

*Becoming The People Of God: Vocation*

For the last three years, Kevin has been leading us into a year-long focus on a particular practice that he wants to introduce us to. He gives us some practical language and resourcing to learn how to begin to implement those practices into our lives and into our walk with Jesus. So with that practice each year, we're also invited to two habit series that help us drill down into what that practice means or looks like.

This year, we are kicking off our fourth and final practice—the practice of vocation, which we've defined as this: Stewarding your God-given identity and calling to create and to cultivate good in the world. Last week, Kevin's intro to the series took a macro view of scripture where he looked at both the beginning of the story in Genesis 1 and 2, and the end of God's story in Revelation 21 and 22.

Through those two accounts, he painted this important picture of humanity beginning in a garden full of all of the raw materials of God's creation and ending in a city, a collection of gardens, if you will, where those raw materials had all been cultivated. Through human creativity and ingenuity, God's ordained rule or dominion that he gave man was in play and in practice.

So the reminder or the important facet of last week's message is that your work, your vocation, need not be ministry to be God ordained, but that God has ordained, or he has called all of humanity in a multitude of ways, to play with God's "Lego," to borrow from Kevin's language last week, to contribute, cultivate, and create. All that said, as we get started this morning, I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Exodus 25. We're going to be in a number of places this morning, but Exodus 25 through 40 is the hub.

As we get started in today's message, I want to begin with a question I already know your answer to, but how do you feel about group projects? You know what I'm talking about. These are those shared presentations you had to do in high school or in college class. Or maybe if you're in the corporate world, these are those slide decks that you have to work on with your whole team, where you are highlighting your service level objectives and your service level agreements. It might even be that piece of software that you and the team pulled an all-nighter on in the garage just to get it done by the deadline.

It's not most people's favorite. And the reasons are probably clear to a lot of us. Whether it's because of the loafers in the group who don't do anything, or maybe it's the fear of being judged, or the loss of creative control, or just getting everything

and everyone scheduled, aligned, and on the same page. Group projects take a lot of work, and so they're not really our favorite thing to do. Growing up, whenever we'd have these assignments in class, I remember the teacher would always step in and tell us that this is what the real world is like. I would listen to that, and I knew they were wrong. I knew this was just something that they had to say. Then I arrived at adulthood, and lo and behold, literally almost everything I do is in some way a group project. We are always part of a team.

I recognize that we often hate them. But I hope we also begin to recognize that they're deeply and profoundly necessary in our world today. Like many of you, I was often the achiever in the group growing up. I typically grew up leading the projects and doing the majority of the work. Why? Because that was the only way I knew it would get done. And most importantly, it would get done right. I didn't want to put my grade in another person's hands. I wanted to make sure I got the A.

I hated group projects; however, I experienced a profound shift in my thinking 19 years ago on a cold, almost winter evening in Oklahoma. I will never forget this day because it was one of the absolute best days of my life. It was the day that I became a dad. For that entire day, I was so blessed to be by Tiff's side to support her as she went through all of her contractions and all the labor. A little after 6:00 pm that night, I got to hold my daughter, Peyton, for the very first time.

She was beautiful, and she was perfect in every way. So I look back on that night sometimes, and laugh because I have this newborn daughter, who was in the NICU because she was having a little bit of breathing difficulties, and so for precautionary reasons, she was in there, and I have this group project in school that was due the very next day.

So, in the midst of celebrating Peyton and making sure she's okay and making sure that Tiffany's okay, two hours later, four members from my group project came rolling into the maternity floor of Mercy Hospital in Oklahoma City because our group was making a video, and it was time for me to film my part.

I remember, I brought them into this labor and delivery room where two hours earlier my wife was in labor, and I remember sitting on the edge of the bed that she had just been lying in and needing to compose myself enough to somehow make this meaningful contribution to the video. I look back on that and it's meaningful to me because it was the first time that I had ever

knowingly entrusted myself to the work of other people. I even got an A on the project, and my group members were generous.

I tell you that story not to highlight the birth and not to highlight even the group project itself, but to say that I learned something from that experience. It taught me something about what life in a different kind of kingdom was like. It gave me a glimpse of life where the contributions of everyone worked together for good. A glimpse where life was about a whole lot more than what I could necessarily put in or achieve of my own volition. Because everything that happened that day was perfect, and basically none of it had anything to do with me or my effort. Instead, it was the sum total of everyone around me that something holy happened that day because the sum of the whole was greater than its parts.

