

INTRODUCTION

“Your vocation is how your station in life serves as a channel of God’s blessings to the people around you.”

How to Use This Bible Study

- “Discovering Your Vocations” is suitable for adult Bible studies in the congregation as well as for home study, with parents leading senior-high level children.
- Each of the four lessons is designed for one long class (60 to 75 minutes) or else two shorter classes (45 minutes each).
 - To adjust the pacing, the instructor may assign different people to look up distinct Bible passages (for a faster pace) or have all participants look up each passage together (for a slower pace).
 - When a lesson is split into two sessions, the introductory prayer may be re-used during the second session.
- The “Historical Introduction” may be discussed briefly at the beginning of the first lesson.

Historical Introduction

“Vocation” comes from the Latin word “*vocatio*,” which means “calling.”

In the medieval *Roman Catholic Church*, the term “vocation” was limited to priests, monks, and nuns—persons who were thought to have special “divine callings” that set them above ordinary people. The *Lutheran Reformation* challenged such thinking in several ways:

- Lutherans taught that man-made vows (such as to celibacy) should not take priority over stations in life that God Himself has instituted (such as marriage and parenthood).
- Lutherans taught that all people have vocations from God, including their vocations in the *family* (husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, etc.) and the *community* (baker, butcher, farmer, civil magistrate, soldier, etc.) as well as in the *church* (pastor, bishop, laity, etc.).
- Lutherans viewed vocation through the lenses of both Law and Gospel:
 - As for the Law, vocation comes from God’s commands (not human traditions), and the works performed in one’s vocation do not merit God’s favor, but simply serve one’s neighbor.
 - As for the Gospel, vocation may be viewed as God working through one person to bless another person; my vocation is not so much about *what I do*, but rather about *what God does through me*.

The *Reformed tradition*, following John Calvin, shared with Martin Luther an insistence that lay people, not just clergy, have important callings from God. However, the Reformed tradition, especially among the Puritans, additionally emphasized a zeal for economic innovation, which sociologist Max Weber discussed in his famous study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Although the Puritans sought to be devout, in time their views became secularized. The result is that many people in America today think of “vocation” as simply a career, without any spiritual significance.

Lutheran theology emphasizes contentment within one’s current vocation, rather than the Protestant work ethic’s desire for upward mobility. For Lutherans, a discussion of vocation does not so much center around “what will I do with my life?” but rather “what has God already been doing with me and through me as a blessing to myself and to others?” In answering these questions, Lutherans include the secular benefits of one’s career, but careers do not take center stage. God works through people in the family and in the church as well as in the community, and vocation is God’s delivery channel for spiritual as well as for material blessings.

Lutheran theology also emphasizes that God’s face is hidden in vocation, as if behind a mask. It appears on the surface that a milkmaid milks a cow, or a farmer harvests grain, or a soldier defends a nation, or a father raises his child, but in each case God operates behind the scenes—hidden “in, with, and under” these vocations—to deliver *material* (and sometimes *spiritual*) blessings. In an analogous manner, God works “in, with, and under” the water of Holy Baptism and the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper to deliver *spiritual* blessings.

Linguistic Introduction

Grammatically, vocation is expressed by the passive voice. People “are called.” They do not call themselves, but rather God calls them. For example, when the *Augsburg Confession* refers to a pastor as being “called,” it uses the Latin verb form *vocatus*, which is the perfect passive participle of *vocare*, “to call.” The *passive* voice means that the pastor receives his call from outside himself. The *perfect* tense means that the action has been completed in a past time but also has an ongoing significance during the present time, and even into the future. God has called him, and God continues to be with him. He is God’s instrument; God is the agent working through him. So it goes with the callings of the laity as well as of the clergy: they “are called” by God.

From the Lutheran Confessions

“Even though we experience much good from other people, whatever we receive ... is all received from God. ... So we receive these blessings not from them, but through them, from God. For creatures are only the hands, channels, and means by which God gives all things.” (*Large Catechism*, First Commandment)

