

How We Cultivate The Earth

Sociologist Robert Bellah wrote a very significant book in 1985 titled Habits of the Heart.

He and his team interview 200 people asking the question

How is American culture affecting the fabric of our society.

He based his study on the work of the famous 19th Century French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville who in his sociological studies warned of the destructive nature of excessive individualism.

This book helped many identify the thing that is eroding the cohesiveness of our culture

“expressive individualism”

Bellah and his team argue that Americans have created a culture where individual choice and expression have grown to a point where there is **no commanding values, and little shared life** that has been the historical glue of American society.

“We are moving to an ever greater validation of the sacredness of the individual person, but our capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing... The sacredness of the individual is not balanced by any sense of the whole or concern for the common good”

Bellah proposes one measure that would counteract the unraveling of our culture and help reweave American society:

“To make a real difference there would have to be a reappropriation of the idea of vocation or calling, a return in a new way to the idea of work as a contribution to the good of all and not merely as a means to one’s own achievement.”

Tim Keller in his book **Every Good Endeavor** writes

“The hope for our unraveling society is a recovery of the idea of that all human work is not merely a job but a calling.”

The Latin word vocare – to call- is the root of our word “vocation”

Although we think of vocation as our job, it is actually much more.

A vocation is when someone else calls you to do something and you are doing it for them rather than yourself.

And so our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to someone beyond merely our own interests.

As we shall see, thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person, and undermines society itself.

But if we are to “reappropriate” an older idea we must look at the idea’s origin. In this case, the source of the idea of work as vocation is the Christians Scriptures.’

Tim is right. Working for your own self interests has led our American society to a point of personal and cultural desperation.

Let’s see what the Bible says about our Calling, or our Vocation:

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. ² By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it **He rested from all His work** which God had created and made.

Genesis 2:1-3

*Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ God blessed them; and God said to them, “**Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over** the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” *Genesis 1:26-28**

¹⁵ Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to **cultivate** it and keep it.

Genesis 2:15

Work is a godly activity. In the Old Testament God appears as a creator, as a **gardener**

In the New Testament he appears as a **constructor, a carpenter.**

God creates man and assigns him work: to fill the Earth, rule over it and cultivate it.

Cultivate:

- 1) to develop, establish, foster, devote yourself to;
- 2) improve, better, train, discipline, refine, enrich, civilize

From this word we get the word **Culture:**

The total of the inherited ideals, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action.

God's primary calling, or vocation for us all is to cultivate the Earth with His culture.

Paul echoes this in his letter to his friends in Ephesus:

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. *Ephesians 2:10 NLT*

This was a verse that changed my attitude about work, and my life.

This Biblical concept of work being a high idea is unique in human history.

Work has always been viewed differently.

Ancient Greeks thought that the gods had created men to work for them.

According to **Plato**, the ideal life was to develop the soul in a quest for truth and work only hampered this quest.

Greek philosophers like Epictetus and others taught that true peace and happiness was achieved through a non attachment to things in this life.

Leisurely contemplation was the ideal form of life, separating you from the cares and concerns of living a physical existence. Work was a barrier to the highest form of life.

However God knows that work is essential to us humans.

Work is a basic need, like food, rest, friendship, sexuality, beauty, and pleasure.

Many Christians through the ages have considered "vocation" to be a work directly for **God as a priest, a nun, or monk.**

In fact in Miskito culture, if you are "called" that means that you are going to become a priest.

This thinking changed during the Reformation when Martin Luther began to look at the Scriptures and see the divine dignity in every task that benefits society.

Psalm 145 for example says that "God feeds every living thing."

*The LORD sustains all who fall
And raises up all who are bowed down.
The eyes of all look to You,
And You give them their food in due time.*

You open Your hand

And satisfy the desire of every living thing. Psalms 145:14-16

Luther wrote that it is through the work, the vocation of society, that God provides for all. Here are two things that Luther wrote about our godly vocations.

“When you pray for your daily bread, you are praying for everything that contributes to your having and enjoying your daily bread. You must open up and expand your thinking, so that it reaches not only as far as the flour bin and baking oven but also out over the broad fields, the farmland and the entire country that produces processes and conveys to us our daily bread and all kinds of nourishment.”

“God milks the cows through the vocation of the milk maid.”

In Psalm 147:13 Luther noted that “God Strengthens the bars to your city”

For He has strengthened the bars of your gates;

Psalms 147:13

How does God do that? Luther says:

“By the word bars we must understand not only the iron bar that a smith can make but everything else that helps to protect us, such as good government, good city ordinances, good order, and wise rulers. This is a gift from God.”