So I want to do a little exercise here. This may be a little bit out of our norm, out of our comfort zone, but I want to invite you to use your God given imagination for just a few minutes with me. I want to invite you to close your eyes. I want you to picture the house that you are currently living in. I want you to picture its colors. Think about its floor plan and how it's laid out. Think about your front yard or your backyard. Think about its messes and its chaos. See those dishes in the sink that are awaiting you when you get home. Remember that thing in that room that is broken and needs repair. Perhaps there's some delayed maintenance or a hole in the wall where that door kept swinging a little too hard and punched right through the drywall. I want you to picture all of its charm and all of its chores. I want you to picture all of its limitations and all of its potential.

And once you have that in mind and with your eyes still closed and your imagination still fully engaged, I want to ask you, if you knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that your house or your room, that you would always, for the rest of your life, live in it. Better yet, if you knew that not only you but your children, and your grandchildren, and your great-grandchildren, and every generation that proceeds from you throughout the rest of time would also live in this home or in this space.

How would that change the way that you live in it? How would you invest in it? How would you spend your evenings and your weekends caring for it? How would you landscape it and furnish it? In our imaginations, dreaming is free. So dream some big dreams, the sky is the limit.

Now imagine the same were true not just of your house, but of your neighborhood. How would you invest in relationships with your neighbors if you knew they were going to be your neighbors no matter what, for a long time? How about your parks and in your schools? Imagine the same were true of your city. How would you invest in your roads and your infrastructure and your city councils, and your libraries, and your local nonprofits? Obviously, this exercise could extend beyond homes and cities to counties, states, countries, and continents. It's just that the

bigger it feels, the more detached we become in feeling like we have an ability to contribute to it.

I don't know what you imagined, and I don't know how you imagined it, but I can tell you a little bit about how I think my behavior would change where I live. I think everything that I would do would be the best and most long-lasting version of that thing that I could do. I think I would be far less concerned with cutting corners to cut costs, and far more concerned with finishing the job with the best materials and the most skilled labor because I would want those efforts to not only be enjoyed by me for the next 30 years, but to be enjoyed by the generations to come for the next 300 years. So when I wanted bookshelves, I likely wouldn't seek out IKEA like I do today. I'd save money for those built-in wood, oak, walnut, or cherry bookshelves made by a master craftsman.

What I want you to see is that something about our posture begins to change when we view ourselves as transient. Like if I know I'm going to wait for my startup to IPO and then cash out and sell and move out of the area, I will invest a little differently. If I know I'm only on a nine-month lease in this apartment, and then I'm moving on to the next thing, well, I invest a little differently still. If I know I'm here today and I'm gone tomorrow like a hotel room, well, I invest differently. Or perhaps not even at all.

I was talking with Brandon this week a little bit about where I was headed with this message, and I like what he said. He compared it to how we might treat a rental car. It's something that we use and abuse for the weekend, but beyond that, we don't care about it at all, which is true because that rental car they gave us in Vancouver this last summer was the worst. I couldn't wait to give that thing back. But all this to say, when we view something as temporary, we invest differently. Or perhaps not at all. But whatever we do, it's usually not with others in mind. It's only with me in mind. That's as far as I planned for.

The reason I bring all of this up is because I think that this same mentality often shapes how we think about our entire existence and the totality of God's creation. Because whether we realize it or not, for thousands of years, we have been programmed, particularly in Western thought, to view everything around us as temporary, something that is ultimately meaningless, ultimately destined for our departure. So why invest in it?

You may remember the Greek philosopher Plato and those who followed him, known as the Neoplatonists. They concluded that there was this ultimate being, there was this source of everything known as the One, something like God to us, and the furthest thing from the One was known as the material world. That was the lowest place to be, the lowest way to be. So the implication of their work that began to shape our thought, including our theology, including our understanding of God, was that the earth or the physical world that we know must be this

temporary, lower level of being. And heaven must be this higher level, spiritual way of being that we escape to when we die.