For Further Study

- Video archive of the Wittenberg Academy 2016 Family Retreat plenary sessions on vocation, which follow the general outline of this Bible study, www.hausvater.org/audio-video/334.
- Additional resources at the Hausvater Project, www.hausvater.org:
 - Conner, “The Love a Wife Desires, the Respect a Husband Needs”
 - Huntington, “Talk of Them When You Sit in Your House”
 - MacPherson, “The Doctrine of Vocation: Sacramental Blessing, Not Sacrificial Duty”
 - MacPherson, “‘Balancing Work and Family’ vs. ‘Redeeming the Time’”
 - MacPherson, “Thank God, There’s Always Enough Time in the Day”
 - MacPherson, “Where Are You in Titus Chapter Two?”
 - MacPherson, *Studying Luther’s Large Catechism: A Workbook for Christian Discipleship*
 - Shulz, “Family Worship: Biblical Suggestions for Your Home”
 - *Much more*: Bible studies, hymns, sermons, etc.
- Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (a popular overview by an LCMS lay theologian, who presently teaches literature at Patrick Henry College; see also, his *Family Vocations*)
- Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (a scholarly treatment by a Swedish Lutheran known for emphasizing First Article theology: how God the Creator remains active in preserving His creation)

About the Author

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LESSON 1: What Is the Doctrine of Vocation?

From the Lutheran Confessions

“Here consider your own situation according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, employer, employee; whether you have been disobedient, dishonest, lazy; whether you have injured anyone by word or deed; whether you have stolen, neglected, wasted anything, or done any harm.” (*Small Catechism*, Confession)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, although I fail daily in my vocation, I thank you for the forgiveness I have through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Fill me now with Your Holy Spirit and use me as Your tool for Your kingdom. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Read **Genesis 12:1–3**. This passage records the “call” (Latin: *vocatio*) of Abram, who became Abraham. For what purpose did God promise to bless Abram? Next read **Galatians 3:8**. Whom has God blessed *through* Abraham and his Seed? Then read **Genesis 21:1–3**. Did Abraham and his wife Sarah accomplish their vocation by their own abilities?
2. Read **Exodus 2:10–15, 4:1–5, 10–12, 31:1–6**. Does God call people who are equipped? Or does He equip people whom He calls? The world urges self-confidence, but where does God desire that we place our trust?
3. Read **1 Corinthians 7:17**. This passage refers to being “called” by God in various stations in life: married or widowed, slave or free, circumcised Jew or uncircumcised Gentile, etc. What wisdom does St. Paul offer concerning contentment within one’s current vocation as compared to seeking a change of vocation?
4. Read **Romans 13:9–10** and **Galatians 5:13–14**. In one sense, vocation means simply living out the second table of the law—loving your neighbor as yourself—not hypothetically but with a specific application to the actual “neighbors” God places in your life: your spouse, your children, your boss, your coworkers, etc. Identify, by both name and relationship, ten of your “neighbors.” How does God presently bless *them through you*? How does God presently bless *you through them*?
5. Read **Matthew 6:11**. In his *Small Catechism*, Luther defined “daily bread” to include “everything needed for this life, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, fields, cattle, money, goods, God-fearing spouse and children, faithful servants and rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, order, honor, true friends, good neighbors, and the like.” In what sense is your vocation, like the vocations of other people, an answer to the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread”?

6. Compare **Romans 10:13–15** and **Romans 13:1–4**. Through which vocation does God work to deliver spiritual blessings such as the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation? Through which vocation does God work to maintain peace and justice in society?

7. Read **1 Timothy 1:1–13** (esp. vv. 4, 5, 12). God regards a pastor’s service to his family as a priority that is foundational for his service to the congregation. How was this priority inverted by the medieval Roman Catholic Church? What steps can your own congregation take to protect pastors and their families from the demands of the parish schedule?

8. The heresy known as “legalism” includes two dangerous errors. First, legalism replaces God’s moral law with a human tradition, as if that man-made law should burden someone’s conscience. Second, legalism confuses Law with Gospel, as if obedience to a man-made law could somehow merit God’s favor. Read **Mark 7:8,13** and **Ephesians 2:8–10**. Discuss how distortions of the doctrine of vocation can lead toward legalism. What aspect of vocation needs to be stressed in order to ensure that the Gospel, not the Law, receives the greater emphasis?

9. The world speaks of “balancing” our commitments between work and family. Read **Colossians 4:5–6** and **Ephesians 5:15–16,19**. Contrast the world’s language of “balancing” time with God’s language of “redeeming” time. What is the difference between these two attitudes, and which priorities does God seek to restore and protect when His people “take back” the time that Satan tempts them to squander? For further reading: “Balancing Work and Family’ vs. ‘Redeeming the Time,’” www.hausvater.org/articles/230.

