

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Lord help me to use my natural abilities

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

Isn't it great when you see something in sport where an individual has a real natural talent for the activity they do? We see them perform feats that we can only dream of doing. Listening to talented musicians is a similar thing. We would never pay to watch someone play sports in a mediocre way or play the piano badly. The title of our talk looks at the natural abilities that people have and how these translate into Christian service. Of course, we are not looking at a performance here, but the service of the living God. Can we therefore expect or even demand that those with natural abilities take up the necessary roles within the Church?

So, our title brings a highly complex topic to the fore. Who should be doing what? In my workplace the term 'best athlete' is widely used whenever we discuss the selection of those who are best suited for the work that is to be undertaken. Is this how we should be organising ourselves within the Church of God? There is also the issue of what people should be doing. I remember another incident at work where an individual was keen to state that they had been working on something and had become particularly good at it. Unfortunately, that capability was of no use to the business. The effort put in was for no real benefit and the employee was realigned to more suitable activities and training. But of course, I cannot say that serving the Lord can be compared to the functioning of a company. The Lord made it clear in His teaching that even the seemingly small work done in His name is worthy of His recognition.

In addition to these general points, we could ask numerous specific questions about the use of our natural abilities. Some abilities do lend themselves to certain Christian services, but that may not mean we should be doing those things. There is also the question of whether we could pursue a career or activity in our lives which gives us opportunities to speak to many people about the Lord. But is that actually what God wants us all to try and do? Should a talented linguist always be sent to the mission field to translate the Bible? These are just a small sample of the types of questions that could be asked for such a topic. Then there is then the added complication of the verse that is so often quoted from Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verse 10:

'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.'

Alas, such a verse can almost be used to justify any course someone might take. Again, more questions – far too many for me to even contemplate answering them. I do not intend to answer any specific questions that may arise, such as those I have already asked. In the first instance it would be impossible as I am not likely to know the circumstances enough to try. Then there is the fact that I am not God so it is not really for me to determine what people should do. My aim is to look at some general principles that I trust will help when this subject is considered by any listener.

Hopefully, these will help us to avoid pursuing our own course. Rather, we should look to God to see what we should and should not be doing.

Does God need our abilities?

I come then to my first principle, which is to consider whether God needs our natural abilities. The answer of course is an emphatic no! God is more than capable of achieving His purposes with or without our help. The scripture that initially came to mind for this point is in 1 Kings chapter 19, which tells us of Elijah speaking to God after the great victory at Mount Carmel. We will pick it up from verse 13:

‘So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And he said, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.” Then the Lord said to him: “Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall be that whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”’

Elijah is effectively saying here that all is lost, and that he is the only one left who cares about God. The answer from the Lord shows very clearly how wrong Elijah was. He was also going to be replaced. Elijah had been a great prophet of the Lord, yet his successor was already planned. God used Elijah in wonderful ways, but He didn’t need him. Scriptures such as this should serve as a check on any high opinion that we may have of ourselves.

But there is more to consider, not only does God not need us, but he tends to choose the weaker things of the world to achieve great things. There are many to choose from, but for now we will consider the anointing of David as king of Israel. The Lord had given the people Saul who was a mighty man and stood head and shoulders above most of His people – yet what a failure he was. God had given the people the person they wanted, and it all ended badly. God then chose a man after His own heart. In 1 Samuel chapter 16 the Lord has to check Samuel with these words as he was looking for the next king to anoint:

‘But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”’

Samuel had been looking at David’s older brothers and thinking that they were the best fit. They had good physical statures that impressed the prophet. But God had chosen the youngest, who had not even been considered by his father as being important enough to be shown to Samuel. Yet look at what God achieved through David!

1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verses 26 and 27 state the following:

‘For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish

things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.'

So here we see the principle continued in the New Testament. God uses the unexpected to achieve his purposes. We may be naturally brilliant at some particular thing, but that does not mean that God has planned for us to do it. He may want to have the victory with someone who is not as good at it. Perhaps it is better to be reliant on God knowing we are not good naturally at something, than to think that we can achieve something without His help.

Is it wrong to use our natural abilities?

My line of thought so far is likely to stir up the question as to whether it is therefore wrong to use our natural abilities at all in the service of God? Of course, I would not suggest such a thing. My second point is therefore to consider how an ability is of benefit to the Church. After all, there are some abilities that do lend themselves to the more typical aspects of Christian service. Being naturally gifted at teaching or being a good orator would be particularly helpful for those who are led to such roles in the Church.

