

What does God desire from me as a Christian professor?

Thought you'd like to hear from Sang Eun Woo, Assistant professor of Psychological Sciences at Purdue University, as she considers how her faith intersects with her life as a professor:

A while ago, an undergraduate student came to my office asking for a short interview for her class assignment. She said that the assignment was to meet and interview someone in a job that she was interested in pursuing in the future. Some of her questions led me to burst into laughter:

How much do you sleep? When do you wake up? How many hours do you work everyday? What do you do in your free time? Wait.... do you actually have any "free" time?

I had forgotten how I used to think of my professors when I was in college... Yes, back then, I also thought that professors didn't ever sleep, play, or eat. This student had known me for a while (she has been working in my undergraduate research lab for several months); she must have developed a similar impression that, somehow I would spend most of my time typing away on my computer, teaching in a classroom, prepping for class, sitting in research meetings, or doing some other "work" without leaving much time to have a "life." I told her that it is very easy to give out that *illusion!*

Another story:

In the beginning of this year, a group of Christian graduate students on campus had graciously invited me to spend an evening with them. We enjoyed hot tea, dessert, and conversation together. They wanted me to speak about the topic of *excellence*. I shared how I had been wrestling to let go of my selfish desire to pursue excellence in my work and to establish my identity as a number-one researcher. I shared how easily we could lose our ultimate identity as Christians as we shift our focus away from seeking and glorifying our God and instead concentrate on success and excellence by "making ourselves known as the best." It was a wonderful evening of mutual encouragement, exhortation, and fellowship, and I thoroughly enjoyed our conversations. One of the most memorable questions brought up that night was this: "Another Christian professor we had as our guest speaker last year said that she believed God had called her to work at least 80 hours a week. Do you think that's what we're all called to do as faithful Christians in academia?"

Hmm... that really made me think

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How do we know how much time we should devote to work (e.g., writing papers, working in the lab, etc)? Does working 80 hours always mean being a diligent, faithful steward...? And this led to my pondering the very personal question:

What does it mean to serve God in my vocation as a psychology professor?

As I was mulling over these issues, two words slowly came to my mind: **joyful obedience**. I desire to faithfully respond to God's call in every moment, in every situation, with everyone I meet, and to find joy in everything I do.

God calls people for different purposes, so I cannot really speak for others about how exactly we should structure our individual lives. At the same time, I believe that ALL Christians, no matter what they do for their jobs and vocations, would resonate with the following: *God calls us to be faithful in recognizing and using our talents, time, opportunities, and resources to work for His glory.*

What, then, does it mean for me to be faithful in using my talents, time, opportunities, and resources so that I can glorify God in my work?

For a research psychologist, "work" probably means, among other things, "thinking." Working with ideas. Striving to discover the truth about human nature, emotions, cognitions, and behaviors. More tangible activities include reading/writing papers, analyzing data, discussing ideas with others, responding to emails, preparing for classes, and so on.

As an assistant professor in a secular university with a heavy emphasis on research productivity, I believe that I am called to be diligent in my work and do good research, fully utilizing my skills and intellect to contribute new knowledge to the field of psychology and communicate it effectively with my fellow scholars in the field. While it can be challenging to be faithful in ALL these activities, I also find it incredibly rewarding. What a joy to learn about ourselves - human beings, created by God and reflecting His image! What a joy to share my discoveries of His creation with others! Sure, one would not NEED a doctoral degree in psychology to do that. Nonetheless, I am deeply grateful that God has blessed me with the opportunity of being a psychologist. I enjoy the scientific process of seeking "what is true about us" by reading and thinking critically about issues related to the human mind and behavior, designing and conducting studies that may help further our understanding of those issues, navigating through numbers and figures of data, discussing ideas with fellow psychologists, and interacting with students in classroom and research meetings. I believe that that enjoyment is a gift from God. A gift that is to be cultivated through personal discipline, training, and obedience.

At the same time, I also believe that God did NOT call us to be *excellent* in what we *do*. He wants us to *be* like Christ - humble and *obedient*. A big difference there... hmm...

God doesn't say we all need to be "number one" in our productivity, but instead, He wants us to be **faithful** in how we work and live our lives. Realizing this simple truth was so liberating and comforting to me. Making the best use of my time by obeying God's call is all I am to do!

And, I think there is another, very important, part of our job as Christian professors: I believe that academia is a mission field.

Academia is the place where God has called me to be a blessing to others in every way possible.

With this in mind, I am becoming more and more aware that sometimes I need to learn how to give up my "precious time to write a research paper" in order to help out a student/colleague in need or simply stop and listen to His voice. A lot of times it also means I need to let go of my selfish desires to be successful for my own glory, to please people for my own satisfaction and pride (e.g., journal reviewers, senior faculty in the department, students), and to believe that I am in control of my life (i.e., dictating how my day should be structured).

I am realizing that it requires wisdom to discern when to focus on task at hand, and when to stop and pray (I am hopeful that the more I seek to obey and make myself available for His service, the more clearly I would hear His voice).... I realize that it also takes an obedient heart to see the needs of others and the needs for my own spiritual growth. God is constantly calling me to love and care for my colleagues and students, whenever the opportunity arises... God also calls me to become more loving, joyful, at peace, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and disciplined, as I continue to grow as a Spirit-filled Christian.

In closing, I'd like to share what David Henderson (the head pastor in my church in West Lafayette) once said to me: "it is my prayer that I may be *open* to whatever God wants to work *in* me and *available* to whatever God wants to *workthrough* me." May it be so for me, and for all of us in Christ!