Quotations for Further Discussion

- “Instead of seeing vocation as a matter of what we should *do*—what we must *do* as a Christian worker or a Christian citizen or a Christian parent—Luther emphasizes what *God does* in and through our vocations” (Veith, 23).
- “In vocations, we are not doing good works for God—we are doing good works for our neighbor” (Veith, 39).
- “We do not *choose* our vocations. We are *called* to them. ... *Our calling comes from outside ourselves.*” (Veith, 50, 55)
- “God himself will milk the cows through him whose vocation that is” (Wingren, 9).
- “All works count for nothing in heaven; their sphere is on earth. ... Man’s cooperation with God is not directed towards God, but outward, toward his neighbor” (Wingren, 177, 180).

LESSON 2: Discovering Your Vocation in the Family

From the Lutheran Confessions

“Other necessary good works were [by false teachers] considered secular and unspiritual: the works which everybody is obliged to do according to his calling—for example, that a husband should labor to support his wife and children and bring them up in the fear of God, that a wife should bear children and care for them, that a prince and magistrates should govern land and people, etc. Such works [are] commanded by God.” (*Augusburg Confession*, art. XXVI)

“[God] has instituted it [marriage] before all other estates, and therefore created man and woman separately (as is evident), not for lewdness, but that they should legitimately live together, be fruitful, beget children, and nourish and train them to the honor of God.” (*Large Catechism*, Sixth Commandment)

Prayer

Lord God, heavenly Father, in these last days Your gifts of marriage and parenthood are greatly despised. Forgive me, for Christ’s sake, for my own participation in sins against the family. Empower me now, by Your Holy Spirit, to lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed and to honor the plans You have for husbands and wives, for parents and children, in order that I and all who are mine may not be cursed to the third and fourth generations, but rather may enjoy Your promised blessings both now and in the world to come. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Read **Genesis 1:27–28**, **Genesis 2:18**, **Matthew 19:4–6**, and **Ephesians 5:22–33**. What are God’s purposes for marriage? How does God bless a husband and wife *within* their marriage? How does He bless other people *through* their marriage? In what sense did God design marriage as an evangelism tool?
2. Read **Ephesians 5:33**. Which spouse is to “love” the other? Which spouse is to “respect” the other? Why is this distinction important? For further exploration, see: www.hausvater.org/book-reviews/48.
3. Read **Deuteronomy 6:6–9** and **Ephesians 6:4**. In what ways does God intend for fatherhood to be a channel of His blessings to children? In what sense did God design fatherhood as an evangelism tool?
4. Read **Proverbs 1:8**, **Proverbs 23:22**, and **Titus 2:4–5**. How does God’s blessing of mothers supplement His blessings of fathers for the benefit of children?
5. Read **Ephesians 6:1–3** and **Colossians 3:20**. Commenting on these passages, Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism* that the Fourth Commandment—“Honor your father and your mother”—should be obeyed for two reasons: first, it is *commanded* by God; second, God has attached a *promise* of His blessings to this commandment. How can parents nurture relationships with their children in which the *authority* of the parent functions primarily as a tool for delivering God’s *promise of blessings*?

6. Read **Proverbs 16:31**, **Proverbs 20:29**, **1 Kings 12:6–15**, and **Titus 2:1–8**. In our culture, elders have become “the elderly,” a separate class of people with whom the young do not interact regularly. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther wrote: “Provide for [your parents and grandparents] when they are old, sick, infirm, or poor, and all that not only gladly, but with humility and reverence, as doing it before God.” In what ways does God intend for the “grandparent” generation to be a channel of His blessings to the younger generations of parents and children? How may those younger generations serve as a channel of His blessings to the older generation?

7. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther wrote, “All authority flows and is propagated from the authority of parents.” In what sense is civil government an extension of the office of fatherhood?

8. Compare what God’s Word teaches, in the passages discussed earlier, concerning marriage, parenting, and grandparenting, with contemporary trends in American society. Read **Luke 11:4**, **1 Corinthians 10:13**, and **1 Peter 5:8–11**. What specific temptations has Satan placed between you and your vocations within the family? What comfort do you have through faith in Christ Jesus in the face of these temptations?

9. Read **Exodus 20:5–6**, **Judges 2:8–15**, and **Psalms 78:4–8**. What happens when grandparents and parents fail to pass God’s Word down the generations? What does God accomplish through grandparents and parents who faithfully teach the young? Does your family have regular home devotions? If not, consider using these resources for establishing your “family altar”: www.hausvater.org/bible-studies.

