

Christian Vocation: Geoff Stevens, Graphic Designer

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Preacher: Geoff Stevens

- [0:00] Yeah. Okay, so on your sheet, I've kind of broken out a few categories of how I want to break out my talk here this morning.
- The first one is, what if you got what you want? What if you got what you want? And this is just sort of the title I'm putting on my, what I'm going to give you a little seven-minute history of my work life.
- But you'll see it's sort of my life just in general. And then we'll go on to just talk about how the gospel provides a new mission, a new metric, a new motivation for all of life and work, as I was saying earlier.
- So about me. So my name's Jeff Stevens. I grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut, right down the road. When it came time for college, I wanted to play ice hockey.
- It was basically my driving passion, among a few other things. So I went to Gordon because they had a terrible ice hockey team, and I knew that I could probably play a little, which I did.
- [1:11] I was a psychology major because I was very interested in the way people think, and I thought that a psychology major was going to help me delve into that, which it did not.
- I met Bruce Herman at Gordon College. He was my main art professor, great man, still active artist, very thoughtful man. And he sort of took me and actually pushed me into a local art school up by Gordon.
- He said, you need to go to art school. I'm like, well, I can't. I'm here. And he said, well, go to this one for now. And from there, I ended up going all the way down to Savannah to SCAD, which is a terrible name for a school that presents things for a living.
- Like, that's what they do. And their name is SCAD. So I went to SCAD, and I studied graphic design at SCAD, which, when I was there, was a very broad discipline.
- So graphic design was everything from designing magazines and book covers and billboards and advertising. And there really was no internet that controlled all of our lives or apps or, like, this was pre...
- [2:22] This was a better world, frankly, than the one we live in, especially from a designer's point of view. So I studied design, and I...
- So the culture at design school, if you don't know, especially in the commercial side of things, so... And let me say that real quick. Graphic designers work for other people.
- They are not artists in the sense of I'm a fine artist, and I'm making beautiful objects that are for their own sake. And believe me, I love that. I just can't do it.
- So I'm a graphic designer, and I work for other people. And part of the training is you do very shoddy, student-y kind of work and put it up on the wall.
- And then about 40 people walk up to it and tell you why it's terrible. These are called critiques. And your peers, who don't know anything, critique you.

- [3 : 17] And then your professors, who know some things, critique you. And so there's just the culture of critique. And a handful of people come out of commercial design school with portfolios that either sort of survive or they don't.
- Right? So I went and applied for an internship. 40 other people applied for this internship. And I won. And so it's like, wow, okay, I love this.
- And I won this internship. It was great. It turned into a full-time job. My first full-time job was scuba diving magazine. It's a Rodale Press magazine. It was a national magazine. It was a great opportunity.
- So I laid out covers and articles. I went to Aruba and Bonaire. And they certified me to dive. And by the way, I didn't really care about diving.
- I just, I'm a graphic designer. I take other people's ideas and I try to make them look awesome. So I'm living the dream. And I didn't even know it. And, of course, I had met Mona at school.
- [4 : 29] We were married. And I ended up at a advertising agency graphic design studio hybrid, which is something you'd only find in a city, a small city like Savannah.
- So we did branding work. We did advertising. We did everything in between. So if you're not familiar with the term branding, well, branding is where you take an organization, a business, or even an individual, and you dress them in a certain kind of clothes.
- And then you put them out into the marketplace. And you say, hello, I'm the bank. And I'd like to introduce myself. And these are my colors. And this is my logo. And this is the way I talk. And that's branding.
- And that's sort of the sweet spot of how professionally how I'm wired. That's where I'm most comfortable is in branding. We also did a lot of advertising, which is where the creative arts get kind of a bad name, right?
- Because they cultivate desire for things that people don't need. And, yes, they do do that. And they do it on purpose. And they talk about it. And I was a part of that.
- [5 : 42] And, yes, it is disgusting. So I'm cruising along. And this sort of mimics the talk last week.
- So I'm just doing what I love to do and enjoying it. And all of a sudden, I'm winning awards. I'm winning. We're winning awards. But I'm winning individual awards, like the Art Director of the Year Award in Savannah, Georgia, by the way.
- So don't get too excited. But still, it's like you're the best we have going in this city, right? So that happened one year. Then that happened the next year. So it's two years in a row. And my head is beginning to swell.
- Our clients, so we had the biggest bank in town, the biggest architecture firm in town, the art museum, the power company. We had everyone.
- We worked for everyone important in the town. They were my clients. Well, our clients, but my clients. And we were starting to do TV commercials.
- [6 : 45] I was flying to New York City and working with directors and literally going out to L.A. And just all of a sudden, I'm in advertising. And one day, so that's sort of where I want to stop my story.
- And that was about maybe 15 years ago. And I was having a self-quake. I don't know if you are familiar with that term.
- But apart from work, I had a self-quake that started with my marriage, which was through my marriage, I was confronted with the fact that I was a selfish animal, basically.
- And then all of a sudden, I was at work where everything was great. And one day, and I think this is just a Holy Spirit intervention for me, the question came into my mind, what if you got everything you want right now?