When you start looking back on the hymns that we've sung throughout the years and how we've understood our relationship to Heaven and Earth, we can begin to see things like this in those lyrics. You may know this hymn: "The World Is Not My Home, I'm Just Passing By." "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue; The angels beckon me from heaven's open door, And I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

Or how about, "Some Glad Morning When This Life Is O'er" by Albert E. Brumley? "Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away; To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away (I'll fly away)." Now, I don't bring this up in any way to denigrate these songs. We love these songs deeply, and certainly at various points of human history, we can look around and see the broken world all around us and want to leave every bit of it behind. Because when we've seen some of the grievous evils that we've seen even in the last 100 years, why would we want to stay somewhere when we could just fly away?

I get it. And even when we look at scripture, some of this thinking isn't without reason. Particularly when we realize how much of the Platonic thought Plato's teaching has shaped and colored the lenses with which we use to read scripture.

The most obvious text is 1 Thessalonians 4. Paul writes,

**For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 1 Thess. 4:16-17**

You read a text like that with Platonic lenses on, and what does it sound like? It sounds like Jesus is coming back, and we fly away. I get it, but what if we take off those Platonic or Neo-Platonic lenses and read it again? Does anything change? Well, I think so because suddenly the coming of the Lord or *Parousia* looks less like Jesus coming to retrieve us and then take us elsewhere and more like the coming arrival of royalty or a king.

So what do you do when a king arrives to wherever you are? Do you wait for them to drive up, get out of the car, walk up to your door, and knock before you ever let them in and greet them? Is that how you treat someone of royalty? No. You go out to where they are, and you greet them. So when any US president arrives somewhere, they walk off Air Force One, there's a red carpet out there, and they walk out to great acclaim. Everyone is there to greet them. The same is true for every world leader, every member of royalty throughout the world.

But what happens next? They come to see you, right? That's why they're there. So you accompany them from their arrival back to your home or back to the place of meeting, wherever that might be. N.T. Wright, a New Testament scholar, says it like this:

**When Paul speaks of 'meeting' the Lord 'in the air', the point is precisely not...that the saved believers would then stay up in the air somewhere, away from earth. The point is that, having gone out to meet their returning Lord, they will escort him royally into his domain, that is, back to the place they have come from. Wright, Surprised by Hope**

If Earth is not something temporary that we tolerate for a little while, like a lease and then move on from, how does that paradigm shift begin to impact the way we live life and live out our calling and our vocation in the present? If we're not just passing through, if this world matters eternally, what does scripture teach us or show us about how God invites humanity, in particular, to participate in his work? That's where Exodus 25 comes in.

In Genesis 2, God walked among humanity in the garden. He was there with Adam and Eve in the garden, being fully present with man, such that God's space and human space overlapped. And in Genesis 3, when man and woman sin, the fall of humanity, the God space and human space, were severed or separated, and Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden or exiled. Then Exodus 25 is the beginning of God's endeavor to reintegrate God's space and human space once again with what is known as the tabernacle, which is essentially a fancy tent that, when consecrated or made holy, the presence of God could once again descend on it like a cloud. God could, again, live and dwell among all of his people, as he had always intended.

That was part of what he created from the beginning. So you can picture this tent, and this cloud would descend on it, and then hundreds of thousands of Israelites would be camped all around it. They would be living there with God. So the tent had in it this room called the Holy of Holies, which was this place where the presence of God would literally be camped all among his people. This Holy of Holies had a very specific design. It was meant to imitate, reflect, or model God's heavenly throne room in heaven. It was a replica. In Exodus 25, God instructs Moses to begin gathering donations from the people to make this.

**"These are the offerings you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece." "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you." Exodus 25:3-9**

As a brief aside, you may remember last week in Genesis 2 that gold and the onyx were there in the Garden of Eden as the raw materials of God's creation, as the "Lego," if you will. I don't think it's any coincidence that here in Exodus we're seeing those substances listed. It's kind of a hyperlink of sorts. Moses begins to gather all of these materials, and you'll notice some of them are raw. But some of them are already cultivated with human ingenuity, like yarn or linen, and God instructs them over the next five chapters to make a bunch of different items.

He instructs them to make like the Arc of the Covenant, a table, a lampstand, and the tabernacle with all of its curtains and all of its frames and all of its crossbars. There's an altar of burnt offering and so on. And by the time we get to Exodus 31, God turns his attention now to the people. This is what I want you to pay attention to.

**Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given ability to all the skilled workers to make everything I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant law with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent—the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand—and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you." Exodus 21:1-11**

I don't know if you've ever tried to do something and realized that no matter how hard you try or how much you train, it just wasn't going to happen. You do not have what it takes to excel in that area. That's me singing. That's me running fast or jumping. God didn't give me those skills. I know I look like Brandon, but Brandon's the one with those skills. He can sing.

Conversely, what Exodus 31 begins to paint a picture of is that not only does God want certain things made, but he specifically begins to gift people with wisdom, knowledge, and skill to do the work that he has called them to do. In other words, God has given them a vocation, a calling. I want you to understand that this building, the tabernacle, this was not a small project. This required metal workers and textile artists and wood carvers and jewelers, and dyers and tanners, and architects and engineers.

God needed dozens and dozens of different vocations, not just priests, not just the spiritual workers. All of their contributions, all of their callings, all of their work mattered. In fact, one thing I read this week suggested that around 128 different vocations were needed to source and craft all the materials and manage this whole project in order for this tabernacle to be built. That's a lot of work. That's a lot of people to organize. Exodus continues.

**Then Moses summoned Bezalel and Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work. They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. Exodus 36:2-3**

What I want you to see here is twofold and is important. Number 1, our skills and our abilities are not happy accidents. They're intentionally given to us, freely by God, as part of our calling. You are skilled, you are gifted in a variety of ways. That is no accident, and it's not all because you tried hard and worked for it. God has given you some things that you're just naturally talented at because he has chosen to make you talented in those ways.

Number 2, we are invited by God to give and use them freely, but we are never compelled. This was true even in the tabernacle. They were invited. They were not compelled. It reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:8b "Freely you have received; freely give."

What I'm hoping you begin to see in all of this is the progression of thought throughout scripture and the consistency in this imagery and these metaphors, because it was tangible. It's something you could touch, see, and feel at the end of Exodus with the tabernacle. And again, in the days of Solomon or in Ezra and Nehemiah, with the first and second temples, it becomes a metaphor for our future reality today as people of God.

The Apostle Paul demonstrates this well in 1 Corinthians. He stays with the same kind of imagery, but he says this,

**For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. 1 Corinthians 3:9-15**

He says that don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple? This is a y'all. This is not each of us individually; y'all are God's temple, and God's Spirit dwells in your midst. And so, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is sacred and you, together, Church, are that temple. So Paul isn't here speaking of a physical, tangible building; he's speaking of the people, the church. But he is also not speaking of some celestial disembodied reality in the clouds. He's portraying a future reality where Earth and everything in it is refined by the proverbial fire and renewed or made new.

In other words, just like that little home that you found that's so charming in the woods or whatever, it's a patchwork of good and bad craftsmanship. But you can imagine, you can see, you can look ahead. There's a future reality where what is good and beautiful in that home could be retained while what is not will be removed. Another example is that classic car that's being restored in your garage, what is good and beautiful is retained, and what is not is removed.

All throughout scripture, this building analogy, this project analogy is used. We talked about it a few weeks ago with the Sermon on the Mount. Do we build on rock, or do we build on sand? We talk about it when we refer to Jesus as the cornerstone because the implication is that we collectively are the stones that are built upon the cornerstone.

All of this language that the Bible uses portrays a future reality that is not temporal, but as eternal, a future reality that is not eradicated but is renewed. So in all this, the language or the vision that I want you to grasp more than anything else is the reality that what we do in this life and in this world matters because, in some sense, the best of it endures.

Now, you might ask how exactly the reality is. I don't know. I think some of that's a mystery, but I do believe that scripture does not affirm the Platonic thought that all of this is for nothing. That all of this is something that we just fly away and escape from. I think N.T. Wright says this better than I could.

**The task of the church between ascension and parousia is therefore set free both from the self-driven energy that imagines it has to build God's kingdom all by itself, and the despair that supposes it can't do anything until Jesus comes again. We do not 'build the kingdom' all by ourselves, but we do build for the kingdom. All that we do in faith, hope, and love in the present, in obedience to our ascended Lord and in the power of his Spirit, will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing. Wright, Surprised By Hope**

What I want us to be able to look at ourselves in a mirror and recognize that all of us work, all of us produce something with our lives and everyone is invited to do godly work whether you are a plumber or an architect or a physicist or a receptionist or a doctor or a lawyer or a truck driver or an analyst or a prison

guard or a soldier or an inventor, it doesn't matter. The same is always true. You are invited to do all of that for the glory of the Lord and to further his kingdom. All of that can be godly work, not just what the pastors do on stage, not just when it's ministry adjacent—all of it.

