human life created? What is the purpose of life? Did you catch that in verse 26? *"Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness so that they may rule."* There it is. Hidden in plain sight, staring right at us. The reason that humanity exists, the reason you and I were created, the purpose of life is, in fact, to rule. Now, this is a bit of a foreign language to us. We're not used to talking about this.

When you're working in your workplace and responding to emails, I doubt the category you place that in is ruling. I'm just ruling over my email. So let's unpack this a little bit. The Hebrew word for this is the word *radah*, and it means to rule, to have dominion, or to reign. It's important to see that this language is royal language. It's very intentional. That's why it's a little bit foreign to us. But you were called to a royal calling. Adam and Eve were created to rule and to reign over the created order in which God had placed them.

God, in his sovereignty, has given authority, autonomy, and power to us as humans to rule over creation. You should be asking how we are to rule, because it doesn't mean that we just have free rein. Spoiler alert, from Genesis 3 to the end of Revelation 19 is the story of how we don't rule the way that we're supposed to. That's why this world is riddled with death and brokenness, because we're distorting the rule.

So how do we go about that work? Well, that is hidden right before the statement ruling. It's, "Let us make mankind in our image and in our likeness," image and likeness. We could preach countless sermons on what it means to be created in the image of God. But one of the things I want to pull out for us today in this idea of image and likeness is at the very center of what it means to be human and how we are to go about our work.

To be created in the image of God means a lot of things. It means that there's dignity that's ascribed to us. There's purpose to us.

Often, we link up our understanding with this to the likeness word, and that's okay. It's accurate. It's right there, but the image word has something a little bit different. So I want to look at each of these words.

The idea of being created in the image of God is the Hebrew word *tselem*, and it means image. It's a great translation. It means likeness or representative figure, or an icon or an idol. The word for likeness is *dmuwth*, and it means likeness, manner, pattern, or resemblance. So remember, put this in the context for this conversation of how we are to go about ruling and then consider these concepts.

The Image

Let's go back to that *tselem* one. The *tselem* is the image, and fascinatingly, it means that it's the exact same word when you read about the people of God in the Old Testament betraying God and worshiping false idols. So are we supposed to be an idol for God? No, that's not it either, but let's take one step back and think about what an idol is doing and how it functions.

A false idol is a physical representation of a false God. When you look at that false idol, particularly in the ancient world, they were statues or totems that represented the likeness or kindness of the false deity that it claimed to be.

Now, let's take that into the image of God in which you and I were created. We are not to be idols. We will not become God. Please hear me clearly. But we are to be the living embodiment and representation of God. So in our ruling, the pattern and way in which we rule over created order must be consistent with the character and likeness of God because that's what it's supposed to do.

Maybe one other way to put it is an idol is something you're not necessarily supposed to look at, but in some ways you're supposed to look through in a metaphoric sense. You're not supposed to actually see the thing; you're supposed to see through the thing to the false deity that it represents.

Now, transport that onto our identity as image bearers of God. We are not necessarily going to be seen as God, of course, but people should be able to look at our lives, see through them, to the likeness of God. Listen to the way one commentator, Crispin Fletcher Lewis, put it.

[Genesis 1] has a sharply focused theological anthropology: Humanity is to be the eyes, ears, mouth, being, and action of the creator God within his creation...This point gives the biblical prohibition of idolatry its strongest possible rationale: for humans to make an idol is foolish because it fails to appreciate that, according to the original order of creation, it is humanity that functions in relation to God as do the idols in relation to their gods.
Fletcher-Louis

What he's saying there is that idolatry is not just the offense of God in that you're giving your affections away to something else. That's absolutely true, and that is a part of the sin of idolatry. But he's saying, if we were created in the image of God, to then make anything else an idol is to abdicate the very core of our identity. It's to try to outsource how we were created and what we were created to do. To place it on something else.

He says that it is what makes idolatry so profoundly painful to us and to God, that it was our God given status that we were to step into. It was our role to step up to it. We are to be the conduits of God's presence in the world around us.

The Genesis story is this provocative, subversive way to start it all, in which God says that all of us are created in the image of God. And there's this whole bit about, in the ancient world, this idea of being the image of God was meant to, in other pagan religions, just be for the king and the king only. And the Genesis story says, absolutely not. Every single human being, regardless of their status, where they come from, where they were born, every single one of us has been inscribed with a significance and a meaning in which God has created a world and invited us to join in co-creating and ruling over this earth. It is a stunningly provocative idea.