I think its clear in the Bible calls us to cultivate our society through Godly behavior, morality, and ethics. He has assigned us positions in our world to accomplish this.

What positions?

First or all we are **members of a family**. We were all children, and as a result, brothers and sisters (unless you were an only child. Now perhaps we are fathers and mothers.

Next **we live in a community**. We are **neighbors** and have people who live around us.

We are **citizens** of a city, a state, and a nation.

We have **jobs** that provide our income, and ultimately should benefit all those around us.

Thus I can conclude that we are called by God to be a

- 1. Good Friend,**
- 2. Good husband, wife, father, mother, uncle, aunt, child, brother, sister, and cousin.**
- 3. Good Employee and/or a Good Boss**
- 4. Good Citizen and finally**
- 5. A Faithful Follower of God.**

How are we to do this?

God does give us specific instruction on how we are to be effective in these vocations.

Let's begin with something we are all familiar with: The Ten Commandments Ex 20:

1) *"You shall have no other gods before Me. Exodus 20:3*

Much has been said about this first commandment, but what it boils down to is *"Don't let anything come between you and me."* Our relationship with God is the most important thing in our life!

2) *"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" Exodus 20:4-5*

Although many of us don't live in a culture where there are statues of gods that we worship, unless you are Asian or Indian. My wife grew up in a Japanese family in Hawaii where as faithful Buddhists that said prayers to a box and placed rice and other food offerings in front of that box. In our western culture we have other idols like our job, our wealth, our social status, our material possessions, video online gaming, how much we travel, and more. I think that we can sum up this second commandment by understanding that God is saying: *"Don't get fixated on your job, your car, your recreation, your money, or pleasures. These will not satisfy you. Only I can do that!"*

My friend Craig Englert purchased a beautiful Mustang convertible. It was a great looking car and Craig loved driving it around Maui. But it took time away from his wife Kathy and their four children, one who was still in diapers. One day Craig was down on his knees polishing the chrome wheels. Kathy came out, looked down at Craig and said *"I see you are on your knees worshipping your idol."* Craig sold the car a few months later.

When Mikaela and Lukas were in diapers, I was spending a lot of time at the La Ceiba airport doing work on our Piper Seneca twin engine airplane. There was a lot to do to maintain that aircraft. One day when I was getting in the truck to leave for the airport, Laura said to me *"Where are you going? To the airport to see your girlfriend?"* I got the message. Laura needed my help at home.

3) *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain. Exodus 20:7*

"You must not misuse the name of the LORD your God." NLT

I often hear many referring to this third commandment when they hear swear or cuss words coming forth in conversations, or in traffic, or moments of parenting. However I have come to conclusions that sometimes those words may be appropriate for the situation. Laura once told one of our pastors that when she became a Christian that she stopped cussing, but when our children became teenagers, many of those words came back into her vocabulary. Our pastor looked at us with understanding and said *"Laura I never cussed in my life until my children became teenagers."*

On the other hand, I have heard of a young man coming up to a young lady and saying "God told me that you are going to be my wife." Wow, that puts the pressure on that young lady. I have also heard

a missionary tell a person that he met at a local church, *“God is calling you to come to the mission field in (in some faraway place) and be part of our ministry.”*

Although that might persuade some to follow through with that supposed word from God that might in fact border on manipulation, the real question to be asked is *“God are you calling me to be that man’s husband or go be a missionary in that far off land?”* I think that this third commandment is not really about cussing but more in *“Don’t tell people that I told you to do something that I didn’t, that really it was you who wanted to do it. Stop using my name to manipulate others to do what you want them to do.”*

4) *“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work,*
Exodus 20:8-10

Many have compiled their lists of what is work and what is not. In religious Jewish culture, you cannot push elevator buttons on Shabot, answer the telephone, tear off toilet paper, turn on lights, or walk beyond the Shabot wire that surrounds the community. In Christian culture in some places in the Caribbean, you are supposed to take a nap on Sunday afternoon, and I know some pastors who would come out on their porch in the late afternoon, yawn and stretch their arms, letting everyone know they just finished their nap, even if they were inside doing something else.

The reality is that God knows that we all need a day to not work and rest. He is saying in this fourth commandment *“Take a day off of work and spend time with your family, and with Me. Enjoy moments with those I have placed around you. Meditate on all the things we have been talking about. Listen in an undistracted way to all the things I want to say to you. Trust me that I will provide for you.”*

5) *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.*
Exodus 20:12

This is a command with an attached promise: *“Remember that family is important. I have given you your parents for a reason. Even though they may not deserve your respect, treat them with honor, and your children will treat you likewise.”*

6) *You shall not murder.*
Exodus 20:13

This command has to do with unjustified killing. Here is what I think God is saying:

“Do not take mortal revenge on another person nor kill them with your words. I’ll take care of any offenses, don’t worry!”

