

WE'RE ALL TENTMAKERS

In Acts 18 we are told that while Paul was in Corinth to preach the gospel and lead people to Christ, he supported himself by making tents. This was Paul's normal way of evangelizing, not just something he did in Corinth. In each city that he preached Christ, he worked at making tents to support himself. From the money he made, he paid for his room and his food.

So "tent-maker" means someone whose real purpose is to serve Christ, and whose whole life is devoted to that, but who has a job to support themselves while they serve the kingdom of God.

Here is my point today, my one and only point: all believers, as far as the N.T. is concerned, are tent-makers. That is the title of this sermon: "we're all tentmakers."

Paul was not always a tentmaker. When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples in pairs to preach and heal in all the Jewish towns, he told them to stay at whatever home would take them in, and eat what they were given there, as long as they stayed in that town. This they did.

It seems that in Acts, when the apostles went out to preach, they did the same thing. But for Paul, something changed. We don't know what. But this we know: near the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey he preached at Philippi, and while he was there he and Silas and Timothy stayed at home of a business woman named Lydia.

That seemed to go fine. Paul and Silas ended up in jail, and when they got out they went back to Lydia's home, said good-bye, and went to Thessalonica. But in 1 Thess 2:9, Paul says this:

⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

In Acts Paul goes from Philippi to Thessalonica. In Philippi they stayed with Lydia. Something happened somewhere, and when Paul got to Thessalonica, he never did that again. From then on, Thessalonica, then Corinth, then Ephesus, and so on, he worked as a tent-maker.

He never again accepted hospitality or money from the people he was preaching to. *⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.*

So a tentmaker is a name we give someone whose real task is to do God's work, but who has some other job to support himself or herself. Like Paul. We are all tent-makers.

There are two kinds of work in the N.T. Let's keep them separate.

One is our job or career, and the other is our calling, our work for Christ. We need to keep these separate from each other. Jobs are good and important, but they are not our real purpose, our real work.

The N.T. implies that our job, our "tent making," has dignity, and it is important to support ourselves. But in the NT, the job or career is not the believers' real work, it is not "who we are."

"What do you do?" people sometimes ask. For the Christian, for every Christian, the right answer is, "I follow Jesus; what do you do?" That is our *calling*.

Our calling. Believers, every single person who wants to live like a child of God, who intends to follow Jesus, has been called by God. Listen to Romans 1 on *calling*.

Romans 1: ⁶ *And you [believers in Rome] also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.* ⁷ *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.*

1 Thess 5:24 - *The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

The Bible has many ways of describing God's people. Being called ones, called by Jesus and by God, is one way, and I will use that today. Let me read the Romans 1 verses again:

⁶ *And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.* ⁷ *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.*

This is a good summary. We have been called to belong to Jesus Christ, we have been called to be God's holy people. So our *calling* is whatever we do because we belong to Jesus, whatever we do because God called us to be his holy people. That is our *calling*.

And what we do because we've been called to belong to Jesus Christ, what we do because God called us to be his holy people, is also called *work*. It is our calling, and it is also our *work*.

So we have two kinds of *work*. We have our work to do because of where we find ourselves in this world. For children and youths, work is usually school and school work. For adults there is work in the home and outside the home to stay fed and sheltered. That's all one kind of work.

The other kind of *work* is what we do because Jesus called us to himself and God called us to be his holy people. That kind of *work* is whatever we do because we are *called* by God.

Keep these two kinds of work separate in your own mind. They can occur at the same place and at the same time. We do things because we are called by God, because we follow Jesus, while we are at our other work, our job.

And our calling includes being good workers at our job, our career. We're to serve our boss as if we were obeying Christ himself. And we treat those under us fairly and kindly, because we will also answer to Christ for these things. So our calling affects our career, our job.

But keep them separate in your mind, even though they affect each other. And, understand that in the NT our calling is the work that counts.

That is the work that lasts, and almost everything the Scriptures have to say to us are about that kind of work, our calling, the things we do because we follow Jesus and are God's children.

The N.T. implies that our job, our career, that kind of work, has dignity. It is good. It is important to support ourselves. But for the most part, when the Scriptures instruct us it is not about that kind of work.

Our job, our career, it not that important to God. How we act in our jobs is important to God, because that is part of our *calling*. But in the N.T., what our career is, and if we are succeeding at it, does not matter very much.

In the Scripture, success is if we are good honest workers, and if support ourselves and have some left to share. If we do this, we are successful in our career, as far as God is concerned.

I am teaching about this today in part because in our society, career tends to get too much honour, and I am calling us all away from that. We ought not to build our lives around our careers, but around our calling. The Kingdom of God, and the world, differ on this matter.

In the Kingdom of God, our purpose is not to do well in our career, but to do well in our calling. Our meaning in life comes not from our career, but from our calling. Life comes from answering the call of God, not from answering the call of career.

If we choose to move away from our calling to get ahead in our career, we have moved away from Life. If we let our calling slide to succeed in our career, we have moved from the great to the small, we have moved from what lasts forever to what will disappear.