It's sort of like WWJD. It's like, what if Jesus just walked into your life physically right now and said, hey, what's going on? What are you doing with yourself? And my answer to that question was not a good answer, if I was being honest.

[8:00] It was a terrible answer. Because all of us, where I worked, were building the me show. We didn't really love our clients.

We loved our success. And we were trying to win awards. And we were trying to build our own books. Because all the creatives were always looking at the next place they could go jump to and further their career, especially if you're in Savannah.

Because, well, it's Savannah. So I put this verse, what good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Now, I want to just say, I just want to admit that everything I have to say this morning, there are no, as much as, I love the deep truths of scripture, okay?

And I will spend hours with any of you if you want to talk about the mysteries. But what I want to say this morning is that just the first things of Christianity, just the basic gospel, can and will change your life if you take what it's saying seriously and let it deal with you.

[9:13] And so this is not rocket science, right? Like, of course, we've been sitting in, I was a deacon at my church at this time, by the way. I was very familiar with the gospel and its data points, and I believed it.

But for me, experience had to come alongside the words to combine, to teach me the hard truths, right?

And for me, this was a hard truth. And it wrecked me. It literally cut me to my core. And I had a self-quake.

And so real briefly, what happened was we started going after a couple, at the same time, at the same moment, I'm like, what am I doing? Like, I'm living for myself.

We started going after clients that were outside of the realm of okay for me to work on, such as we had a vodka account.

[10:16] And they were trying to combine vodka and Red Bull and then sell it to 18-year-olds, that kind of thing. Or pillows that people use to enhance their sexual life, which is fine.

But they want us to advertise it and, like, do all these, like, visual horrible things, which I couldn't do. So that was going on. And meanwhile, the Christian parachurch ministry called Ligonier Ministries, so this is R.C. Sproul.

Maybe some of you are familiar with him. He just passed away. They came after me because I had been doing pro bono work for my church. And they saw it. And they're like, you should come work for us.

And you should come design our catalogs and come work for parachurch ministry, which I did. I did. Because we'll get into some of the reasons why.

But basically, it was throwing my career away. And I knew that. You don't go design catalogs for parachurch, niche-y, reformed Christian ministry and ever go back to working in consumer advertising at agency level again.

[11:23] You're done. So I went in and told my boss. I'm like, I got to go. He said, you're crazy. You're, what are you doing? I said, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm not, I'm letting the chips fall where they may, which is something I'm going to try to bring out if I can do that in the time I have.

Okay. So I'm too throwing my career away. Great. So now I'd like to talk about how that's come about for me and how these things are still a vital part of my work life and my life in general.

And the way I want to frame it up is to talk about how the gospel gives, gave me and gives us a new mission, a new way of measuring our worth and a new motivation in life and in the workplace.

So, first of all, a new mission. Let me read this passage from Colossians, so succinct and so powerful.

Since then you have been raised with Christ. Set your heart on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

[12:46] Set your mind on the things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

So, at that time, I think this is a question we all ask ourselves, right? Who am I? Why do I matter in the world? What is my purpose?

