

High Calling of God

by Carl Armerding

The sermon highlights the high calling of God and the cost of being a servant of Christ, emphasizing the importance of humility, obedience, and the power of God's grace.

Duration: 39:37

Scripture: Matthew 25:34

Topics: "Calling Of God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of having a clear objective or goal in life. He uses the analogy of a doctor recommending a specific pace and objective for daily walks to illustrate this point. The speaker emphasizes the need for believers to have a sense of purpose and direction in their spiritual journey. He references Philippians 3:14, where the apostle Paul expresses his determination to press on towards the goal of the high calling of God. The sermon also highlights the impact of Paul's ministry in spreading the gospel and the importance of serving others in the name of Christ.

Transcript

The Book of the Acts, chapter 9. The ninth chapter of the Book of the Acts. For the information of those who are with us for the first time in this series, I'll just say that we began a week ago, Lord's Day, to look at a few little passages in here that deal particularly with the way in which the Lord Jesus is presented in this very Book of the Acts. And tonight we're going to see another one of these pictures of him.

It's only just a very slight glance, shall we say, but nevertheless it's there. So I'd like to read for you, first of all, in this ninth chapter of Acts, a few verses here that surround this text that I want to make my theme for this evening. And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest and desired of him letters to Damascus, to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way--and by the way, this expression, this way, was the way they had of referring to the Christian faith.

This is not exactly unique with Christianity. We find that this same word is used in China. The word Taoist means the way, and they have used this expression, just as the Buddhists have captured another one of the titles that belongs to our Lord when they referred to Buddha as the light of Asia.

Of course, our Lord said he was the light of the world. But this way is the way in which they refer to the Christian faith. Whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus, and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven. And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks or the goats.

And he, trembling and astonished, said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice. That is, they heard the sound, but they didn't know what was being said.

But seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth, and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man. But they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.

And he was three days without sight, neither did eat nor drink. And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias. And to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias.

He said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus. For behold, he prayeth, and hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man how much evil he hath done to thy saints of Jerusalem. And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name. But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way.

For he is a chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake. And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house, and putting his hands on him, said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee on the way, as thou camest, hath sent me that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

And immediately there fell from his eyes as had been scales. And he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. And when he had received meat, he was strengthened.

Then was Saul certain days with the disciples, which were at Damascus. Every Christian in this audience tonight, and all who may hear this message by means of the tape, is indebted to this man about whom we have just been reading. This is the man whom God used to bring the gospel into Europe.

Last night we were talking about a man who probably carried the gospel into Africa. But we noted that so far as the record goes, not one of the apostles ever took it upon himself to do pioneer work in the continent of Africa. And we're just wondering if that might be the reason why the scourge of Islam was allowed to cover the northern part at least of that great continent.

So that even today we find it difficult to bring the gospel to those who sit under the influence of Islam, that is, Mohammedanism. But we find no such obstacles thrown in the way of the gospel in Europe. And here is this man, Paul, whom God chooses in this way to bring the gospel into Europe, and incidentally to you and to me.

So as we look back 1,900 years tonight, we think of how the gospel penetrated into the countries from which most of our fathers came, and we can truly be thankful to God that he raised up this instrument to carry the good news. To carry it not only to the countries immediately adjacent to Palestine, but traveling at least as far as Rome, and some think even as far west as Spain, with this gospel of God's marvelous grace. And not only that, but the man whom God has chosen to give us at least 13, if not 14 books, if we include the Epistle to Hebrews, we have 14 books credited to this man in the New Testament.

And this man also has his conversion story three times in this book of the Acts. Here in chapter 9 and in chapter 22, we have his own personal testimony, and again in chapter 26. You know, God doesn't allow things like these to be repeated in this way without putting some emphasis upon them.

So that we look upon this ninth chapter of Acts tonight as being one of the pivotal chapters in the New Testament. But let's take a look at the background of this man. You know, so very frequently when we hear the life story of some of these outstanding men, we don't read much like we have in the case of this man.

This man here was out to put to death everyone that named the name of Christ as Savior. He absolutely hated the Lord Jesus Christ. And later this evening, I'm going to take you to another portion of God's holy word in which he tells us something of his own autobiography.

And what he had to give up in order to preach this gospel. So that this was no cheap thing with him. This was something that cost him something.