God's call is the only call that gives life. Many other calls promise life, but none give it.

Not much difference in NT between paid and unpaid service to God.

The N.T. makes is very little difference between paid and non-paid servants of the Lord, and we need to make as little difference as possible between these two kinds of Christians.

The call to follow Jesus, to serve others, to be God's holy people, is no different between the paid minister and the unpaid minister. Churches decide to support some and not others, and Paul defends that openly. We'll get to that in a few minutes.

But there is little difference between the Lord's call to the one the church pays and the Lord's call to one the church does not pay. There is a difference in job, but little in calling.

Jesus saw his work for God as his only real work.

- "*Isn't this the carpenter?*" [Mark 6:3]. "*Isn't this the carpenter?*" That's what the people in Jesus' home town said when he came preaching there.

But Jesus said: (Jn 4:34) – *My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.*
Jn 5:17 – *My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.*

Jn 9:3-4 – *As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.* Jn 17:4 – *[Father, said Jesus,] I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.*

Jesus had a job, a career, but it is mentioned only once in the Bible, and that work was NOT the work that God was interested in Jesus doing.

Paul also had work from God. Romans 15:16-18, 23

God gave this grace to me, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, . . . proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. . . .

But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain.

Paul's career was tent making. But he was called to be an apostle, and that was his vocation, his real work.

How Should Christians Think About Their Calling?

But are WE to be the same? I suppose that is the real question. How does the N.T. speak about OUR work? The answer is, a lot the same. Listen:

Here's what Paul says to the Thessalonian believers. These are not missionaries, not pastors. They are ordinary Christians.

1 Thess. 1:3 - *We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour produced by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus.*

Work, labour, and endurance: these are not about jobs or careers, these are about their calling to follow Jesus and to be God's holy people. Work, labour, endurance.

Hebrews 6:10 - *God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.*

1 Cor 15:58 - *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

These are all God's calling, and these instructions are given to ordinary congregations. *Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

We are all called by the Lord, called to be saints, called follow him, called to serve him. This is our calling. Our career, our job, is not our calling.

Our calling has to do with the different gifts that each of us has, spiritual gifts, and a lot of it is not in the realm of spiritual gifts, but is just faithfulness in prayer, in Christian love, in trying to aim our children toward God, in the life of the church.

Our calling covers every part of our life. It affects our job or career, it affects our home life with our families, and it includes our relationships in the world, and especially in the church. That's all our calling. All of this is where we do the work of the Lord, and where we labour in the Lord.

Some have lots of energy to pursue their calling outside their job, others have little energy left. This had to have been true in N.T. times as well. Early churches were full of slaves and poor people, lots of whom must have had to work very hard all day long.

In the N.T., this is not a problem. There is no sense of frustration with this. There is always a way to be a follower of Jesus, all day long and all night long. (Our calling most certainly includes rest, quiet, and retreat.)

Our job, our career, is work, is good and right and how we support ourselves. But that is not what we do. We are called people, called by the One True God Himself, through His Son Jesus.

Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. These words are for every child of God, not only "ministers" of one kind or another.

What about paid ministers?

Allow me to defend my relationship to this church before I talk you all into firing me.

The NT is clear that those being paid don't have a different calling than those not paid, they are not special people or special believers. There is lots about how a professional minister is viewed these days that is not biblical, and I have been trying to correct some of that today.

But meeting the material needs of some so they can devote more time to serving the Kingdom was certainly a part of the life of NT churches.

2 Thess 3:8-9: *We worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but to make ourselves a model.*

1 Tim 5:17-18 – *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain, and, The worker deserves his wages.*

Here is 1 Cor 9:11, 13-14 - *If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?*

¹³ *Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?* ¹⁴ *In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.*

Paying ministers was part of church life in the NT, and Paul defends it by going back to the priests and Levites, who ate from the people's tithes, and from the animals brought for offering.

Let's just keep clear that paid ministers do not have a much different calling from God than unpaid ministers. Difference in career, but not much in calling.

I have preached this to encourage you all. You are all called people, you are ministers, the Lord has called you. Each of us, every single one, comes under this same calling: called to follow Jesus, called to be God's holy people.

I have in mind especially the young people who sometimes think about the rest of your lives. Don't make career planning the center of your life. Let your calling be the center of your life.

You do need to think about having a job, and supporting yourself. Work is good, and God will be leading you in these things as well, what work you should do, and where you can do it.

But don't build your life around that, because it is too small. *Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*, said Jesus.

Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness. That's our calling, Jesus *calling* us, today. This message, today, is our Lord calling us toward Life. I hope you can hear that, because that is what's happening. This is the Life road.

And all these things will be given to you as well. This last part is about how we will eat and have clothing and shelter. God knows we need these; He pays attention to how each of us get these.

Be willing to work, try to make good choices, but don't be too preoccupied about career. God will lead you. Don't be distracted by career and forget your calling.

This makes us all "tent makers," those whose first goal is their calling, to seek God's kingdom and righteousness, and who work to support themselves and others.

1 Cor 15:58 - *My dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*