

Your Work: Secular or Sacred, Mark 6:1-3

Introduction

Many years ago, there was a movie which came out entitled "OH GOD!" It starred John Denver as a grocery store manager who was visited by God.

John Denver receives a letter telling him that he has been granted an audience with God. Although he considers the whole thing to be a hoax, he goes to the designated meeting place. The room is empty except for a single chair and the voice of God. John Denver asks to God show himself.

Reluctantly, God appears before John Denver, but he looks a lot like George Burns. There God stands as an old man with thick glasses, baggy pants, tennis shoes, a windbreaker jacket and a golf hat! When John Denver stares in disbelief, God replies, "Well, what did you expect?"

Now you may find that scene amusing or you may be a bit offended, but I think it can teach us something because it's similar to what happened in our text.

Mark 6:1-3, in the New Living Bible says, *"Jesus left that part of the country and returned with his disciples to Nazareth, his hometown. The next Sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They asked, 'Where did he get all his wisdom and the power to perform such miracles? **He's just a carpenter**, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us.' They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him."*

In this passage, God in the person of Jesus Christ stands before this group of men in a synagogue in Nazareth, the town where he grew up. Jesus had

already traveled around a bit and gained a reputation in Israel. He had performed miracles like raising the dead, healing the sick and calming the storm. He had taught large crowds; he was known throughout Palestine as the miracle-working rabbi.

Then he went home, back to Nazareth. And there he taught in the synagogue. Maybe he taught the very same lesson that he had used in other towns. But the reaction in Nazareth was very much different than the reaction he got elsewhere. They raised the question, “Where did he learn how to teach like this? This is just the carpenter that used to live down the street.” They just couldn’t bring themselves to believe that this could be the Messiah of the Old Testament—he was just a carpenter. And you can almost imagine Jesus asking George Burns/God’s question, “Well, what did you expect?”

Maybe you have a bit of a problem seeing our God as a carpenter. Can you envision the great God of the universe in a workshop knee-deep in wood shavings? Or to bring it up-to-date, can you picture God as a grease-covered auto mechanic or the Maytag repairman? The truth is, it’s kind of hard for us to picture Jesus as anything other than a powerful preacher.

We know that fathers in the first century were expected to teach their children a trade. Joseph, no doubt, taught Jesus what he knew about carpentry. We don’t know anything about Jesus’ life between the ages of 12 and 30, but I think it’s safe to say that he spent much, if not all of that time, working in his father’s carpenter shop.

It seems likely that Joseph died at a young age, and Jesus as the oldest son may have been the major provider for his family. Whatever else may be true,

though, we do know that Jesus worked there long enough to be known by the folks of Nazareth as “Jesus the Carpenter.” And in Mark 6:3, we find people who were offended at Jesus because he was “only a carpenter.”

Our God was a carpenter, and I think that there are several lessons that we can gain by taking note of the fact. I want to begin by looking at the distinction we sometimes make between secular work and sacred work.

I. The Sacred and the Secular

Let me ask you a question—Do you think Jesus was serving his heavenly Father as he worked in his earthly father’s shop planning doors and smoothing yokes? Or do you think he was just marking time until he could get out there and really begin his work for God? While he labored in that shop, was he just engaged in secular work, or was he even then serving God?

I’m afraid that we have created an improper distinction between the sacred and the secular. What do I mean by that? We usually think of secular work as having no spiritual or religious content. And sacred work is work that is spiritual in nature.

And it’s probably easier for us to describe the difference than to define it. We would say that the preacher’s work is sacred and the carpenter’s work is secular. The first works for God; the other just drives nails. When a man teaches communication classes at the university, he is just doing secular work. But when he comes to church and teaches the adult Bible class on Wednesday evening, then he is doing sacred work.

The only problem with this distinction is that it’s not biblical at all! Do you think that the God who was a carpenter would agree with this distinction? I don’t

think Jesus was serving God any more by preaching up on the mountaintop than he was by driving nails in the shop! The example that Jesus set for us is complete service to God in every context of life; there was no secular work for Him!