Why am I here? These are the questions. These are the ultimate questions. These are the ontological questions. These are the teleological questions. These are like the big questions. Well, for me, they really hit me at that time as I was saying.

And I was confronted with my answers. And, you know, I have this joke with my children. It's Clay. Did I see Clay here?

So, Clay, what's all that matters? And what else? Making your friends feel bad. Yeah, what about personal glory? That's what it's all about. Right. So, whenever we would go to the sporting event, you know, I turn to my children and be like, what's all that matters today?

[14:04] And then they say winning. And I say, and then what else? And they say getting personal glory. And then I say, what else? And they say, making the other guy pay, you know. And I'm like, of course, it's a joke.

But it's not a joke, right? I mean, that is the default mission is to win.

And I'm not trying to be political here at all. I'm just trying to be myself, which is to say I observe that our mission is to win, right? And my old mission was to, let me put a positive spin on it, to become the best me I could be.

And to be well thought of by others. And, you know, yeah, to win awards and to be great. And to make the most out of my life.

And it had a very horizontal feel to it, right? It's me starting with me and then looking horizontal.

[15:08] Man, I don't know about your professions, but in my profession, all we do is look down on other people. We look down on our clients. We look down on other creatives. We're like, oh, you think that's good?

Like, it's all subjective, right? So we're like, that's terrible. You're terrible. I'm great. The new mission, however, is, if there's any Presbyterians in the room, to glorify God and to enjoy God.

That's my new mission. To love him. To please him. To thank him. And ultimately, to be with him.

And so what are the implications of this for my work, right? If I realize my original mission is sort of faulty, you know?

And the mission the gospel gives me is to live for God and not for myself. Well, what are the implications at work?

[16:20] They're huge. There are many. We could never cover them here. But I will mention that the first one for me was that Jeff had to be demoted.

The Jeff show had to sort of pull up the tent. And I had to sort of rethink.

For me, it became sort of a daily thing where I woke up in the morning. I'm like, how am I going to address the fact that now I'm awake to having living for this thing over here, which is not what God wants for me to live in this way?

So another implication for me at work was that people who prior to I would see as tools or obstacles to get what I want, now I see that if I'm going to love God, then I have to love other people.

And if I'm going to love other people, I have to change how I interact with them. It sounds so basic, but I'm just reporting facts. I also began to care about and love my unseen audience.

[17:48] So when you're in the business that I'm in, there's the masses. The work that you do goes out to the masses who you don't touch like we're doing now.

And so when this new mission came into my life, I started thinking about those people. And I started thinking, what's good for those people? Because God's told me, you want to know one way you can glorify me?

Care about other people. Love other people. Think of them as their needs more important than your own. Let me pause there and just say, are there, as I say, as I say, confess really to you, that this mission and crystallizing in my mind says, here's a few implications for me and my work.

Do you think, do you have in your mind implications at your work? And would you like to share one or two? If not, that's fine.

Go ahead. Were you raising your hand? I was. I couldn't. So, boy, you went to Gordon College. Grew up in a Christian home, right?

[19:14] How did the seduction, it just kind of happen? Yeah. So, I think that it is very difficult to bring your, if you coast at work, the culture of work, in my experience, the culture of work is different than even ordinary, even school culture, because it's really based on performance and merit.

And it is, in many ways, I think Christians walk into work. I know I was doing this, and I wasn't being purposeful in my thinking.

So, I had to have a self-quick. So, God had to come in and just shatter me. But, hopefully, that's just part of what we're doing now, is just talking about these things so that we're a little more thoughtful as we go into the workplace and say, wait a minute, I'm still the same guy that I was on Sunday morning affirming, you know, what my calling is.

Because my calling is to be, to use my gifts, my creative gifts, for God's glory. It is. But my big calling is to honor God and to love Him.

And, let's move on, because I think we're going to flesh out, if no one... Go ahead. I just want to say this. There are two things that have really taught me the reality of the sinfulness of mankind.