To summarize, God has inscribed significance and meaning into every single one of us. And we see it all over the place. This is the subplot of every Disney and Pixar movie you've ever watched. It is someone coming awake to their identity to be a prince or a princess. You see this all over the place because it is the way it has been inscribed into our being.

So in one sense, we are to rule in the way that God does, to have that character, which seems simple out of the Genesis story. I'll say it briefly that God is a creative God, so we are to be a creative people. What I mean by that is creativity or creation in the broadest sense, not necessarily artistic, and that sort of thing, which of course so many of us are, and we lose that somewhere along the way. I don't know if I've met a kid who won't color at some point in their life. We are naturally creative, and we unlearn those sorts of things. We are called to be a creative people, a people like God who are bringing creation into existence.

Not in the same way as God. God creates; the theological category is called *ex nihilo*, meaning out of nothing. We cannot create like that. God alone can speak, and worlds are generated. We can't do that creation. But what you're going to see in a second, in Genesis 2, is that we have still been given the ability, power, and authority to, in fact, create. To take the raw materials of the world and build something. It's like God created us as little boys and girls in a room full of Lego, and he says, "Just go build." It's a beautiful example of the call of work and vocation. So let's get to Genesis 2, just a little further in the story.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had

formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Genesis 2:8-15

See if Genesis 1 was about humanity's identity in creation, that we are called to rule in the image and likeness of God. Genesis 2 is humanity's call to create culture. It's a bit hidden in there. In some sense, Genesis 1 is the prologue. It's the grand scene that's setting up God's creativity and our central place within that. But Genesis 2 is where the story starts to get rolling. The opening credits that slowly flash on the screen are gone, and now we see humanity in the garden beginning to do the work that they were called to do.

One of the things we miss, or maybe you've wondered why, on the second page of the scriptures, there are all these weird, seemingly meaningless details. Do I need to know that the trees were beautiful and tasty? Do I need to know that there's onyx and resin? Why are all of these details here? What's happening is that God has placed the humans in the garden, and they are naming all of the raw materials of creation.

It's the author of Genesis saying, "Here's the Lego pieces, all of the raw things, and then God says that you are in this garden of raw materials. You are to take it and to work it and take care of it. The first word to work with is the word *abad*, which means to work, to keep, to serve, or, my favorite translation of it, to cultivate.

The beauty of this moment is that we live in a world filled with raw materials, in which, when image bearers come along, they take all of it and cultivate it into something wonderful. Andy Crouch, in his book *Culture Making*, which is an excellent read, says, "...it is paying attention to what already exists and what will be the most fruitful and beautiful use of it; most of all, what will most contribute to the flourishing of the human beings he is about to create." That's the raw material of the garden. Tim Keller defined work as, "Rearranging the raw materials of a particular domain to draw out its potential for the flourishing of everyone."

Let me give you a better real-life example. I don't think there's a better one than that of pizza. Every Friday night, our new family tradition for Sabbath dinner is to make pizza from scratch. Pizza

is not something that grows out in the world as a raw material. See what it means then for the image bearer to come along to cultivate the raw material of the earth is for me to take a little bit of flour, mix in some yeast with some sugar and salt, and hot water. I allow that to start to ferment. Then I pour that into the flour and begin to mix it up.

I'm taking all of those raw materials, which were somewhere in my kitchen, which, even further than that, were somewhere grown into creation. And I mix it and knead it with my hands, and slowly I put it away, let it rest, and cover it up with a towel. The yeast works through the dough, and it expands, and then about two hours later, I come along and take it back out, and I knead it. I stretch the dough and put sauce, and cheese. This is where Adley comes in, my youngest, and she throws a lot of everything at it. Over time, we create this thing, and I slide it onto a pizza stone in an oven that's at 500 degrees. Twelve minutes later, I have something that didn't exist before. I created pizza. And pizza, my friends, is very good.

Think of the way that you could take grapes, crush them, ferment them, and age them in barrels to create wine. Think of an author who takes ideas, words, prose, and grammatical skills and weaves them together to make a novel that grows the imagination and appetite for beauty in the world.

Think of a mom and dad who take a body, soul, food, water, love, and education and rearrange them into a functioning human being that contributes to society. Think of a software engineer who takes code and design and pulls it together to generate a program that contributes to the flourishing of individuals.

The call to rule in the image and likeness of God is to take the raw materials and get creative with what they could do if we ordered them properly. That's how we participate in the ongoing creation of the world. I just have this sense. It's not in the scripture. But I have a sense that God just sits back, like a father would watch a kid play with Lego, and he's just thrilled with what we do with it. He gets excited to watch us step into our creativity and see what we can create.