Quotations for Further Discussion

- Vocation is “a matter of what *God* does in and through us” (Veith, 9).
- Vocation is the “theology of *ordinary life*” (Veith, 157).
- “As soon as I think of my neighbor, all vocations no longer stand on a common plane, but a certain vocation comes to the fore as mine. One important fact in God’s providence is that I have the neighbor I have” (Wingren, 65).
- “Vocation means that all those who are closest at hand, family and fellow-workers, are given by God: it is one’s neighbor whom one is to love. Therein vocation points toward a world which is not the same for all people” (Wingren, 172).
- “Since God is at work in the world about us, it is God who gives us the moment together with the relationships with others in our situation which the moment brings; and with these relationships he gives us our definite tasks. To use the moment and the time which God gives is to enter into one’s vocation” (Wingren, 226).

LESSON 3: Discovering Your Vocation in the Church

From the Lutheran Confessions

“The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.” (*Augsburg Confession*, art. VII)

“Of ecclesiastical order they [the Lutheran theologians] teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called [Latin: *vocatus*].” (*Augsburg Confession*, art. XIV)

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we have Your promise that wherever two or three gather in Your name, you are with them, and we understand that the marks of Your church are the pure teaching of Your Word and the proper administration of Your Sacraments. Preserve Your church among us through the blessing of faithful pastors and also draw others, through Word and Sacrament, into the kingdom of Your grace. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Read **Isaiah 55:11** and **Hebrew 4:12**. Why should we be confident that wherever the Gospel is purely taught there must also be true believers present? Read **Matthew 18:20**. Who else is present among them?
2. Read **John 10:27**, **Romans 8:28,30**, and **2 Thessalonians 2:14**. What common “calling” do all Christians receive from the “voice” of the Good Shepherd? Read **1 Peter 2:9**. On the basis of their common faith, what vocation do all believers share?
3. Read **1 Corinthians 12:1–30** and **Ephesians 4:7–16**. Do all Christians have an identical calling within the church? Has God equipped each of them with the same spiritual gifts? Read **1 Corinthians 14:33–35** and **1 Timothy 2:8–15**. Even if a man and a woman both appear to have the same gifts, does that necessarily make them each qualified for the same calling within the congregation?
4. Read **1 Timothy 3:1–7**, **Titus 1:5–9**, **Romans 10:14–15**, and **1 Corinthians 4:1–2**. What calling do “bishops” and “elders” receive from God, and what qualifications ought their congregations recognize in them? What does it mean for these pastors to be “called” rather than “hired”? (Which process places greater emphasis on human abilities? Which process places greater trust in God to guide and to equip pastors?)
5. Read **1 Peter 2:25**, **5:2**. Note that the Latin word for “shepherd” is “pastor.” How are pastors like Christ?
6. Read **Matthew 16:19**, **26:26–28**, **28:19–20**, **Mark 16:15–16**, **Luke 24:44–49**, and **John 20:21–22**, and **Acts 1:8**. What is the apostolic ministry to which pastors today are still called? How does the Holy Spirit serve the laity through this vocation of the clergy?

7. Read **Jeremiah 23:28** and **Luke 10:16**. Complete, and discuss the implications: A true prophet _____ God's Word and _____ God's Word _____. Therefore, those who listen to such a messenger actually are listening to _____.

8. Read **1 Corinthians 9:14**, **Galatians 6:6**, **1 Timothy 5:17–18**, and **Hebrews 13:17**. How does God bless the clergy through the vocations of the laity?

9. Read **Matthew 7:15**, **24:4–5**, and **Romans 16:17**. *Whom* has Christ called all believers to judge? Read **1 Corinthians 10:14**, **Colossians 2:8**, and **1 Thessalonians 5:21**. *What* has Christ called all believers to judge?

10. Read **Acts 6:1–4**. Who called seven men to serve as deacons—"the apostles" or "the multitude of disciples"? Re-read **1 Timothy 3:2,7,10** and **Titus 1:7**. What do the phrases "be blameless," "have a good testimony," and "be tested first" indicate about the role of the congregation in evaluating the person who is to be appointed as its pastor?

11. Read **Romans 12:1–2** and **1 Thessalonians 1:8–10**. In what sense may it be said that pastors *preach* sermons but laypeople *live* sermons? Medieval monasteries cultivated the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) of cloistered prayer and fasting. The Lutheran Reformation emphasized instead the *vita activa* (active life) of vocations in service to one's neighbor. Read **Matthew 5:14–16**. To which sort of life was Christ calling His disciples?

12. Read **Titus 2:1–8**. Identify the distinct vocations for which Paul desired pastors to mentor four different groups within the congregation: older men, older women, younger women, and younger men. For further discussion, see "Where Are You in Titus Chapter Two?" at www.hausvater.org/articles/320.