And incidentally, that makes this whole story one of the greatest apologetics that we have for our Christian faith. No enemy of the word of God has been able to give a satisfactory explanation for this change in the life of a man called Saul of Tarsus. Who was on his way up to the city of Damascus to hail men and women and to cast them into prison and even to see them put to death.

Then suddenly he himself is arrested. Arrested by a voice from heaven. And here we have the Lord Jesus describing himself and identifying himself as we find nowhere else in the word of God.

He says, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. Now our Lord is speaking this from glory. And this is one of his self-descriptions.

I am Jesus, or according to the record in one of the statements later on in the book, he even added the words of Nazareth. I am Jesus of Nazareth whom thou persecutest. What do you say, how in the world could the Lord Jesus be persecuted when he was in heaven? Ah, that's where this precious truth comes in of the oneness, of the union between Christ and his own.

That whatsoever is done to one of his own, he feels it is done unto himself. And even before he left this world, you know, he gave us a statement concerning that in the 25th chapter of the gospel according to Matthew. Where the Lord Jesus tells that he has as the king sitting upon his throne, he has before him three groups of people.

He divides one group into two other groups, the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. He says to the sheep on his right hand, come ye, blessed are my father, inherit the kingdom, and so on. For when I was in prison, ye visited me.

I was naked, ye clothed me. I was hungry, you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink.

And they said, Lord, when so we thee hungry, thirsty, and so on. And the Lord Jesus points to another group, whom he recognizes as his brethren, and says, inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye did it unto me. Unto me.

And contrarywise, those on his left hand, not condemned because of anything they had done, but because of something they hadn't done. I was in prison, and you did not visit me. I was naked, and you did not clothe me.

I was hungry, and you did not feed me. It's what they didn't do. And this, dear friends, shows us that sins of omission can be just as serious as sins of commission.

For it certainly shows that in that story in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. It's the old Count Tolstoy. It is thought that maybe Tolstoy became a Christian before he died.

Some of his writings would seem to give that impression. And Tolstoy wrote a story long ago about a Russian cobbler, a Christian, who had a vision that he was, a communication that he was going to see the Lord Jesus that day. And all day long, in his cobbler shop, he waited for the Lord to come.

And when evening was come, he was so disappointed that he didn't see the Lord Jesus because he was so persuaded at the beginning of the day that Christ was going to visit him in his cobbler shop. And he complained to the Lord Jesus at the close of the day, according to Tolstoy's story. And then the Lord Jesus said to him, You remember when that woman came down into your shop shivering with the cold? Her body was just quivering, and she was suffering hunger as well.

And she came down the stairs into your shop, and you gave her some of your cabbage soup and your tea? And the cobbler said, Yes, Lord, that was I. You remember that little boy that was selling apples, and his business wasn't too good? And he came down into your shop to get warm, and you gave him some of your cabbage soup and some of your tea? That was I. And so he went on to name another. And the Lord Jesus was in this lovely little story by old Comte Tolstoy, giving us a wonderful illustration of how he is ministered to even though he's in heaven. And likewise, he's persecuted even though he's in heaven.

This, dear friends, makes very solemn what is going on in many parts of the world today where Christians, our brethren and sisters in Christ, in China, in Africa, in South and Central America, yes, and in Spain and other countries, Russia, being put to death for Christ's sake, being tortured. And one in heaven says, They're persecuting me. Jesus the persecuted.

What a picture of our Lord this is, isn't it? And when Saul recognizes him as such, he says, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? Now, it would have been so easy for the Lord to have continued his instructions to him. But you know, to me, this is rather interesting that in this story, which we have here in the ninth chapter of the book of the Acts, and Paul is not behind repeating this in his later statements of himself, that it was a man called Ananias. We never would have heard of Ananias if it hadn't been for this story.

And I wonder sometimes whether Ananias, living up there in the city of Damascus, ever thought that he was going to be used, as he was used, to have a little part in the preparation of this great servant of the Lord. Beloved, here's again a case where God could lay his hand upon a man who was ready to do the job. Just as we were hearing last night, he could lay his hand upon Philip.

And Philip knew the scriptures. And when he was invited to come up and sit with a eunuch, and he found out where the eunuch was reading, he could begin at the same scripture and preach unto him Jesus. And

here's a man, Ananias.

He doesn't have to say, when the Lord speaks to him and says, Ananias, he doesn't have to say, Who art thou, Lord? He knows him. He says, Hear my, Lord. Now, the Lord says, I've got a job for you, Ananias.