Jesus, at all times, involved himself in activities that were pleasing to his Father. When Jesus said to his mother in the temple at the age of 12, “*Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?*” (Luke 2:49), I don’t think he was just talking about that one day, I think it was a summary of his lifetime commitment.

And what that means is that while Jesus labored conscientiously as a carpenter, he did so in obedience to the will of God. Jesus didn’t spend 18 years “marking time” until he really got to work for God. He worked for him constantly.

Suppose for a moment you lived in the Galilean town of Nazareth in the first century. You’re a farmer, and one day you are out plowing in the field and the old yoke you have been using breaks. You decide to get a new one made, so you go to the local carpenter’s shop. A young man named Jesus takes your order and tells you that he will have your yoke made before the Sabbath day.

What type of yoke would you expect from Jesus? Don’t you suppose that it would be top quality? Don’t you think that our God the carpenter would take his work very seriously because he saw it in view of his relationship with his heavenly Father? I don’t believe anybody ever brought back a shoddy piece of work that Christ did. Because he didn’t just work for people—he worked for God by working for people.

You see, our distinction between the sacred and the secular often causes us to see no connection between our relationship with Christ and our employment. We may feel free to act any way we want at the job. That may mean not doing our best. It may mean acting like our co-workers—joking like they joke, cursing like they curse. It may mean engaging in slightly illegal or immoral types of activity. But then Sunday rolls around and its time to serve God by going to church! You serve God by living for him in **every** context of life.

The Apostle Paul plainly tells us that in serving our employer, we're serving God as well. Now, what he has to say in Ephesians 6:5-7 is directed explicitly to servants of the first century, but its application extends to all of us who have a responsibility to someone else.

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ. Work hard, but not just to please your masters when they are watching. As slaves of Christ, do the will of God with all your heart. Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.”

Paul says here that the Christian slave who worked in the fields or the vineyards or wherever wasn't just serving an earthly master—he was serving God. And your attitude toward your job changes when you realize that you're not just serving your boss, you're also serving God. Whenever you're serving God, that's not just secular work!

Well, if our traditional distinction between the secular and the sacred isn't correct, then what does distinguish the two? Put simply, it is a person's motivation or intention that decides whether he is serving God or just being

secular. Jesus did the work of a servant when he washed his disciples' feet. It was a physical act. Involved in it were a towel, a basin, water and dusty feet. All tangible, all physical. But it was a very sacred deed.

And what made the act holy? What made it sacred? It was the motive, the intention. Thousands of servants washed feet all over Palestine that night without it being holy. But this particular act was holy because it was done to the glory of God in the service of others.

A preacher gets up and delivers a message from the Bible. Is that sacred? Is that holy? It is if he has done it to the glory of God! It's not hard, though, to minister the word of God in an unholy manner. Paul spoke in Philippians 1 of men who preached out of envy and strife. If someone is preaching so as to bring glory to God, then that preaching is sacred. On the other hand, if a person is preaching to bring glory to self, then that preaching is secular and unholy.

In the same way, being a carpenter is sacred or secular depending on a person's reasons for working as a carpenter. Paul said in Ephesians 4:28, *"If you are a thief, stop stealing. Begin using your hands for honest work, and then give generously to others in need."*

If someone works to glorify God by providing for his family and for the church and for others who are less fortunate, then his work is every bit as sacred as that of the preacher. If a person's goal, however, is centered around money, prestige and success, then he's secular to the core, even if he's preaching.

A job isn't secular just because you work at it with your hands. And a ministry isn't holy just because you minister in holy things. A job is sacred or secular depending on your attitude. If you work in your career to glorify God

through your service, then your work is every bit as sacred as the full-time minister of the gospel. I don't think we have fully understood this in the church.

A writer for a great newspaper once visited India. While there, he met a missionary nurse who lived among the lepers and ministered to their needs. He noticed how tender and loving she was to these poor souls. Looking at her in amazement, the reporter commented, "I would not wash their wounds for a million dollars." She responded by saying, "Neither would I, but I'd gladly do it for my Savior. The only reward I am looking for is his smile of approval."

