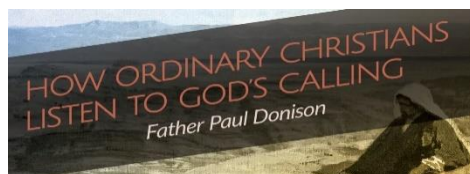


“How Ordinary Christians Listen to God’s Calling”

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Father Paul Donison

Focus Verses: Romans 12:3-18



Lesson Summary:

What work is God calling me to in this next season of my life? What is my vocation? This is one of the most pressing concerns of ordinary Christians and it is one of the most frequent prayer requests that clergy hear. Many Christians deeply desire to follow Jesus but are unsure of what that means in the particularities of their own lives and opportunities. In this session, Fr. Paul offers clear and succinct guidance that will enable all Christians, no matter their age or station in life, to better discern what form their discipleship ought to take in their day-to-day lives.

Whenever I visit with parishioners, I ask the same question at the end of our time together. What is your top box prayer need? What can I be praying for you most specifically? 90% of the time, the answer is a question of calling.

“I don't know what God is calling me to do in this next season of my life.”

This question of calling is difficult for Christians because we want to be obedient - we want to follow our Lord in what he wants for our lives. That is always confusing - mixed in with our own desires, our own sense of giftedness, and what the community around us is telling us we should be doing. I love to teach on calling; I love to teach ordinary Christians how to listen for God's call in their lives.

THE THREE VOCATIONAL CALLINGS

When we begin looking at the question of calling, we first have to identify that there are three vocations that a Christian need to recognize.

#1: The General Call

First, the general call is what every Christian is called to in following Jesus.



While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

MATTHEW 4:18-19

This general call is the call to follow Jesus. Along with that call to follow Jesus, we hear the words of Matthew 22 that we say every Sunday at the beginning of our liturgy:



You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

MATTHEW 22:37-40
From our liturgy

This most general call - this most vital basic call - that is shared between all of us is the call to follow Jesus; and in following Jesus, to love God and to love my neighbor as myself.

This is an important corrective as we begin this discussion on vocation. Think about how we greet each other in our Western culture. Normally, after introducing ourselves with our names, what's the next piece of information we share? We share our profession, our vocation, our work, our job, what we do. We wrap up far too much of our identity in our work and in our jobs and our “specific” vocations (which I'll talk about in just a moment.) It is important to begin with by saying this healthy corrective - my identity is found in this general call; my call to follow Jesus.

#2: The Specific Call

But there is a specific call as well - the specific vocation, the specific work, the unique calling on my life. This is specifically what we're focusing on in this

teaching today. The specific call - how God is calling you uniquely in this season to live and serve him.



Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.

GALATIANS 1:1

This is specific call. This is what we normally mean when we talk about a person's vocation. That specific work, job, or task given to them for this season.

Paul understands himself to be an apostle (a sent one). One sent as an authorized representative of the gospel. Paul says that this vocation - this specific call - does not come through man or by man but comes from God himself. This is the specific call that we so often are searching for in our lives. What is God specifically calling me to in this season?



“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

JEREMIAH 1:5

But how did Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Daniel, and all these other prophets throughout the ages understand that this was their specific call from God? How did they know to the core of their being that this was in fact the specific vocation God had given them?

I would argue that if we look at the scriptural narratives in this teaching today that it's not as hard as we think it is to discern that specific calling in our lives if we pay attention to:

1. Our Loves: what God is doing in our hearts by the Holy Spirit in his inner witness
2. Our Giftings: the way God has wired us
3. Our Community: looking to have confirmation from those around us who know us, love us, are mature, and can listen with us.

#3: The Immediate Call

Thirdly, we have an immediate call - how we live out our vocation day-by-day and hour-by-hour.



Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”

ACTS 3:1-6

This is a miraculous healing story on Peter and John's part. It's a beautiful example of immediate call. They were responding faithfully to God's call in that particular moment. They were on their way to temple. They were living into their specific calls as evangelists and apostles. But along the way they bumped into a man asking for help and, hearing the Holy Spirit convicting their hearts that there was a specific way they were called to respond, they lived into that immediate call.