At the same time, the Bible reminds us that all work can fall into two main categories. I'm going to call it ordered work and disordered work. What does that mean? Ordered work is when humanity sows order and beauty and peace, or shalom, wherever there is chaos. And disordered work is when humanity sows chaos into wherever there is order, beauty, and peace.

In our world today, we are often accustomed to seeing work as successful or unsuccessful, and we tend to gauge successful work typically on one major metric—money, revenue, and profit. If I make money, revenue, and profit, my work is successful, and I receive acclaim and recognition. I receive promotions.

We have to ask ourselves what is that for and who does it benefit? Does it benefit the whole or does it only benefit some parts? Does it benefit the kingdom that Jesus is building, or does it benefit some other rival kingdom that someone else is building? In other words, work can be successful and still be disordered, and work can be underpaid, underappreciated, not successful by the world's standards, and still be ordered.

So what kind of work do you do? Is it ordered? Does it create, contribute, and cultivate goodness with the building blocks that God has given you, building toward the kingdom? Or is it disordered? Does it tear down? Does it destroy? Does it entrap? Does it ensnare others by moving God's people and his creation more toward ruin than renewal?

Each of us should be introspective about the calling or the vocation that we have received and reflect on the nature of the work that we do. So, if I'm a software developer who creates beautiful, efficient software with the explicit goal of trapping people in endless doom scrolls or sports gambling, am I doing ordered work?

Those are the kinds of questions that we need to ask ourselves. Does it sow order, beauty, and peace in chaos, or does it sew chaos amid order, beauty, and peace that God has created? The beauty is not necessarily our place to make a judgment about. That's really between you and the Lord. But I want to be clear that just as in the days of Moses and Bezalel in Exodus, your vocation or your calling can be anything and still be work for God. You do not need to be the person standing on stage preaching or singing to do Godly work.

Maybe you're wondering how. How do I begin to get introspective to know whether the work that I'm doing is building for and toward God's kingdom? It might help to think of it as work for God is always work with God and toward God. Any work can be work for God if two things are true. The kind of work that God

or Jesus could join me in. In other words, would Jesus share a job site with me? Would he share a desk or a cubicle with me? Would he ride in the passenger seat of my vehicle and do the things that I do? Could I train him to do what I do with a clear conscience? Would he participate in it? I think there are some obvious jobs where we would say no. But there are some less obvious jobs where we would also maybe say no as well.

Number two, is this work toward the kingdom and for the kingdom? In other words, is the work that you are doing bringing goodness and lasting contribution to the world? Is it the best work? Does it benefit humanity? Does it faithfully steward the resources that God has given us to bring beauty, peace, and order without using and abusing people in the process? Work for God is always work with God and toward God.

Church, I believe that the Bible teaches all the way from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, that we are all part of this great big group project where God has given us rule and dominion over his creation to join him in cultivating and building goodness for his kingdom. The kind that makes a lasting difference.

We may not love group projects, but everyone in this room and every single person who has ever lived on earth is part of the biggest group project the world will ever know. Some of us are the loafers. We isolate, we distract, we tear down and destroy. But others of us create order and meaning and beauty and care and joy as faithful stewards. One day God will bring about a true renewal, a refining, a perfection from the imperfection of what we've contributed.

The Apostle Paul likens that moment to something like my daughter's birth nearly 19 years ago. He says this in Romans 8.

**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8:18-22**

Just in case Paul's words are confusing, I think N.T. Wright once again says it better than I could.

This is no smooth evolutionary transition, in which creation simply moves up another gear into a higher mode of life. This is traumatic, involving convulsions and contractions, and the

radical discontinuity in which mother and child are parted and become not one being but two. But nor is this a dualistic rejection of physicality as though, because the present creation is transient and full of decay and death, God must throw it away and start again from scratch. The very metaphor which Paul chooses for this decisive moment in his argument shows that what he has in mind is not the unmaking of creation, nor simply its steady development, but the drastic and dramatic birth of new creation from the womb of the old. N.T. Wright.

Church, what we do in this life with our calling and with our vocation matters and so work for God is always work with God and toward God. What do we do? We work for God.

*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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