There's a man called Saul of Tarsus. He's in a certain house down there in a street called Straight, and he's praying. He's praying.

And he's seen a man called Ananias coming in and laying his hand upon him so that he might receive his sight. Oh, but Ananias says, Lord, I've heard of this man and all he's been doing. Oh, never mind, says the Lord.

I'm sending you to one who's going to be a chosen vessel of mine. Verse 15 of our chapter. He's chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, and I will show him how great things he must suffer for my namesake.

So here we have the introduction to the story. And now I would like to take you to another part of the Word of God in the Epistle to the Philippians, chapter 3. The third chapter of the Epistle of the Philippians to let this man tell us what it really costs him to be the servant of Christ that he was. You know, sometimes when we think of these great leaders that God has raised up from time to time, within our own times, for example, that is, I'm speaking of those of us who have a few silver hairs on top of our heads, and some don't even have that, but nevertheless, you can count your years tonight in the scores.

Instead of the tens, you can remember when Mr. Moody was preaching the gospel, God had chosen a man. He'd raised him up to preach the gospel of his grace. Other men were chosen later on.

J. Wilbur Chapman, a man who went around the world with the gospel. We think of men like this. And in our own times, we could name several others, of course, prominent whose names are upon everybody's lips these days.

God chooses these men. But sometimes he uses a very humble instrument to prepare that instrument for him. This was the case, for example, with Billy Graham.

How many people know that it was a man called Mordecai Ham that was used to bring Billy Graham to know the Lord Jesus Christ? You know, we just thought, well, a man like Saul of Tarsus, he certainly should have had at least Peter or somebody like him to lead him to the Lord. But no, the Lord chooses an insignificant disciple by the name of Ananias and gives him the honor. And now, as I say, we're going to let this man speak for himself here.

In Philippians 3 and beginning at verse 4. Philippians 3 and verse 4. But I might also have confidence in the flesh, if any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more. Circumcised the eighth day. You know, that meant a great deal to a Jew.

That immediately marked him as a descendant of Isaac. Because the Ishmaelites, who were also descendants from Abraham, they circumcised in the thirteenth year. But this man was circumcised the eighth day, which marks him out as a descendant of Isaac, who was in the line of promise, you see.

Not only that, he says, I was of the stock of Israel. That is, he was a descendant of Jacob, not of Esau. He was not an Edomite.

You see again, he's pointing out that he's in the line of promise. Then he says, I'm of the tribe of Benjamin. He wasn't a son of one of the handmaidens, one of the slave women.

Nor even of Leah, the woman whom Jacob had to take. But of the beloved Rachel, yes. He says, I came down through that line.

And incidentally, this was the line from which Israel got its first king. So you see, he's in the royal line. And then he's an Hebrew of the Hebrews.

There was no mixture in his household. That is, his father and mother were genuine Hebrews. They didn't mix things up.

There was no unequal yoke there. You see, how all of these things accumulate here to his honor and profit. Then we come to the things that he had to choose himself.

These things of which we've just now been speaking, they were things that came to him without any choice on his part, whatever. But now he says, as touching the law, a Pharisee. You see, the time came in Saul's life when he had to make a choice between being a Pharisee or a Sadducee.

And he chose to be a Pharisee. Those who, at any rate, believed in the Bible as much as they had it as the word of God. And they believed in its great truths, like the truth of resurrection, which, of course, the Sadducees rejected.

And as I was telling some of you the other night, my friend Sidlo Baxter says, that's why they're sad, you see. But anyhow, he made this choice himself. And then notice that he wasn't simply passive in his faith.

We read here in verse 6, that concerning zeal, he was persecuting the church. And he was perfectly honest in this, perfectly conscientious in this. And then, detaching the righteousness which is in the law, he doesn't say he was innocent, but he says he was blameless.

Which, I take it, means that he kept his record clear. When there were infractions, he brought the proper sacrifice to see that everything was in order in his life. Now, here you've got a list of things, dear friends, which stands out in contrast to the life story of many people today who give what they call their testimony.

Sometimes their testimony is really embarrassing, isn't it? We don't care to have our wives or daughters alone to hear some of these men tell about the kind of lives they lived. We know that they're seeking to magnify the grace of God, and we wouldn't for one moment belittle that. But here is a man who didn't have any of that to confess.

But everything that he mentions here tonight is something which was commendable in the eyes of his fellow Jews. But now let's see his estimate of these things. We get three estimates of these things.