It's why the work you do matters. Not just for the way you show up for coworkers, that's important and the way you care and love for your coworkers, but do you see what all the created order was? What God was doing in Genesis was taking the chaos of the uncreated, uncultivated world, forming it to give order. And that's exactly what you do in every sphere that you work in. You take disorder and create order. For the follower of Jesus, we aim for the flourishing of all of creation.

The work you do, where you spend your time, where you spend the majority of your waking hours, whether you get paid for it or not, there is so much work that we do in this world. I don't get paid to do the dishes, but I do the dishes, and it's very good. Because the kitchen's clean. Whether paid or unpaid, whether

you file the W2 or not, the work, the calling is to rule through the image and the likeness of God. So we are called to cultivate creation.

Care for Creation

Secondly, we're called to care for creation. The Hebrew word for care here is *shamar*. It's to keep, to guard, to protect. This is the idea, similarly, in which we are guarding against the forces that would want to destroy the good creation. So just like a gardener would take all of the dirt, seed, water, and the sunlight and cultivate a space in which that plant could flourish, there's a second role to that in which they have to guard against those pesky rodents that want to come in and eat the thing. I want to guard against all the forces that are trying to destroy the good creation. This is the idea of *shamar*.

We were placed in there to work the garden, but also to care for it, to push back that which will want to infiltrate. There's a sense in which our job is to protect, to care for the environment, the creation in which God has created. We are called to step into that work. We're not just called to any work, but the work that God protects and advances, the flourishing of creation, humanity, and also this very earth.

One commentator summarized it this way: "We are to actively partner with God in taking the world forward." And you thought you were just balancing budgets. You are partnering with God to somehow find a way to bring the world a little bit further. It's a stunning picture. That's how the story begins. But let's look at how the story ends.

The way the story begins and the way the story ends will deeply shape how you live in the in-between. I know, for me growing up, I had this idea that somehow crept in that the end of the story was about us escaping this earth and flying away some glad morning to some other place. But that's not how the story ends, my friends. And that has a deeply formative impact on how I understand the work that I do in between.

So flip all the way to the end of the Bible to Revelation 21, the very last two chapters, which, just as a beautiful literary note, mirror Genesis 1 and 2. You'll see that in a few spots. This is one unified story that's pointing to Jesus, all telling the work of God throughout creation. So let's pick up right at the second to last page, Revelation 21:1.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." Now the word there is the word for renewed heaven, renewed earth. That's a better translation. It means more new—new in quality, not new in essence. Think about it, if you buy yourself a used car, you say that this is my new car. It's like that with similar language.

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven

from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." Revelations 21:1-5

Did you catch the language a little bit there of Eden? Of this new beginning, of this new start, this renewed creation. But notice also in verse 2 that the garden has now transformed. It's not a garden, it's a city. One way you can think of a city is as a lot of well-organized gardens. It is a culmination, a climax of humanity's culture-making in which it finds its locus point in a city where there's art, beauty, creation, restaurants, management, city planning, and architecture? That's what a city is.

But notice the trajectory of this story. It's John the Revelator looking up and not us flying to heaven, but rather that holy city is coming and crashing down into Earth. See in the new heavens and Earth, where we will spend eternity, we will, in fact, work, we will build and create. We will have beauty, art, and architecture, all those things. But it's a new creation in which the grit and the grime and the junk of all of that old way, the sin, the remnants of all that brokenness of death are done away with. That's the hopeful part in which God says, all death, all tears, all mourning is gone.

The way to think of this is to imagine the work that you get lost in, where you lose track of time, where you find a sense of transcendence as you're doing it. It's like doing that forever and not needing to rest. It's where you come alive. It's where your souls are awakened. I mean, can you imagine what that would look like? Flip to Revelation 22, just a page over.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. Revelations 22:1-5

Did anyone else have that image of heaven growing up that we're somehow just floating up there with harps? Do you see the

difference of this vision? You were created to rule, to create, to partner with God in developing and working within this world, and we get to do this through eternity.

As the quasi-theologian Russell Crowe once said, "What we do in this life echoes into eternity." That is a gladiator reference, but there's truth to it. N.T. Wright, in his excellent book, one of the most formative books I've read, *Surprised by Hope*, talks about how we don't build the kingdom of God that goes into eternity, but we build for it. The work we do is a signpost for that which is to come. What we do, when it contributes to the goodness and flourishing of the world, will carry on into eternity, for we will reign forever and ever. This is your calling. This is vocation.