I raise these questions:

- Why are you living the way that you are?
- Why are you working at your job all week long?
- Why do you do the things that you do and say the things that you say?
- Do you do it for personal gain, for the money, to climb the ladder of success?
- Or do you do it all for the glory of God in Christ Jesus?

II. The Glory of the Ordinary

But there is something else here I want you to note. The fact that Jesus worked as a carpenter serves as a reminder to us that Jesus came into this world in ordinary fashion, aside from the fact of the virgin birth. He was born to two poor parents. When he was a baby, he did all the things that normal babies do—he cried, threw his food halfway across the room and messed in his diapers.

As he grew older, there seemed to be nothing special about him. He didn't walk around with a halo constantly over his head. Isaiah 53:2 predicted, "*My servant grew up in the Lord's presence like a tender green shoot, sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about*

his appearance, nothing to attract us to him.” In other words, there was nothing special about the way he looked. He looked ordinary, he lived an ordinary life, and it was because of this that the Jews couldn’t imagine that he was in any way extraordinary.

We live in a world that worships the grand, the great, and the outstanding. It has little time for the ordinary. I can understand why that is to some degree. To be viewed as “Mister Average” hurts our feelings. We’d rather be up there among the indispensable people, making our indelible mark on the world. It’s not enough to dream dreams; we’ve got to dream “great dreams.”

And so we look around us in the church. We see evangelists in the church who are really “on fire,” who have so much enthusiasm and vigor. We see missionaries who travel halfway around the world and make great sacrifices for the Lord. We see great men who seem to know the Bible frontwards and backwards and can teach in amazing ways.

And what we end up with is the impression that if we are not on a par with the gifted evangelists, teachers and leaders we meet, then we just aren’t doing much for Christ. After all, our own lives seem so ordinary in comparison. And, yet, Christ’s years as a carpenter were ordinary. There was no hysteria, nothing spectacular about that part of his life. Did he serve God during these years? You better believe it. But, he did it while performing ordinary, everyday tasks.

I admire gifted preachers. I admire enthusiastic preachers. There are times that I need the lift that they can provide. But there are many who fulfill their responsibilities in the shadows who are just as significant. For example, I

have just as much admiration for the single mom who raises her children to know and love God.

We need to refuse to be intimidated into thinking the ordinary is only a little more than useless. Thank God genuinely for the enthusiasm of fast-moving preachers and leaders who dream lovely dreams. When the zealous thunderballs come preaching with arms flying thank God for them and pray for them. Thank God for the dedication of missionaries who travel around the world under difficult circumstances. When you hear of their sacrifices, thank God for them and pray for them.

But, don't ever get the feeling that you're some kind of faithless pagan just because you are not serving God like that. After all, all you do is work at ordinary jobs like teaching school, selling insurance, or working in a factory. We can be made to feel that we aren't serving God at all.

Do you really believe that the preacher or the missionary is serving God more than the rest us? What counts as Christian service?

- Does constant and earnest prayer for the lost count?
- Does it count that you raise your family to believe in God and to fill society with the richness of Christ?
- Does working hard at a job so that you can give liberally to support dynamic preachers and missionaries count?
- Does it count that you work among the lost showing them a Christian example of honesty, integrity and purity?
- Does it count that you set forth the principles of Christ in your marriage relationship?

These are the kinds of things that are just as important as anything a preacher does. No one believes any stronger in the beauty and importance of the ministry than I do. I know that we need to encourage our most talented young people to consider serving God as preachers and missionaries and counselors. But I also believe its wrong for us to down-grade our own service to God just because we work for the college and the preacher works for the church. If we're working to glorify God, then there is nothing ordinary about what we do.

Again, what raises the ordinary to significance is the dedication to the glory of God of what we are and what we have. And if you're involved in serving Christ in this way, then you don't have anything to worry about. You can know that you are living out every context of your life as sacred and holy.

III. Conclusion

Once again, allow me raise some questions:

- Why do you live the way you do?
- Why do you work at your job all week long?
- Why do you do the things you do and say the things you say?
- Do you do it for personal gain, for money, for prestige and success as the world defines success?
- Or, do you do it for the glory of Christ Jesus? **His example in every context of life was sacred and holy!**