Quotation for Further Discussion

- "Vocation is a matter of Gospel, a manifestation of God's action, not our own. In this sense, vocation is not another burden placed upon us, something else to fail at, but a realm in which we can experience God's love and grace, both in the blessings we receive from others and in the way God is working through us despite our failures" (Veith, 23–24).
- "Thus love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations, through both spiritual and earthly governments. ... [A person] receives the good gifts of God's love through both prince and preacher" (Wingren, 27–28).

LESSON 4: Discovering Your Vocation in Civil Society

From the Lutheran Confessions

“Of Civil Affairs they [the Lutheran theologians] teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God, and that it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to judge matters by the Imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make oaths when required by the magistrates, to marry a wife, to be given in marriage.” (*Augsburg Confession*, art. XV)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, recalling the Fourth Petition blessings that Your Son, our Savior, has taught us to request of You, we ask once more for Your gifts of good government, peace, order, good neighbors, and the like. We know that you provide these blessings even without our asking, but we ask that You would lead us to acknowledge this and to receive these gifts from Your hand with thanksgiving, even as you call and equip us to serve others through our vocations in the community in which it has pleased You to place us. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. At the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptists taught that Christians must separate themselves from ordinary economic and political life in order to become holy. They forbade their members from owning private property or serving in civil government. Read **Matthew 19:18**. Which commandment in that verse presupposes that private ownership of property can be God-pleasing? Read **Matthew 8:5–13**, **Luke 3:7–14** and **Luke 19:1–10**. What can we infer about the moral status of the occupations of soldier and tax collector, based upon how Jesus and John the Baptist each interacted with people who had those vocations? How, then, do Lutherans differ from Anabaptists on the doctrine of vocation?
2. Read **Matthew 22:21**, **Romans 13:1–7** and **1 Peter 2:13–17**. For what purposes has God established civil government? What does God accomplish through the vocation of civil authorities? What does God accomplish through the vocation of citizens? See also **Proverbs 14:34–35**.
3. Read **Matthew 16:19**, **26:26–28**, **28:19–20**, **Mark 16:15–16**, **Luke 24:44–49**, and **John 20:21–22**, and **Acts 1:8**. Summarizing these passages, the *Augsburg Confession* states: “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted” (art. V). Now read **1 Timothy 2:1–4**. In what ways does a well-governed society provide a blessing to the Church?
4. Read **John 18:36**, **Luke 12:14**, **Philippians 3:20**, and **2 Corinthians 10:4**. Summarizing these passages, the *Augsburg Confession* states: “Let it [the church] not dictate laws to civil authorities about the form of society” (art. XXVIII). Even if the IRS were to loosen the 501(c)(3) regulations that limit a congregation’s involvement in political matters, where should the church still draw the line?

5. Read **Jeremiah 29:7** and **1 Timothy 2:1–2**. In addition to honor, obedience, and taxpaying, how does God desire for Christians to support their civil government? Read **Romans 13:3,5**. What do faithful citizens enjoy under civil government?

6. Read **Romans 13:2,4,9**. What is the difference between the vocation of an executioner with respect to a duly convicted criminal and the vocation of a private citizen with respect to his or her neighbor?

7. How do the examples of **Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, Esther,** and **Nehemiah** reveal that God-fearing people may contribute to the welfare of the people whom they serve in civil government?

8. Read **Acts 25:11**. When wrongfully accused, what may a citizen claim before some civil governments? Read **John 18:36** and **Philippians 3:20**. Even under a government that denies the right to appeal or to petition for a redress of grievances, what comfort do Christians still maintain?

9. Read **Exodus 1:17, Hebrews 11:23, Isaiah 5:20,** and **Romans 13:4**. When does an ordinance of civil government, or in extreme cases even the governor himself, cease to have legitimacy?

10. Read **Daniel 3** and **6,** and **Acts 5:17–32**. Under what circumstances do Christians have a duty before God to disobey a civil government's decree?

11. Read **2 Kings 9** and **11, 2 Chronicles 36:22–23, Isaiah 44:24–45:7,** and **Daniel 2:21** and **5:26–31**. How does God bring about a change of kingdoms?

Quotations for Further Discussion

- “So the emperor, when he turns to God, is not emperor but a single [*einzelne*] person like any other human being before God. But if he turns to his subjects, he is emperor as many times as he has subjects” (Luther, quoted in Wingren, 12).
- To confuse law for gospel in the spiritual realm, leads to Popery; to confuse gospel for law in the temporal realm, leads to the Peasant Revolt (paraphrasing Wingren, 115).