There are also those who have natural abilities which greatly benefit the Church witness as a whole. Talented musicians who are able to write songs of praise or scientists or mathematicians who study the world around us to explain how God has ordered the world - all are of great help to believers. Many of the great scientists of the past were Christians and they set out to understand how God made the world work to learn more about His glorious work of creation. What a blessing it is to the Church that there are believers who still do this work today, especially when science in general is being used to discredit the idea of there even being a God.

Those are just some examples of the types of abilities that may be more straightforward at fitting into Christian service. But what about some others that may not immediately fit in to a clear area of service? Perhaps areas like sports, engineering or art are not areas which widely recommend themselves to Christian service. Can they still be used? Again, the answer is of course they can. God can use any talents for His work. I know full well that those things I have listed have been used for the Lord's work in wonderful ways. But, as we will come to later, it is not for us to dictate what God needs, but to see where we can be of use for Him. If it happens to be in line with a natural ability, then we can be thankful for that.

There is a word of warning as well in this. Any seeming ability that is contrary to God's word should never be pursued or looked to be used. Someone who has a gift for deceiving or lying would have a hard time arguing that they can use these things to the glory of God or be of use to the Church.

Just as an aside, in addition to the practical use for our abilities in the Lord's service, there is the fact that our natural abilities often provide enhancement to understanding the wonders of God. I am sure in heaven we will continue to have those abilities that we show now, but they will be used to wonder even more at the greatness of God. The mathematician will see the beauty of God's order, the musician will marvel at the beauty of the music made in praise to God, the linguist will be astounded at the words of God and the artist will see a beauty of the work of God's hand. Alas the list could go on. These things that we will appreciate in heaven can be enjoyed now by each of us as we seek to know God better in our lives.

What then should we be doing?

But let us come to our next point, and I believe the key consideration for a topic such as this. And that is the question – what is it I should be doing? As I have said before I cannot state what a

person's walk for God should be. But I can point to the scriptures that show us how we should go about finding out.

First, the question about the will of God. Somehow this question has been made out to be some mysterious activity that requires some kind of celestial sign to confirm what it is we should be doing. Yet the vast majority of the will of God for every believer is actually stated in the Bible. Romans 12 is a good place to start. Philippians also provides helpful things for us to do, such as to rejoice in the Lord and not be anxious. We can be guilty of spending so much time waiting for God to give us some miraculous sign that we forget that there is plenty for us to be occupied with. When you look at so many Bible characters, they were not sat waiting for God when He came and called them to do something grand. They were already busy; they were already known of God for being faithful to Him. After all, what use are our abilities if we don't actually know God very well in the first place?

But this is perhaps another one of my asides. We now come to the key point. What should we be doing? Do we look to what we are good at and do that so that God can then use it? It hardly seems to be a good course of action and not quite in keeping with seeking God's will. I turn to the example of the apostle Paul (called Saul at the time) at his conversion which we read about in the book of Acts chapter 9 and the first 6 verses:

'Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'"

Later in chapter 9, verse 15 to be precise, we have the following message from the Lord:

'But the Lord said to [Ananias], "Go, for [Saul] is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.'

From this we can learn two things. The first I am going to look at is what God did. If we were picking roles for people in the beginning of the Church period by ourselves, the apostle Paul would probably not be at the top of our list to go to the Gentiles to preach the Gospel. Given his knowledge of the scriptures wouldn't it have been better for him to stay in Jerusalem to convince the Jewish people that Jesus is the Christ. Paul actually describes himself as someone who did not speak well and perhaps even something akin to saying he was not an appealing person. Why put him front and centre of the great thrust of the Gospel throughout the world then? Surely, he would be of more use staying put where he is? Yet that is precisely what God did and look at what was accomplished. When Paul did eventually go back to Jerusalem it didn't work out particularly well. Did Paul not use his natural abilities? We only need to look at the book of Romans to see that he did use them in the Lord's service. But his primary work was not necessarily his strong point. Therefore, he had to rely on the Lord's help and grace to do it.

