

GOD'S JOB DESCRIPTION: TIME VS ETERNITY

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AMOS 7:7-15

II CORINTHIANS 4:6-10 AND 16-18

Have you ever wanted to give God some suggestions about how to run things? Not earth-shattering suggestions, perhaps. Just simple things – like the food we eat. Why not put all the vitamins and minerals in the tasty foods? Save all the fat and cholesterol for spinach, liver, brussels sprouts and broccoli. And perhaps God could do a little better job of distributing the weather. Some areas don't need as much rain as they've been getting. Meanwhile there are places in the world that are experiencing fires and drought. And then there are some other things I would like to suggest to God. If God would just reveal Himself a little more clearly it would be so much easier. I know the Bible says that God's ways are not our ways, but God's so hard to predict. I have a good day and start thinking to myself, "Well God sure is smiling on me ... I must be doing something right." And then before I can turn around, my life is so fouled up I think I'll never find the way out." Where are you, Lord, when I need you? And one thing more! God could also use some advice about the kind of people God calls to do the work. God seems to have this "thing" about calling really imperfect people.

Certainly Abraham was imperfect. Why, he once tried to pass off his wife as his sister just to save himself some trouble. What a wimp! And Moses was imperfect. He once killed a man in a fit of anger. Then there was Samson. Look how easily he let a woman lead him astray. And then David. An adulterer. A murderer. Surely God could have done better than David. And Jonah – fleeing from God because he hated the people of Ninevah, only to find himself eaten for lunch by a huge fish. For that matter, I probably would not have chosen Simon Peter, either. Sure he ended up as a rock, but before that he was as fickle as a reed blowing in the wind. And James and John – self important and always jockeying for a place of prominence and position. I would even have had difficulty with the Apostle Paul. You've read Paul's writings. He caused all kinds of havoc in the early church with some of the things he said. And he could be more than tedious in making his point, too. Why couldn't God have consulted us before He made his selections.

Now, take Amos! Can you imagine our PNC interviewing the prophet Amos to become the new associate pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Martinsville?

“Now, Mr. Amos, let’s have a look at your credentials. Where did you go to seminary? Would it have been Union, or was it Princeton? What major theologians have influenced your theological development? When and where were you ordained?”

“Seminary? Theologians? Ordained? Well you see, I’m a shepherd by background. I really haven’t had any formal training, though I did work for a while dressing sycamore trees, if that might count for anything.”

Hmmm. “Sycamore trees? Righteousness? Well, Mr. Amos, actually we were looking for someone with a doctorate. And we’d really prefer a ministry that wasn’t so confrontational.” Poor Amos, I doubt that any PNC would even have taken a second look at his PIF. And he certainly wouldn’t have made it past the first interview. God just isn’t very good at choosing people to represent Him, is he?

Let’s look at some more recent examples of the people God has chosen and used for God’s glory. Take Billy Graham, a Southerner, graduate of a Bible College. No seminary training. There have always been those who have criticized Graham’s conservative theology. There have always been those who have expressed skepticism about how many of those who make decisions for Christ in Graham’s crusades really are changed. And yet you can go into almost any major city in the U. S. and find someone who will tell you that the turning point in his or her life came at a Billy Graham crusade.

Or Mother Teresa. A Roman Catholic. Frail, way past the age where she should have retired. Surely God could find someone younger and in a much more prestigious spot than Calcutta to serve as God’s example of self-giving love.

Or Martin Luther King, Jr., African-American. Like Graham, a Baptist. Unlike Graham, his politics were always a little too far to the left for most mainline Christians and Dr. King was not a perfect man morally. Yet when he stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial and proclaimed, “I have a dream ...” it was God’s dream with which he confronted America. And America has never been the same since.

How does God go about this sort of “calling” thing? What kind of job profile (if you will) does God use in selecting appropriate candidates?

It seems to me that there are at least three characteristics common to the people who have been chosen and have become powerful for God.

First of all, they’ve got to be willing to lay down their lives. Oh, I’m not talking about martyrdom – though that has happened. I’m talking about laying down your life, as in your dreams, your deepest desires, your fondest hopes – giving them all to God.

