

motives for medicine

Chris Damant explores career choices



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You may have broken your arm when you were younger, but does that mean God is calling you to orthopaedics?!

Is obstetrics really your best option just because the staff were friendly during your week on labour ward?

Choosing a career is rarely easy. In fact, it may be so overwhelming or confusing that we settle for making arbitrary choices. However, I am convinced that God hasn't left us clueless for this important decision. But first, we need to get to the heart of the matter.

In choosing a career, it seems sensible to first decide our goals and then identify a career

which will meet them. Examples might include earning a certain amount of money, or choosing a field which you find particularly interesting. Which goals should we choose as Christians? Simply talking about money isn't particularly helpful, as there may be good or bad motivations for earning money: a prospective Porsche owner and a missionary working amongst the poor will both be on the lookout for cash! Rather, we must carefully assess our underlying motivations.

There are different ways to consider this problem, but one helpful way is to look at the distinction between selfish and selfless desires.

This contrast is used numerous times in the Bible. The apostle Paul says 'each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others' (Philippians 2:4). Similarly, when summing up the Law, Jesus says that we are to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40).

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In fact, selfishness is at the very heart of sin. Martin Luther, the Reformer, described the human condition as 'being curved in on itself' (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* L515-516). While we were made to be with God and enjoy him forever, we have instead turned away from him; and turned towards ourselves.

We have gone so far as to create idols to serve ourselves and our felt needs. The secular world may often embrace these, and as Christians it can be difficult to resist. There are two idols which are particularly calling out to us as we think about career choices: security and comfort. Let's look at those now before hearing how God completely trumps these by offering himself to us.

security

First, security. Life is dangerous and we are vulnerable to sickness, hunger, poverty and loneliness. These are not good things and even thinking about them can be scary. But how do we respond? We look to ourselves and build larger barns (Luke 12:13-21). The promise of God creating a new heaven and a new earth where

there will be '*no more death or mourning or crying or pain*' (Revelation 21:4), is barely heard as we foolishly proclaim '*You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry*' (Luke 12:19). This doesn't mean we shouldn't care about these things; the fact is that God has graciously taken care of them but we have refused in favour of our own plans.

It is quite possible that God won't provide for us in the precise way we were expecting, but that is perhaps because he knows that while material things are important, fundamentally what we need is him. Medicine is crying out to us to offer us this security and it is tempting to go for a specialty with quick career progression and a secure consultant job at the end. Alternatively, perhaps the security of being a medic is so tied up in our identity that we cannot even contemplate the idea of giving up medicine to serve Christ in a different area, perhaps working overseas or for a church. But medicine cannot provide the sort of security we really desire: God himself has already given it to us, in Christ! Whatever we do, we should not look to medicine but to God to provide us with security, for it is he who is the source of our future hope.

comfort

Second, comfort. Hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure, is quite plainly the mindset of many individuals and probably underlies much of western culture. I once suggested to my paediatric consultant that I was thinking of being a GP. He raised his eyebrows, looking slightly offended and bemused, but then said 'It's ok, I understand... you just want a nice life.' (Thanks very much!) The desire for a comfortable life is common to all (though the

ideal of comfort varies between people), and it would be easy to look for that when choosing a career.

God does not ask us to lose all hope of comfort. However, we will not find true comfort in anything that medicine has to offer, any worldly possessions or experiences. Indeed, we may often have to give these up or experience hardships and persecutions. Instead, God offers us himself as the source of comfort. If we are sorrowful, he understands that; if we seek peace, he will provide that; if we desire friendship, he is with us. Let's not allow our career decisions to get side-tracked by false promises of security and comfort which no speciality in medicine can ever provide.

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So, we have seen that not only are our desires selfish, but that we also turn to ourselves to meet those desires (Jeremiah 2:13). How can we turn from this? First, by acknowledging our wrong and gratefully receiving God's promise of forgiveness. Second, we need to understand the full extent of God's grace to us.

We might think that we need to shun our desires in an impressive feat of stoicism. But as we have seen, God actually enters into our deepest desires for security, comfort, (as well as affection, peace, meaning, dignity etc) and he fulfils them himself. Of course, we will only experience this in full when we live with him eternally in the new creation, but as Christians

now this begins to be a reality.

Once we stop trying to meet our desires by ourselves, they finally get fulfilled. We have been set free from the need to serve ourselves. What then shall we do? Paul implores us to 'not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love' (Galatians 5:13).

Each of us will differ in how we choose to serve God; there is no specialty holiness scale. Some possible guiding principles could be to look at the gifts he has given us and what we think we would be best at: not because that will mean quick career progression, but because we will be better able to serve our patients. In addition, we could be guided by our interests; again, not because we are seeking our personal intellectual satisfaction, but because that may help us to persevere during difficult times, or even inspire us to drive up standards in that area. Or, we could think about what speciality might offer us the best opportunities to graciously share the gospel with patients and colleagues, or allow us to support wider gospel work through the giving of our time or money.

By evaluating our underlying motivations, this will enable us to make godly decisions about our careers: we need to remember that we have already been catered for and it is now our privilege to serve others. We don't need to sacrifice our careers and lives at the idols of security and comfort; no, we can use our careers to serve God and others, to build his kingdom. ■