We need to remember - though we can get very clear on our specific calls, immediate calls will come in on a regular basis into our lives. We need to be careful not to be so distracted in our specific vocations that we miss those immediate opportunities to respond in a unique and special way called by God. That's immediate call.

Paying attention to God's specific call

But of course, the reason we're engaging in this conversation today is to delve into the question of specific call. How do we do this? How do we pay attention to God's calling in our lives? How do we hear the voice of Jesus in the midst of this question of calling?

DISCERNING VOCATION THROUGH YOUR LOVES

First, we need to focus on our loves. We discern our vocation through our loves. It's a telling exercise for you to answer this question just you, not you and your group together. You can discuss this in your group after but answer this question.

What tasks did Jesus love?

When you look at Jesus' earthly ministry - those three years of ministry recorded in the gospel - which activities and tasks do you think Jesus loved the most? Don't give the pious answer of "dying and rising again" was what he loved the most. Yes, we know he did that out of love for us.

How do you answer that question?

But when you look at his tasks, the things he did, the things that occupied his time, what do you think he loved doing the most? It's kind of like a Rorschach test. The way you answer it will tell you something very much about your own set of loves.

How do I answer that question? I think Jesus loved the most sitting around table teaching and having a scribe or a Pharisee try to correct him in matters of the law. I think he really loved those moments where he had a group gathered and someone would raise some kind of objection to what he was teaching, and it provided him a teachable moment to engage them and to expose what was not true or not healthy or not godly and show them the way forward. My answer demonstrates a love for dialogue around theology, for the discussion of ideas, and for engaging with truth. It says a lot about what I love and how I discern my own sense of calling through my loves.



When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

MATTHEW 9:36

That word "compassion" is the word *splanchnon* in the Greek. It means being torn up inside. When Jesus saw the crowds harassed and helpless, he had deep compassion. He was torn up on the inside about their plight. It's a picture of the heart and emotional state of Jesus. We need to, as Christians, pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is placing on our hearts. How he's convicting us with our feelings.

The "Inner Witness" of the Holy Spirit

Feelings can lie. We don't want to be held captive to our feelings. But in the words of Ignatius of Loyola, it is in fact often through our feelings, through the affects, through our loves, our affections, that the Holy Spirit actually guides us with what Ignatius and others would call his "inner witness."

Gordon T. Smith, in his book *The Voice of Jesus*, says this about the work of the Holy Spirit convicting us through inner witness with our loves:



On the one hand, we must reject the way of the rationalist, who believes that emotion is inherently excessive and unreasonable. Those who suggest as much do not understand the nature of the human person. On the other hand, we must not be susceptible to every passing feeling. Ignatius, Wesley, and Edwards would call us to use our heads, think critically and consider what is occurring emotionally, discerning what is truly of God.

GORDON T. SMITH
The Voice of Jesus

This work of examining our affections, paying attention to those loves which are within us - discerning whether they are truly loves and affections that come from God or whether they're coming from the wrong place - this is the work of the Holy Spirit working in the Christian's life.



When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.

JOHN 16:13

Pay attention to your loves; pay attention to your affections. Take time to journal and ask yourself "what do I truly love?" What really gets my attention? This is part of how we discern specific vocation.

DISCERNING VOCATION THROUGH YOUR GIFTS

We need to also discern our gifts. Gift inventories are enormously popular in churches. You've probably done one. They can be very helpful - where you fill out the questionnaire and at the end it tells you (based on 1 Corinthians 12 or Romans 12 or Ephesians 4:11) that you've got these certain gifts. Or at least your top gifts and your lowest gifts. Again, a helpful part of discerning specific calling. God knew what he was doing when he fearfully and wonderfully knit you together in your mother's womb. But these gift lists, these charisms, these works of the Holy Spirit uniquely placed in us are not meant to limit us to job descriptions, but to more indicate how God has wired us.