Someone has said, “Man is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men and women.” That’s true. Are you willing to live your life in the center of God’s will? The French Foreign Legion had this motto: “If I falter, push me; if I stumble, pick me up; if I retreat, shoot me.” Suppose that kind of commitment were required in order to be used of God. How many of us would “make the cut”?

I’m sure nearly all of you have seen the painting or perhaps a wood carving of Albrecht Durer’s “Praying Hands”. Years ago, I read the story behind that painting, and though I forget its specific details, I remember still the powerful impact of the story. Durer and his best friend were budding young artists with promise. They wanted to go together to art school. But they finally realized that they had between them only enough money for one of them to go. It was decided that Durer would go first and that his friend would earn the money for Durer to stay in school. After graduation, Durer would then ply his new trade and support his friend through his education. But sadly, the only job Durer’s friend could get took a terrible toll on his body and particularly on his hands. They were cut repeatedly, the fingers smashed more than once, the knuckles gnarled and painfully misshaped by rheumatoid arthritis. No way could he become an artist with those hands. So Durer painted those gnarled and aching hands as a tribute to the one who had, at least figuratively, “laid down his life for him”.

Sometimes, in order to make good things happen, somebody has to lay down their life. That seems to be the first characteristic God looks for in those whom God chooses and uses.

But there is also a second characteristic: God looks for people who are single-minded in their devotion. We prize the person who is well-rounded – the person who is pretty good at a lot of things. We are a little put off by people who are almost fanatically devoted to a single cause. And yet, the people God uses are

people who are known for their single-minded devotion. Those are the folks who always excel – whether it is in business or medicine or the arts or sports – a man or woman possessed by a single aim in life. Amos had that single-minded devotion. His cause was justice and righteousness. And regardless of how the people of Israel resisted his prophecies, Amos was not deterred. “Let justice roll on like a river,” he thundered, “And righteousness like a never-ending stream.” (5:4)

In his book, *People of the Lie*, Dr. M. Scott Peck writes about one of his most difficult counseling situations, with a woman he calls Charlene. At a crucial point in her counseling, right after she explained that everything in life seemed meaningless, Dr. Peck asked her what the meaning of life was. When she refused to answer, he asked her what the purpose of life was to Christians.

“We exist for the glory of God,” Charlene said in a flat low monotone, as if she were sullenly repeating an alien catechism, learned by rote and extracted at gunpoint. “The purpose of our life is to glorify God.”

“Well,” Dr. Peck responded. There was a long silence. For a moment, Peck thought she might cry. “I cannot do it,” she said forcefully. “There’s no room for me in that. That would be my death.” Then with a suddenness that frightened Peck, what seemed to be her choked-back sobs turned into a roar. “I don’t want to live for God,” she cried out. “I will not. I want to live for me. For my own sake!” (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983, pp. 167-168).

There are many people who want to live for themselves. Not for God. They don’t mind dabbling in religion. After all, a little bit of it is good for anyone; but they would never dream of focusing everything they are and everything they have on that one magnificent obsession.

God calls people who are willing to lay down their lives. God calls people who are single-minded in their devotion. **Finally, God calls those who understand the difference between the temporal and the eternal.** If we live for today and its pleasures alone, then perhaps it is understandable that we have little concern for righteousness and justice. But if there is something more to life – if there is a righteous God who has created this world and loves it and who seeks the welfare of all its people, then our willingness to order our lives according to God’s principles is crucial, if our lives are to have any significance at all.

It is commonly said that, “You can’t take it with you”. That’s not quite correct; there is something we take with us to the next life. James Dobson once put

it like this. “At the end of life, there only three things that matter: Who you loved; who loved you; and what you did for Christ.” That’s another way of saying what Paul tells us in our text for the morning: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we focus our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (II Cor 4:16-18). The only thing we get to take with us to the next world is that which does not consist of physical matter: our kind deeds; the people we have loved; the poor we have helped; the Christ we have served. **Isn’t it ironic that the only things we get to keep as we go to the next world are those we already have given away.**

You see, it really doesn’t matter how smart we are, how many degrees we’ve got, how many equities we hold, or how many toys we have in our garage. God is looking for something entirely different. God is looking for people who are willing to lay down their lives. People who are single-minded in their devotion. People who understand the difference between the temporal and the eternal. If that’s God’s job profile, I wonder how we’d measure up.