It will look a thousand different ways in this room. It could be the work you're paid for, the work you're not paid for. It could be just the thing that you're passionate about. It's the pouring into another. It's all of the things that you do, the seemingly mundane, breathing life and meaning into it. I would define the practice of vocation, what we're stepping into for the next year, this way:

The practice of vocation is stewarding your God-given identity and calling to create and cultivate good in the world.

We are created to rule, and we must steward that identity. It's in every single one of us, in every vocation that we are called to. We then, in that stewarding, create and cultivate good in the world because that's who God is, and we were created in his image and likeness.

Robert Bellah was a follower of Jesus. He worked in a secular space, working on a discipline of the sociology of religion. But he's speaking from his own understanding, too, of what it means to follow Jesus. He says this, "To make a real difference, there would have to be a reappropriation of the idea of vocation or a return, in a new way, to the idea of work as contribution to the good of all and not merely as a means to one's own advancement."

In light of all that we've talked about, I hope you're beginning to catch the picture, the vision, the beautiful thing in which we were created, not to work for our own ends, but we are wrapped up in this much larger story in which God is moving the whole thing towards the reconciliation of all. And you play a part because the problem that Bellah picks up on is that over time, we've distorted this vocation and turned it inward.

What we'll talk about throughout the course of this series and the next is that we are caught finding meaning not in our God-given identity as image bearers, created in the likeness of God, but rather we seek meaning at the altars of accomplishment and accumulation.

One of the idols that is just in the water that we swim in is this idea that you have a purpose that's meant to extend you. So that either takes place in finding our identity in our accomplishments,

which is a distortion because you were given an identity and were called to accomplish things, not for your own purposes, but for the purposes of the healing of the entire world, and you play a part in that. It's a small part, but we all play a part in that. Do you see the way that reshapes the whole story?

The other idol that we worship at is this idea of accumulation, where you feel that you can earn a good living and accumulate a bunch of things. The world would tell us that it feels good to unwrap something new, and that's where we might find meaning and purpose. So we just can't wait to accumulate more stuff. We all accumulate. We all consume things. That's part of being human, but what if we reframed it in a much larger story? A story in which those things were not meant to our own ends, but rather we accumulate and accomplish, and we open our hands to contribute to a good world. This is why these habits are under this concept of vocation.

Derek Thompson wrote a great article in *The Atlantic* in which he talks about how work is making Americans miserable, or he calls it workism, and he has this wonderful line in there that says, "Our desks were never meant to be our altars."

So many of us subtly, unconsciously allow our desks to be the place of worship. You're called to that desk. The desk isn't the problem. But have you caught the vision of the larger story of why you are walking in that preschool classroom to order the chaos of little ones into functioning humans? The larger story as to why you're working with balance sheets and cost benefit analyses to say that if these numbers match, we can continue the flourishing of creation. It's why a graphic designer looks at fonts, color choices, and palettes and says, "I can make something beautiful that contributes to the goodness of the world."

That is a whole different thing then wanting to climb the ladder to accumulate more. It's a whole different understanding—openhandedness. Learning to realize that all of life is a gift. We are mere stewards in this wonderful creation, but we live openhanded because this world is not ours; it's God's. We've been given a modicum of authority to rule over it in the way that God would, in contribution. We are not meant to come here and just consume. We are here to participate in the ongoing work of God.

I think openhandedness and contribution are so counter to the ethos of the Bay Area. I mean, so many people come here to take and consume. What if we, as the church, said that we're here to participate in one of the hubs of the world, in which what we do ripples throughout all of creation? We caught the vision to say that it's not for us to take, it's for us to contribute, to live openhanded with the skills, jobs, and the titles that we have.

Robert Mulholland would define spiritual formation as "The process of being formed into the image of Christ for the sake of others." Eerily similar to Jesus' answer to what is the greatest commandment—love God and love others. The Christian life has always been about learning to give our lives away. Every part of it: our talents, time, treasures, everything. That's the vocation to which we are called.

I have been excited to preach this sermon because I remember the moment in which I caught this vision of what God is doing from Genesis to Revelation. And I hope it has filled you with questions and thoughts and excitement and wonder. So that when you show up at your offices tomorrow, or when you show up in your living rooms to care for the little ones that God's put in your care, whatever the work you do, whether you're paid for it or not, all of a sudden you begin to see through the filter, the lens in which God is doing a much larger work than you could ever imagine.

I hope that can invigorate you with a stewardship to say, "I was created to rule in the image and likeness of God." What a privilege it is to play with God's Lego, to sit there and build and create, and may we become a people that do so.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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