[20:51] That is my point. I had no idea how corrupting the workplace, the secular workplace, would be where there was a special place at work.

And I just assumed other people had good motives. You know, as I worked in the school system, it took me years to realize, oh my goodness. They are really sinners, like the Bible tells us the thing.

And I'm bad enough. But, boy, you know, don't assume anything good. Yeah, you know, since you brought that up, and this is just off the script, but I think loving anyone means absorbing blows and taking it on the chin and being open to being taken advantage of.

Anyone. Try loving your children through teenage years. Try... It is... Baked into loving anybody is being willing to absorb blows and being taken advantage of.

Now, how does that play in the workplace, right? It's one thing at your home with your own children, like, you know, but in the workplace where it's...

[22:16] It is not the type of culture where if you're going to live like that, it's an easy place to navigate, right? Or at least I've... That's how...

What I've found to be true. Okay, so real quick, I want to move through. How do we define a successful person? How do we define what a successful person is now?

Why are we bringing... Why am I bringing this up in the context of work? Well, of course I'm bringing it up because... You know what phrase I hate? Have you ever heard someone say, oh, have you met so-and-so?

Well, first thing you need to know is they are successful. And then they go on to tell you. And what does that mean? That means in their field, they're at close...

They've made a lot of money somehow. And it assumes a definition of success, okay, that Christians can't affirm if they're being theologically consistent.

[23:19] Because why? Because how does God define a successful person? How do Christians define a successful person? I think of the fact that we're so outcome-based, and as human beings, we watch what people are able to produce.

And if the product is good, they are successful. But then I watch John the Baptist produce an excellent product and call something like it is, because that was his job that God called him to.

He got his head cut off. That's not successful by our ordinary terms. That was very unsuccessful. Now you're dead. I look at Hebrews 11, and I say, here we have the hall of fame of people that God says are successful.

And the first half of this group were nodding along. It's like, and this guy went, and God came along, and he beat the enemies, and he led them, and he was triumphing. And it's like, win, win, win.

And I'm like, yeah. But then the second half is, and these people were faithful, and they got sawn in half, and they got their heads chopped off. Equally successful people, because the definition of success by God's, God does not measure as we measure.

[24:38] Now, if we can't take God's measurement into the workplace with us, if we're going to adopt the measurement of ordinary human culture, you're going to end up hopefully like me and have a self-quake, or you're just going to stay on the hamster wheel that goes to nowhere and adopt the world's value system.

And what's at the end? You know, last week's talk was so good. I don't know how many of you were here, but just to think about the meaninglessness of playing out the standard human value system.

Where does it end? There's no future hope in it. Even if you are successful by those terms, you've got 30 years to enjoy it at best.

Okay. So, new metric, new measurement. Man, I've got to move on here.

So, why do we do what we do? I think it's, I think the Christian worldview has to answer this question, right?

[26:06] Because how many of you saw the Mr. Rogers movie? Did any of you guys see it? Okay. Well, I'm going to tell you about it anyway. I was hoping more of you had seen it. So, Mr. Rogers, you know, wonderful guy, told all the children that they were special, told all the children that just who they are was valuable, right?

It's a good message. And so, as the documentary goes on, you know, he's just loving children and he's being kind and he's heaping affirmation on them. And then towards the tail end of his life, the critics come out and they're like, you know, Mr. Rogers has like ruined the world because, yeah, you've got to watch the documentary.

It's a true story. So, Mr. Rogers ruined the world because he told children that they were valuable and affirmed just as they are. But then what's going to motivate them to go out and be great and do great things and to like produce and build themselves into something useful for the meritocracy, right?

So, these things are in conflict. And I'm actually not telling you that, like, I understand that tension, right? And I would like to say that tension is actually one of the greatest tensions in Christianity.

Forget about the workplace, right? You are saved by grace, 100% grace. You do nothing to merit it. All you do is say, yes, I need it.

[27 : 40] Give it to me. If you live a stellar life from the moment you become a Christian to the moment you die, Jesus comes along and says, you were a faithful servant. You didn't do anything to earn a cookie.