I include the “murdering with your words” because Jesus references this in his Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’

But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.
Matthew 5:21-22

7) *You shall not commit adultery. Exodus 20:14*

God intended the family unit to be the foundation of society for mankind, beginning with a committed relationship between a husband and wife. Sex outside marriage often destroys the family unit, that is why God says: *“Lust will always get you into trouble. I created sex as the ultimate expression of intimacy within a committed relationship of marriage. Be careful how you look at others!”*

Jesus gives us more understanding on this important commandment in his Sermon on the Mount. It not only what is happening with our hands and eyes but what is going on in our hearts.

“You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
Matthew 5:27-28

8) *“You shall not steal. Exodus 20:15*

I think God is saying this: *“People work hard for what they have. I will provide all your needs if you trust me. Don’t take anything that I have not given you.”*

Paul echoes this in his letter to his friends in Ephesus:

If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need.
Ephesians 4:28

9) *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Exodus 20:16*

In the 20th Century, Communist governments took over major parts of Europe and Asia. In their efforts to control the population, the government told the people what they wanted them to know, and soon, most of the populations of those enslaved countries realized that the government was telling them lies. The official newspaper in the USSR was called “Pravda” or Truth. It was a joke. I visited the Soviet Union in the winter of 1972. From what I heard, no one believed the things that were written in Pravda, and as a result, society broke down, leading the ultimate collapse of that government in 1989. Here is what God says about lying.

“Trust is what my society is built on. You must speak the truth to one another. Where there is not truth, there is no trust, and society disintegrates.”

10) *You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*
Exodus 20:17

In our materialist world, it is natural to look at others and compare your wealth, status, appearance, lifestyle. Sometime the result is that we begin to think we are better than others, and if indeed this is our state of mind, then there will be many who have more than us, and that will cause us to covet what they have. This is not the way the follower of Jesus should think. We are encouraged by Jesus’s words in His Sermon on the Mount:

Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Matthew 6:31-33

Here is what I think God is saying to us through this tenth commandment: “Rejoice when I bless your neighbor. Contentment is a sign of your trust in me. I have my reasons why I give to my children. Don’t be sad when I bless others! Your turn will come.”

- The First Three Commandments instruct us how to respond to our calling **by following God.**
- The Fourth tells us what we need to be effective in that calling – **a day to rest, relate, and reflect.**
- The Fifth shows us how to **honor the family structure** that God wants to build society on.
- The Sixth thru the Tenth show us how to be a **good Neighbor**

There are similar instructions on how we are to respond to our vocation in the Christian Scriptures. **Paul wrote a letter to his friends in Colossae** to try to help them understand their calling and how to walk it out.

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. Colossians 1:9-12

His prayer for us that that we would be

- filled with the **knowledge** of God's will;
- **walking** in a manner worthy of the Lord,
- **pleasing** Him in all respects,
- **bearing fruit** in every good work and
- increasing in the **knowledge** of God;
- **strengthened** with all power,
- **joyously** giving thanks

Then he gets into the specifics:

⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

According to Paul, there are four things we should be doing with the people in our community:

1. Being a good friend
2. Encouraging one another
3. Worshipping together
4. Walking out life together

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

In our professional lives at our place of employment or business we should consider that everything we do and say should be as if we are working directly for Christ, that He is our Boss, and we work according to His standards. That means:

- Excellence in your work and speech;
- Competence, professionalism, being the best at everything that you do.

¹⁸ Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.

²⁰ Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

Next Paul addresses familial relationships. They should be harmonious, with each member fulfilling their God given roles, with respect and love for one another. The focus should be on caring and cultivating each other. This is our vocation as a family.

²² *Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.* ²³

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance.

It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. ²⁵ For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

Colossians 3:16 - 4:1

Most of us work for our living, in a small business, large factory, food service, manufacturing, communications, financial services, etc. We may have a manager or supervision or we may be the boss. Whatever our role, God want to use the workplace to reach many for His Kingdom. Therefore there should be

- Proper conduct in the workplace
- Giving respect to each member of the team
- Never doing a half job, but wholeheartedly making your best effort
- Treating each other with kindness.