God has wired us

These are the centers out of which we do ministry; the centers and core values of our lives; the way we see the world and are uniquely gifted to interact in the world. If you have a high gift in mercy, it does not mean that your only job will be doing mercy ministry. It means that every job you do will be done out of that center of mercy; that you will approach every task in your life as a Christian with mercy at its core (or prophecy or teaching or exhortation.)

How are you wired?

All these different gifts are the very center wiring. That's probably the best way to describe it: our wiring, the way God has wired and made us to function. Anyone that's been married for more than a few days knows that everybody's wired in different ways. Figuring out how to appreciate and live into another person's wiring (how to learn to live together with different wiring) is part of what it means to being Christian community. It's the reason why some can excel in unique ways in one area where in another area they would fall down and vice versa. Because out of our wiring, we're able to operate.

This is what I think biblical gifting is really all about - our wiring. It's important that we pay attention to the way we're wired and don't try to live into a different person's kind of wiring.

We should mature and grow in all of these areas: the charisms, the gifts of the Holy Spirit poured into our

lives. Each and every one of them in different measures. But it's important we pay attention to living into our wiring.

Let me give you an example. A number of years ago, I had a leadership coach I hired when I was still rector in Ottawa. I'll never forget one of the conversations we had.

He asked me, *"What exhausts you the most in your vocational life?"*

I thought about it and said, *"Complaints. Complaints about the ministry and complaints about a decision the church has made."*

"OK, so when complaints come to you, how do you respond?"

"Well, I try to empathize with the person who's bringing the complaint, and then I try to counsel them pastorally."

"Oh, so when complaints come to you, you operate out of a pastoral care gifting."

"Yes."

"How high ranked is pastoral care in your gift mix?"

"Well, it's kind of medium to low. Let's be honest - kind of low."

"Your highest gifts are in areas of vision and preaching and teaching and strategy."

"Yes," I said.

"So why ..." (I'll never forget this) "Why in your hardest moments would you choose to operate out of your weakest gifts?"

The next time a person came to my office (just a few days later) to complain about some decision we've made in the church, I did something different. Instead of my usual pastoral care mode, I shared with them the vision. Pastoral care mode would be to give them a cup of tea and try to understand their pain and give them some pastoral counseling going forward. I was kind and loving, and I still gave them a cup of tea! But after they raised the concern and I sought to understand them lovingly, I again shared the vision.

I said, *"Let me remind you why we made this decision and why it's essential to our view of what God and his kingdom are doing in our midst."* And I laid out the vision for them and I opened the scriptures and explained our reasoning and thinking. And they

walked out - not completely convinced, but pretty happy and satisfied.

Here's the key: I walked away not feeling exhausted at all, but feeling exhilarated because I've been operating out of my central strongest giftings. I was actually operating the way that God had fearfully and wonderfully made me. This is how our gift mix helps us again understand our specific vocation and calling.

CONFIRMING VOCATION IN COMMUNITY

Finally, we don't do this in a silo. We don't do this in a vacuum. We don't do this alone. We are Christians. We are a body of believers. The third way that we help to understand our specific calling is to understand community. And confirming our gifting, confirming our loves, confirming this specific calling in community.



While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

ACTS 13:2-3

It's essential within the life of the church, that we cultivate friendships with mature Christians who know us, who we can meet with and can mentor us, and can listen and help us listen together with God. It's a kind of informal spiritual direction we offer to one another.

It's not about us going to another person and saying, "Can you tell me what my specific vocation is?" Be careful! If you ask that question, someone may well give you one. And it will tell you more about them than probably about you.

Help me listen together to God

But instead, you can go to a Christian mature friend who knows you and say, "help me listen together to God." And part of their job is to ask whether you've looked at the question from the right angles,

whether you've been reading the right scriptures, whether you've taken enough time confirming your sense of call in community.

