



Discerning a Call to Ministry

By Susan R. Garrett

Vocation or call as a form of desire

Is God calling you? The quick answer to that question is 'Yes.' God is calling you—God is calling each one of us here—to live out our lives as a thankful response to God's grace and abundance. But is there any more *specific* word from the Lord for you? Is God calling you to full-time Christian ministry? Is God calling you to go to *seminary*?

In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus said, "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*"

Jesus is using these very short scenarios as metaphors for the realm of God, to describe that realm as *an object of intense desire*. To enter into God's realm, you must want to do so more than anything else. You must recognize that the value of doing so surpasses everything else of value in this world. To enter into God's realm, you cannot be like that rich young man, who asked Jesus how he might enter into eternal life. You remember that when Jesus told him to sell all and follow him, the young man went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions. He didn't recognize the surpassing

worth of the treasure standing right in front of him, and so he went away. He wanted life, but he didn't want it badly enough. The merchant, by contrast, knew that he held in his hand the pearl of great price. He knew its worth. He knew that nothing else he could own would match it for value. He had found his heart's desire, and he acted accordingly.

Theologian David Ford says in his book *The Shape of Living* (Baker Books, 2004) that as you contemplate your vocation, you should ask yourself what your main life-shaping desires are. What do you most want to do and be? What are the priorities you feel most deeply about? To speak about the *ordering of one's desires* is to address fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of one's life. No doubt you have been asking yourself these very questions as you consider a call to ministry.

Ford points out that questions about our deepest desires are complicated by the fact that often we desire things that we don't really want to want! As humans, we are astonishingly prone to compulsions and addictions—desires that grip hold of us in such a way that they take over, and we start organizing our life around them. Ironically, we can even become addicted to things that are good in and of themselves. Ford writes, "The dynamics of desire are often treacherous. We can be attracted on to ground that, as soon as we commit our weight to

it, proves to be a bog we cannot get ourselves out of." So there are good desires and bad desires, but there are also desires that start out good and then end up ensnaring us and holding us in bondage.

What should we do to manage our lives in the face of such dangers? One popular option has always been to hold back, to do everything in moderation, never to give in wholly to any one desire, lest it run away with us. But, Ford writes, "If we do not risk following our desires, we risk not really living. All the best things in life are also the objects of desire: love, joy, justice, health, truth, goodness, beauty. To satisfy our desire for them, even in part, makes life and the dangers of desiring worthwhile." The man who found the treasure hidden in a field gave in to his desire. The merchant who found the pearl of great price gave in to his desire.

The apostle Paul gave in to his desire. Paul had all the right worldly credentials, but he gave them up—regarded them as loss, he says in Philippians, "*because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.*"

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Ford makes one other point. Our desires, he observes, are not all “given” to us, or simply “natural.” Desires are nurtured and developed over time: by our families, by our churches, by the media and entertainment industry, by massive forces of consumerism in our society. Parents, teachers, and ministers (among others) spend a great deal of time and effort trying to nurture good desires in their charges. At my church, I have recently begun to offer a Wednesday night Bible study to the youth in grades six through nine. The youth at my church have other options for Wednesday nights—they can play basketball, or hang in the youth room—and they haven’t been nurtured in a church culture where Bible study is a regular pastime. So I am realizing that part of what I need to be doing with them is cultivating in them a *desire* for deep engagement with the word. They have barely tasted Scripture—they don’t yet know how satisfying it can be to ponder it, to unpack it, to pray with it. My job is to help them to learn the sweetness and savor of such study and to yearn for more.

What are the desires that have led you toward discerning a call to ministry and how were those desires planted and nurtured? Has someone in your church recognized in you gifts and graces for ministry? Perhaps you found yourself in a situation where you were called upon to listen and to give deeply to a brother or sister in need, and you found yourself not only able to do so but filled with joy at being able to do so. Or perhaps you love Scripture and find yourself, for

reasons you can scarcely explicate, filled with a desire to share its reconciling word with others. Calls don’t always happen at once. Perhaps you can think of several moments or events in your past that have led you to this present moment of discernment.

God doesn’t have a one-size-fits-all view of ministry, and you’ll find that at Louisville Seminary we don’t, either. We recognize that ministry takes many forms: some ordained, some not. But there are at least two elements common to all thriving ministry. One such necessity is some combination of commitments, capacities, and talents for leading and inspiring others to service for God. You may not discover some of your own gifts and graces until you are actually involved in formal preparation for ministry. Still, an important part of discerning your call is discovering and measuring your own commitments, capacities, and talents. Have you discerned such

aptitudes in yourself, and have others confirmed them for you? Your process of discernment may lead you to conclude that seminary is indeed the right course for you to follow. But it may not, and that would be okay. I love the old Shaker saying, “Hands to work and hearts to God.” I take it to mean that we can serve God, give glory to God, and enjoy God’s presence with us while doing many different kinds of work, not just the kinds of ministry for which Seminary could prepare you.

The second element common to all thriving ministry is, as I have already said, a deep and profound *desire to serve, a desire to be of use to God*. Examine your own heart: have *you* have been filled with such desire?

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