The first estimate you find here in verse 7. He says, I might point out something that is not evident in your English translation, and that is that the word gain is in the plural, the word loss is in the singular. What things were gains to me, the things that I accumulated, not only by my birth but as a result of my own activities, all of these things were gain to me. And then one day something happened in my life, and I saw they didn't count at all.

What moment do you suppose that was? That was the very moment of which we have just been reading in Acts 9, you see. Here's where a man gets an entirely different estimate, even of the best things that he

can do. Even of the best.

Isaiah said, I got the shock of my life some years ago talking to a missionary. I shall not name where, nor give any names, because the man is still alive and I'm hoping that he's changed his mind about it. But he told me that he had found a new translation for this verse in Isaiah 64, which I've just referred to, that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.

He said, you know, that should read, all our righteousnesses are as ornamental garments. Well, there's a tremendous difference. Tremendous.

So I said to myself, well now, I wonder where this man gets this idea. He claims he's a Hebrew scholar. So I went and I looked up to, yes, the word rags could be translated garments.

As a matter of fact, I think that's about the only place in the Old Testament where that particular Hebrew word is translated rags. In other places it's translated garments. So he had that much right.

I thought, now I'll take a look at that word filthy. How in the world could a man ever get the idea that a word which is translated filthy should have been translated ornamental? You know what I discovered? That the difference between the two words was just a jot, which in our English printing is just like a comma or an apostrophe. That's the difference between the two.

And my dear friend had missed the jot and spoiled his whole reputation as a Hebrew scholar. But see, you don't need to know a word of Hebrew to decide which it ought to be. Keep your bookmark here in Philippians 3, and let's turn back to that passage in Isaiah 64 for just a minute and do something here which anybody can do who knows how to read English.

You don't need to know any Hebrew for this. Isaiah chapter 64, and I'm going to put my friend's new translation in here. Isaiah 64 and verse 6. But we are all as an unclean thing, and our righteousnesses are as ornamental garments, and we all do fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

What do you say? I treated my wife to this one day in the kitchen after I had this talk with this missionary. I said, what do you think of that? Well, she says, that fits about as well as my wedding dress would fit in a coal bin. That's when we still burned coal.

Yes, it would. You don't need to know any Hebrew for that, do you? Not a word of it. You say to yourself, I don't see how these translators could have done anything else than to put it just the way it is.

Filthy rags. This doesn't mean that intrinsically these things wouldn't be valuable. Why, of course they were.

They were valuable. The things that Paul enumerates there in that third chapter of Philippians, they were valuable. But compared with the perfect righteousness and holiness of God, this is what they look like.

This is what they look like. The story told of a lady who was going out on a snowy day. The snow had recently fallen, and when she got to the door, she took out her little handkerchief out of her purse.

And, oh, she said, how yellow this looks. Went back into her room to get another handkerchief right now. And she came back with this, and again wanted to use it, just to leave it.

And once again she came to the conclusion this was yellow. It was because it was in contrast to the perfect white of the snow. And God Himself has used this very picture, hasn't He, to tell us how clean we really are when we are cleansed by Him.

Though our sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. This is it.

Well, let's take a look at the further estimates which Paul has of these things. He looks at them now. He says, well, it's too bad.

I've lost it all. Well, let's look at Philippians 3, verse 8, for a second estimate. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss.

Now, does he use that word loss? Suffered the loss of all things. I count them but loss. But now he says, I do count them but filth.

Oh, this is an entirely different estimate, isn't it? I do count them but filth. You say, Paul, how in the world did you ever come to such a conclusion? Ah, Paul's been looking at things in the light of God's Word, you see. He's looking at them in the light of God's glory.

And you can see how these things which mean so much and meant so much to him in his lifetime, things for which he would have given his soul, now he says, I count them but loss, and worse than that, I count them but filth. Well, Paul, are you going to stop there? You know, even this we can weep over. We weep over things that we lose, and then sometimes we weep over things that don't turn out the way we like them to turn out.

But I want to take you to a third estimate of these things in this same chapter, this same chapter, third chapter of Philippians. Verse 13. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

That's your third estimate. And this is the kind of a thing that happens quite unconscious. You don't forget anything that you want to consciously forget, do you? Oh, I can remember when I was just a boy, there was a song going around, I'm trying so hard to forget you.

I try, but it all seems in vain. That dear face is ever before me and fills me with longing and pain. He couldn't forget.