Clearance Committees

It is fascinating that in the Quaker Church, they have what they call "clearance committees." Richard Foster writes about these clearance committees in a couple of his books. When you're in a discernment moment – about to make a big decision - everything from a specific vocation or marriage as well; you will then go before a clearance committee established by that particular church fellowship (mature elders in the faith) and you'll sit with them and share what you're thinking. They won't tell you yes or no, but they will certainly tell you whether you've been asking the right questions. They will tell you whether you've taken the amount of time and whether there's other things you should consider. It's called a clearance committee.

Finding a clearance committee

I think that in our lives, each of us needs to find friends and companions in the way who can be for us a kind of clearance committee. Who we can go to and say, "Here's what I think I'm hearing from the Lord." Sometimes these clearance committees can be difficult to listen to because we want to run ahead really fast. Sometimes they will strongly confirm what we're saying and that can, even in itself, be kind of scary. You begin to wonder, has everyone been thinking the same thing about me for some time and I'm the last one to know about it?

Illustration from community

I close with this story. I finally had a sense of discerning a call into vocational, full time ministry as a pastor, as a priest. Monica and I were sitting together three months into our marriage. One Sunday afternoon, having visited lots of churches over several weeks and not being satisfied with any of them, I would rant about everything that was wrong in that particular church fellowship we visited.

Why did they do it this way? Why do they do it that way? Why can't they figure these things out? Finally, Monica turned to me after three months of this early into our marriage and said, "So when are you going to go to seminary?"

At first, I thought she was just joking. It was kind of like, it's one thing to be an armchair pastor and complain about the way things are. What are you going to go and do about it?

I looked at her and said, *"What are you talking about?"*

She was quite serious. She said, *"When are you going to go to seminary?"*

I told her, *"I'm never going to go to seminary because we talked about this years ago when we were first dating. You told me that there was no way you were ever going to be a pastor's wife."*

I reminded her of this and she said, *"I never said that."*

"Yes, you did. I remember where we were standing."

"Well, I can't remember saying it, and if I did, I didn't know what I was talking about. You are clearly called to pastoral ministry."

What did I do? I listened to my wife - a mature Christian in my life - and I started calling some friends and some pastors I knew. Over the next few days every single one of them confirmed that call. In fact, most of them said, *"Oh, finally, you're figuring it out!"* I was thinking, *"Have you guys been writing memos about me to one another?"* I'm the last one to figure this out, but I'll tell you, it was an amazing thing. Terrifying in many ways to face this sense of call, but it was amazing to hear these other believers around me confirm that sense of call. With that, I was able to move forward in faith and courage.

Remember your general and immediate calls

That is where I want to leave you. This whole process of discerning our specific vocations. Understanding, first of all, that we have a general vocation. Never forget it. It's the most vital of all to follow Jesus, to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And there's going to be those immediate calls, those moments when things just come up in your day-to-day life. Don't get distracted by your specific calls so much that you can't respond in immediacy to what God is placing in front of you in this particular circumstance.

Press into your specific call

But do press into this question of specific call. This is where we do find our hearts desires. It is where we find satisfaction in offering our best to the Lord in

ministry and service - to our family, to our friends, to our communities, and to our churches.

But as we do so, my prayer is that you will be able to pay attention to your loves - what the Holy Spirit is putting into your heart (your affections) - and discern that before him. Then you'll be able to pay attention to your gifts. Not just a sense of job description, but really how you're wired - wired fearfully and wonderfully made.

But then finally, what is your community telling you? Do you hear that word of confirmation? Because my prayer for each and every one of us is that we would hear this sense of specific call so clearly (with such clarity) that it would produce in us then the courage to follow that call.

Ephesians 4:12 tells us that all of this is done ...



...to equip the saints (you) for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

EPHESIANS 4

That is my prayer for you that through this teaching, through your group discussion, through your prayer time before the Holy Spirit, that you would feel - afresh and with clarity - that sense of call for how you're called to serve the Lord in this season and for his glory. Amen.