That's it. And then, of course, you don't. So, like, every day you need grace and salvation. So, the critics of the gospel come along, understandably from a certain perspective, like, oh, so you're saved by grace.

So, you don't earn any of it. And then they say, so why be a good person at all? Like, why even try? Why strive to use Paul's language? Why effort and point yourself at perfection of pleasing God and killing your old self if it's all by grace and you've got everything you need right now just by receiving it, right?

Well, to me, that's a very relevant question to our work. Because after I had my self-quake and after I threw my career away, I was, the spirit of that for me was, I'm going to just trust that this is what God has for me.

It's a longer story than that, but about ten things kind of came together for me at the same time that were, like, an affirmation that this is what God kind of had for me. So, I said, well, whatever's down the road, I don't know what it is.

[29 : 07] I'm just going to jump off the cliff and do it and let the chips fall where they may. Well, so let's say I did that. So, now I'm trying to be faithful to God.

What's my, now my motivation to be great? My old motivation was because, obvious, right? Like, I'm out in the workplace fighting off all my competitors and I'm trying to win awards and I'm trying to build the Jeff show.

And I want all of you to think I'm awesome. And here's my portfolio, you know, here's my work. And it's what makes me somebody. Well, that's gone now. That is not what makes me somebody.

It's a good thing, but it's not who makes me valuable. Well, I'm valuable because God saw fit to literally come into this world and pay for my sins and pull me back into his family and put the label of child of God on me and give me an inheritance.

Now, we understand, why does Paul come along and go, all this stuff that you think makes me valuable, I count it as garbage. Why? Because compared to what God has provided us in Christ, it is garbage.

[30 : 29] In that perspective. Right? So now, why do I try hard at work? Like, I think it's a legitimate question that has to be sort of addressed.

And, of course, the gospel answer is doing a good job at work, as I was trying to say earlier, the definition of doing a good job at work changes into, first of all, loving the people that you're with.

Loving the people that you're ultimately serving. So whatever career you're in, you're serving someone out there. Right? Loving them well. Doing a good job, as James said last week, unto the Lord.

So every single thing you do in your work day, if you have the perspective of God is calling me to do this task as if I'm doing it directly for him in response to what he's done for me.

And this is sort of my point. I'm just going to summarize it in one word. Why do I work hard? Gratitude. It's as simple as that.

[31:51] I go to work. There are many, many days, to be honest with you, I don't particularly love my job. I'd much rather be working in an agency, working for Nike, or doing more exciting work like I used to do.

But you know what? I go to work, and my motivation is gratitude because God has given me a new life.

And has given my whole life a meaning that it didn't used to have that has eternal value. And so it is gratitude that then expresses itself in love.

Let me read this verse for us. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.

For she loved much. But he who is forgiven little loves little. I think it's a very convicting question if we ask ourselves, in our workplace, do we show that God has loved us much by the way we handle ourselves?

[33:06] And by the way we reject certain assumed methods of doing things, cutthroat methods maybe. And to me that was part of what was convicting me to change my life.

Let me pause at this point. Any questions or thoughts or anything to add? Thank you. I'm just wondering about the work world that you are in.

It's so different from a helping work like teaching or maybe health care or something like that. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Yeah. Is there any struggles there as well? Yeah. I mean, it is. Honestly, that's a good question. And I did wake up one day because I was following my dreams.

I mean, I was following my passions. You know how we tell our kids sometimes, like, just do what you love. And, you know, God, it will work out. And I did wake up and say, you know, how is what I do, how does what I do help people?

[34:23] Now, you know, I went to work for Ligonier. I went to work for a Christian ministry. There were a lot of people at the ministry that were there because their answer to that question was, well, I'll go do what I do for Christians.

And I did tons of, I poured myself in the book covers and articles and revamping the way this ministry presented itself and trying to go to all of you and say, look, you should care about this.

Let me curate the chaos of junk that's out there and simplify it and bring it to you in a way that will help you see its value and maybe step into it.

Right. But that's a very near, I don't, I didn't leave Ligonier thinking, oh, now I'm stepping out of serving God with my life at all.