Why? Because he was trying too hard. You know, a lot of people wonder how this happens. I believe there's an expression that used to go around when I was a boy that probably answers that question.

It's the expulsive power of a new affection. A new set of things takes the place of the old. You know, when God causes a man to say, all that I ever thought was wonderful is now nothing but loss, nothing but filth, He doesn't leave him there bankrupt.

He gives him a brand new set of things. And you notice how Paul refers to these here. He says, reaching forth unto those things which are before.

Beloved, I wonder how many of us really know from experience what it means to reach forth unto those things which are before. Here is God offering me something. How do I stand, indifferent with my arms folded, or do I reach out my hands to take what God is presenting to me in His holy words? Reaching forth unto those things which are before.

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, we read about people like this. They hadn't received the promises, but seeing them afar off, they embraced them. They embraced them.

They were people who counted the things that are before more real than anything that had down here on the earth. You know, this is one of the unique features of our Christian faith too, isn't it? These people who call themselves the now generation, who tell us again and again, we're interested in the here and now. We're not so much interested in the there and then, whether the there and then refers to the past, or the there and then refers to the future.

We're interested in the here and now. But Paul not only had the here and now, he had the there and then. The things which are before.

And in the Corinthians, he tells us, that I hath not seen the rear herd, neither hath entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. And a lot of people stop right there, because that's the end of the verse. But the next verse goes on to say, But, but God hath revealed them to us by His Spirit.

Oh, beloved. We've got a new set of things. A new set of things.

And you know, there's something energizing about this new set of things. Just today, with two of my beloved friends, we're walking along and talking about some of the orders the doctors have been giving me, that I'm to take a little walk each day. The question is, what will be the pace of the walk? And the doctor suggested that I should have before me an object.

He said, if you don't have an objective when you go out to walk, he said, your walk won't do you much good. He said, you need an object when you go. He says, for example, he said, divide your shopping list up into four or five parts and spread it over the days and have an object.

And you go to the grocery store or whatever store it is, have an object before you. He said, that will determine the pace that you can go. And beloved, the Lord has given us these objects ahead to quicken our pace.

And here it is in Philippians 3, verse 14. I press. You know what interests me about this word press? It's exactly the same word which he used earlier when he said he persecuted the Church.

Exactly the same word. The same energy that he put into the opposition to Christ and to his own, he now puts into that which is before him. And evidently he kept this right up until the end, because in his last letter to Timothy, 2 Timothy 4, he says, I'm now ready to be offered.

I'm ready to be poured out. He says, I've fought a good fight. I've finished my course.

I've kept the faith right up to the end. I think I had a good example with my beloved father. And he was nearing 90.

Somebody sent him a poem called Waiting at the Portal. Dad took the poem and wrote underneath, Not waiting, but working. Stand it back.

And he was working. Taught a Bible class within two weeks of his death. Yes, nearing the 92 mark.

But teaching about it was last. Every moment counted with him. Sometimes, you know, when people talk about folks who get about my age, they think we ought to be slowing down.

Well, I'll tell you. You know what my definition of a retired person, a real retired person is? A few of you here tonight. He's a fellow who, if he's doing what he ought to do, he's trying to catch up with the things that he'd like to have done when he was younger.

And that's it. Let's keep busy for the Lord. Oh, we're not going to sit down and twirl our thumbs and say, Well, I'm getting old now.

I press toward the mark. There's divine energy in this, beloved. I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God or the calling on high.

And I can't think of anything else that might fit into that verse except the coming of the Lord himself, the calling on high. This is what Paul is moving on to. This is the man that God chose to bring the gospel to Europe and incidentally to you and to me.

And he hasn't done it simply to give us a bit of history. As Paul says himself in his epistle to Timothy, he said that he should be a pattern to those who should afterward believe. And so here's the pattern, beloved.

God help us to follow it. Shall we sing in closing hymn number 332? Hymn number 332. O teach us more of thy blessed ways, thou holy Lamb of God, and fix and root us in thy grace as those redeemed by blood.

Verse 3. For this, O may we freely count, what e'er we have but loss, the dearest object of our love, compared with thee, but dross. All four stanzas of number 332. Let us rise.

We do pray that thou would engrave this deeply on our hearts. O Father which proclaims the Lord Jesus Christ, shall keep on pressing toward the mark of the calling on high. So bless thy word to our hearts.

In Jesus' precious name.

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