And that brings us nicely to the main point to take from this lesson of Paul, and that is his response when brought face to face with the Lord. Those well-known words to many of us – "Lord, what do you want me to do?" This is where we each need to get to with our topic today. We can talk about using our abilities and if they fit in with Christian service all day long. But that is

irrelevant if our attitude to taking up work for the Lord is wrong. The apostle Paul is the example to follow, indeed in this he was following the example of the Lord Jesus who came in obedience to God the Father to do His will.

We need to put ourselves at the disposal of the Lord and await his guidance as to our activities. If he leads us to work which enables us to use our natural abilities, then wonderful. If not then it does not matter, we have the privilege of being used by God for his work. In the latter case it does not mean we will never use our natural abilities in the Lord's work, it just means that the Lord has a more important thing for us to be doing. This is the order it must always be; we don't do our own work for the Lord and hope He can use it; we ask how He wants to use us.

This also keeps us from the tendency to avoid doing things because we are not that good at them, or someone else might be better at them. If the Lord is leading us to do something that we don't feel we are good at then we should do it anyway, and trust that He will give us the help we need to do it. Moses was guilty of this. He was told to go to Egypt to bring God's people out. He didn't want to because he could not speak well. God said that He made the tongue and therefore would give Moses the word. Still Moses hesitated until God ordered him on. We well know the results, and that there was no hindrance in the work because of Moses' weakness.

That being said, how much more should we do the things the Lord gives us to do if we are naturally good at them? There is no excuse for believers not to take up work that they have been given when they are able to do it well. The Lord himself spoke many parables about the workers waiting for the master to return and the need to be working expectantly of His return. In such cases the lesson of Ecclesiastes quoted earlier is a helpful one.

But what about.....

I am beginning to run short on time, but I wish to just look at another few points. With a subject such as this there is of course the possibility to bring up a mass of scenarios arguing for and against what I have been saying.

The typical sort that first springs to mind is to say we should pursue a particular talent because it may give us more opportunity to speak to lots of people about the Gospel or support the Lord's work. I recently heard a short talk given by a well-known American actor who was speaking about why he follows Jesus Christ, so I can't deny that it doesn't happen. There are countless occurrences of wealthy believers who generously give away their funds to support the work of the Lord so that is not an issue either. But there are two warnings to consider. The first is that point again about being in the will of God. If He does not want you doing that something then it will not result in the great work that we hoped it would be, no matter how hard we may try. If it is not in the will of God, then it is not worth doing. The second warning is the danger that some of these things will expose us to ungodly behaviour. For every faithful believer who witnesses about God, there are many more who have failed, fallen and ruined their witness. How many who have amassed wealth became used to it and consequently do not spend it on the Lord but on themselves? Again, the idea of amassing wealth needs to be in line with God's will for us if it is to have any chance of success.

Let us turn to another point of view. The case may be put forward that only those who are given the ability should do a work. This is similar to other points already made I know, but I want to stress the point. When the Tabernacle was to be made God set aside certain individuals to lead the creative part of the work. Exodus says they were skilled and were given instruction as to how the work was to be done. So, it could be argued that only they should do it because they were good at it, and others should not interfere or try to do it as well. To some extent I agree, but I only agree on the lines that God had called them out to do so. There is no evidence that others were not equally skilled. But God chose specific people and then He gave them instruction and extra

ability to do the work. The argument for not doing a particular role is only valid after God has selected people to do it, not before based on natural ability.

Conclusion

I have no doubt that when this topic was selected there was a desire for our listeners to be encouraged to use their abilities for the work of God, and I agree with such a desire. But the better desire is to have believers eagerly asking that question – “Lord what do you want me to do?”

I will finish with this word of encouragement. I would think that in general, many believers have their own ideas about how they could serve God because at heart they would love to be a person who is able to witness to millions and lead them to Christ. Sometimes we think this way because the everyday Christian life can often be hard and appear unfruitful to us. Like Abraham we can sometimes be guilty of trying to intervene in God’s plan. We propose an alternative which we think will no doubt end in great success and the Lord will be happy with us and our decision. But to counter this thought we must remember this - the person who speaks to thousands, or millions, is doing the same thing as the Sunday school teacher, the parent who reads the Bible to their children, or the Christian who speaks to a friend about the Lord Jesus over a coffee. If it is given by God for us to do, then we should do it and we will please Him in doing so. But we must follow God’s plan, not what we think God should plan for us as ultimately the glory is for Him and not for us.

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