⁵ *Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. ⁶ Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.* Colossians 4:5-6

Here is Paul's counsel on how to make friends in your community. The Biblical meaning of salt is important here. In our modern cultures, salt is uses as a flavor enhancer, or a means to preserve fish and meat. In Biblical culture there is an additional meaning of loyalty and faithful relationships. We see this in Numbers 18 when God makes a "salt covenant" with the Hebrew people.

It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD to you and your descendants with you." Numbers 18:19

God also command that the offerings described in Leviticus 2 be sprinkled with salt:

Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt. Leviticus 2:13

Jesus emphasized this personal relationship image of salt when he said:

Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Mark 9:50

In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells instructs us how to be a good citizen.

Everyone must submit to governing authorities...

The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong.

⁵ *So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.*

⁶ *Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do.*

⁷ *Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority.*

Romans 13:1-7

To apply this to our present political culture I would add

- Be sure to vote and consider running for a local or state office.
- If you have kids in the public schools, attend the school board meetings.
- Attend the city and county council meetings. those meetings. Be aware of what is going on in our local, state and national governments.

God has called each of us to serve Him through our specific "vocations" – our callings.

I hope that we will all be able to see how clear and simple are

- **Our Roles that we play in our society in this vocation and**
- **How we are to conduct ourselves in each of these roles.**

The Bible makes it very clear.

The most important aspect is that we are first called away from our self centeredness to an awareness of our roles to serve those that God has placed around us.

I work in a café business. You could say I am the boss of Rio Coco Cafes, although I never allow myself to think that way. Mostly. I have various executive roles to play- financial accounting and planning, cost analysis of our products, managing labor costs, purchasing green coffee, purchasing coffee and kitchen equipment, training our team members.

Then I have my other collateral duties: I'm the maintenance department; I fix toilets, paint walls, repair plumbing, change light bulbs, repair equipment.

But my most favored job is washing dishes. There is something about the effect of a five second scrub and rinse on a dirty plate that brings me great joy. Something that was dirty and useless becomes clean and an instrument for service. I have worked with many people over the years attempting to help them understand God and His plans and purposes for our lives. Many times I see no response on

the part of those who have decided to walk their own path. They are valued creations of our father, but they are not useful to His purposes to invite many to spend eternity with Him. Others do respond and become world changers. I guess that is why I enjoy washing dishes. With just a few seconds of effort on my part that dirty dish or pan becomes shiny, fresh, and ready for the next use.

A few years ago I found myself at the sink on a very hot day at our café on the Caribbean island of Utila. I was very tired, and there were a lot of dishes. We had many people coming in. Arielle, Moselle, and Naomi were very busy serving the customers. Laura was totally occupied in the kitchen preparing lunch plates.

It is in that moment of fatigue that I remembered a memory verse from Bible school days.

Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45

45

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

This became my matra for the rest of the summer. It still is.

This element of service is the key to fulfilling our calling- our vocation.

Tim Keller wrote this in his book "Every Good Endeavor",

"Christians should be aware of this revolutionary understanding of the purpose of their work in the world. We are not to choose jobs and conduct our work to fulfill ourselves and accrue power, for being called by God to do something is empowering enough.

We are to see work as a way of service to God and our neighbor, and so we should not choose and conduct our work in accordance with that purpose.

The question regarding our choice of work is no longer "What will make me the most money and given me the most status?"

The question must now be "How, with my existing abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of God's will and of human need?"

This is counter intuitive, and goes against the grain of our present culture, yet it the secret to a fulfilled, fruitful, and faithful life. **It is the key to cultivating our Earth with God's culture.**

Maybe some of you are feeling **overwhelmed** right now.

Maybe this is the first time you have actually understood your calling- your vocation.

Maybe you are not sure how to proceed in taking steps to put this into action in your life.

Let me leave you with this one example, and as you listen, think how these simple steps might apply in your life.

Andy Crouch recently wrote a book called ***Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling***

His theme is that work on any scale, grand or modest, is important. He describes the impact that his wife Catherine, a physics professor, has on her “society”.

“In her work as a professor of physics, Catherine can do much to share the culture of her courses and her research lab.

In the somewhat sterile and technological environment of a laboratory, she can play classical music to create an atmosphere of creativity and beauty.

She can shape the way her student respond to exciting and disappointing results, and can model both hard work and good rest rather than frantic work and fitful procrastination.

By bringing her children with her to work occasionally she can create a culture where family is not an interruption from work and where research and teaching are natural parts of a mother’s life; by inviting her students into our home she can show that she values them as persons, not as just units of research productivity.

At the small scale of her laboratory and classroom, she has real ability to reshape the world.”

May God give you similar strategies to create His culture in your world.