I think, you know, if you're a maid at a hotel, can you please God with your life? Of course.

[35:25] Right. I mean, if you're curing diseases and trying to commercialize them, you know, some of us are jealous. Like we look at that and we're jealous because we're like, oh, well, you're like helping people and we're making typography look better and we're choosing, you know, pleasing compositions.

That's not a great answer. I don't know. I think that at the end of the day, the way God measures us is not by the results, the human results. I really honestly believe that. I believe that it's a measurement of the heart.

And so if God has called an administrator under Joseph's reign to make sure there's grain in the barns and he's like the fifth guy down under some other guy and it's only his job to like count everything up properly.

I think he has just as shot as the most successful life as any of us, whether we're making millions of dollars, whether we're curing cancer or whether we're at the stop traffic light, making sure cars don't run into each other.

Because God is in control of the outcomes. Totally. Can we can we can we accept that? That's another truth that comes at us. We're like, yeah, I believe that. That's true. God is God determines.

[36:50] But then that's a hard thing to let come home into here. I don't know if any of you seen Good Will Hunting.

Let's see if I get any more hands on Good Will Hunting. OK, I love the scene in Good Will Hunting. I'm a I cry at movies. I'm a sucker for it. But I love when it when it when Robin Williams grabs a kid, you know, and he's like, it's not your fault.

And he's like, oh, no, I know. It's not my fault. No, no, you don't. It's not your fault. Right. And he hugs him in and he just keeps repeating. It's not your fault. It's not your fault. Well, that's not my message, of course.

But my but the idea that, no, you don't understand. It's like here's this basic, amazing, profound truth.

I'm nodding along on Sunday morning, but then I walk into work. I'm like. And I need someone to say. The outcomes are not in your hands.

[37:50] The outcomes are not in your hands. Oh, yeah, yeah, I get that. I know. No, no, you don't. The outcomes are like take your child rearing. That's it.

Enough said, period. I'm not even going to fill in the blanks for you. Take your child rearing. Are you a bad parent because one of your kids is off not trusting Jesus? Answer. Yes. You're a terrible parent.

Secondly, not. The outcomes are in God's hands. You be faithful today. Yes, Susan.

Saying the same thing you're saying in a different way. I don't think we can know the side of eternity. The way in which the Holy Spirit inhabits and enlivens what your desire to do at work until heaven.

I'm going to try to make this very responsible. When the Redeemer Church was started in New York City, new woman comes to the church. Tim Keller goes off and says, I haven't seen you before. How did you get to the Redeemer?

[38:51] She says, well, I made a mistake at work. And it would have cost me my job. Except my supervisor, one of the powers that he had said, it was my life.

I didn't accumulate. I didn't prepare her for this. I think I seemed like more clever. She did a better job. So she went in to see him. She said, why would you do that?

Why? I have worked in this town for 28 years. I've had a lot of people take credit for what I've done. I've never had. And you. I mean, it takes it away. I've never had. I said, no, no, it's okay.

It really is Jewish. She kept pressing me. Pressing me. He said, look, I'm a Christian. I have so many people who are going to want me. I took all my sleep on himself.

And he gave me a new life. I thought, I want to do this. She said, we're going to go to church. And the next day she was at the dinner.

[39:48] So I think we can do this. That's an analysis. I think we just try to go, having us serve as much of the grace of God as we can. Letting it try to change our attitudes as much as we can.

And then just give it a little. And who knows? Yeah. That's an awesome story. And I feel like that has sort of let the chips fall where they may, kind of built into it.

It's super risky. And I wish we had actually time to talk about the struggle is real, as I've put it.

[40:49] So is Greg still here? Greg, do you want to come up and pray? Thanks, Jeff. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for these words this morning.

That you have saved us by your grace alone. Lord, that we can't add anything to that. Lord, that all of our performance and our achievements and efforts do not earn us any more of your love or grace than has already been given to us in Christ.

And continue to give him wisdom and help him in the struggles that he faces. And be with each of us, Lord. Help us. We pray that the gospel would sink deeper into each of our hearts.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.