

Exodus 31:1-11

Then the LORD said to Moses, ²“See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³ and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts— ⁴ to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. ⁶ Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: ⁷ the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent— ⁸ the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, ⁹ the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand— ¹⁰ and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, ¹¹ and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you.”

A lot of names in the Bible are instantly recognizable. Adam and Eve. Moses and Aaron. David and Goliath. Mary and Martha. And Jesus, of course. Just hearing these names conjures up images of these people, who they were, the things they did, the stories we know. Bezalel and Oholiab. You say those names to most people, maybe even most Christians, and they won't ring any bells. We're those guys prophets, or apostles? Maybe they're just names that show up in those long genealogies we tend to skip over.

It's true that we don't know as much about Bezalel and Oholiab as we do about other Biblical figures. We know they were master craftsmen, experts in metalworking, masonry, and carpentry, gemcutting and jewelcraft, weaving and embroidery. They were also skilled overseers: They supervised the many workers under them. But even though Bezalel and Oholiab don't have that instant recognizability, they were vitally important figures in the Bible. Because more than just having great skill, God had chosen them for a vitally important task. God called Bezalel and Oholiab to build a Holy Place.

They were responsible for the building of the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, the Holy Place where the priests would carry out their sacrificial duties, and where the Lord himself would make his house. They were responsible for everything in the Tabernacle: the Ark of the Testimony or the Ark of the Covenant, covered in gold with the golden angels on top of it; the various altars and tables and lampstands and bronze utensils; the woven curtains in blue and purple and scarlet, and the leather outer coverings; all the sacred garments for the priests with their fine embroidery and precious stones; the anointing oil and fragrant incense. If not for the work of Bezalel and Oholiab, all of those sacrifices and all of that priestly work that God had commanded wouldn't have been possible. Bezalel and Oholiab and all of their unnamed, unnumbered artisans were some of the most important people in Israel's history. Moses and the prophets *taught* about God's Holy Place; Aaron and the priests *worked* in God's Holy Place; David and the kings *protected* God's Holy Place; but it was Bezalel and Oholiab who *built* God's Holy Place.

But there was one more thing that God had given them, and that was what made all the difference. God gave them the skill, he gave them the call, but he also gave them his Holy Spirit, filled them with the Spirit of God—filled them not only with the know-how, but also with the drive, desire, and zeal to carry out the work.

Like he did with Bezalel and Oholiab, God has chosen us to build a holy place. God has his worldwide Holy Christian Church made up of all believers, and he's given this little slice of it into our keeping. And like Bezalel and Oholiab, God has given us the means to do his work. To each one of us he's given gifts and abilities, time, treasures, talents, so that through our works of service we build this holy place.

It's not just the calling of certain groups of Christians. It's not just a job for called workers. It's not just for the more energetic or the more experienced. It's not just for people who have more time, more money, or better health or greater talent. Every part of the body, every part of a building, serves a purpose. Every Christian has a calling to serve God. We're all in this together, and it's not just somebody else's problem.

It's not just a job for pastors or teachers. Called workers have their gifts, but a church needs more than those gifts alone. Each one of us has something that we can turn toward God's glory. One person has strong hands, another has a decisive mind. Some are meticulous detail-oriented planners; others are long-term, big-picture strategists. Some are caretakers, encouragers, conversationalists; some donate, some teach; some have musical or artistic gifts. All pray.

That's what God's gifts are for: building up the body of Christ. It's not for our glory. It's not so we can have a place of honor in the community. We build this holy place out of reverence for the Lord God, who has made us, redeemed us from our sin, and made us holy through faith in him. Whatever God gives to us, we can only give back to him.

Sure, that's our Christian desire. That's our intention—but how's our follow-through? That's where the Israelites had problems. Right in the middle of this whole awesome business of the Tabernacle is another well-known account—but it's not nearly so awesome. It's amazing—but not because it's something God has done. It's because of what the Israelites do.

Moses has been up on Mount Sinai for forty days, speaking with the Lord. The people are frightened. They don't know what's going to happen. So they turn to Aaron, God's high priest and Moses' brother, and they say,

“Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.” And Aaron makes no argument. He takes gold jewelry from all the people, he melts it down, and he shapes it into the form of a calf. The Israelites bow down to the golden calf, they make sacrifices to it, and they hold a riotous festival in its honor.

Everything that God had given to his people, they used for their own ends. The gold that they used? It had been given to them by the Egyptians on their way out of Egypt, and it was God's intention that the gold would be used in the building of the Tabernacle and everything in it. Instead they turn it into a golden calf, a dead thing they can bow down and worship. Their great skill and God-given abilities? God wanted them to use it for his house, his dwelling-place among them. Instead they use their talents to craft an idol. And then they spend their time worshipping a dead idol instead of the living God.

What are we using our gifts to build?

Are we building a holy place? That's the task every Christian has been called to do, as we read in Ephesians 4 today: God's people are called to “works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Is that what we're doing? Of course, thanks be to God, we have a building for worship and Christian education, and many of your hands and minds have been instrumental in that.

But are we using our gifts to build up this Holy Place, this little part of God's kingdom that is ours? Or are we using our gifts to build idols? I'd be pretty surprised if anyone here was building a real idol in their workshop. But what are the things that are keeping us from service here in our temple? What are the things in our lives that we're using our gifts for, while *excluding* the church?

Work is crazy right now. I just don't have enough time. I'm busy. I'm not qualified. I'm tired. And I've got other important things—got to pay off the house, need a new car, kids are in school and sports and band, doctor appointments, deadlines, aches and pains, sleeping in, and I need some “me” time.

So yes, maybe I'm using my God-given gifts...but am I using them for God? Am I building a holy place, or running in the never-ending pursuit of happiness? Are we content to live in cozy houses while this Holy Place is deserted?

My dear Christian brothers and sisters, please understand. It is not sinful to use your gifts outside of the church. Service to God doesn't just mean doing work in the church or for the church, or even in any overtly religious way. When you work at your job, you're serving God. When you raise your children, you're serving God. When you pay your taxes, you're serving God. When you lie down to rest, you're serving God.

And understand too, my friends, that it's never a pastor's goal or desire to guilt anyone into doing anything for the church. We all have earthly responsibilities that God wants us to tend to, or there may be circumstances that keep us from serving in the church as much as we'd like. I know that, and more importantly, God does too.

But the fact of the matter is that the church needs workers. It needs faithful lay servants of all sorts: Council members, men and women dedicated to doing the everyday, invisible grunt work, musicians and artists, teachers and techheads, doers and dreamers. Even if we do find ourselves in legitimate circumstances where we can't do much for the church, there are still ways to help. Pray. Encourage others to step up when needed. Tell others about the blessings that come with serving, the joys to be found in it.

So it's my gospel encouragement that all of us, every single one of us, examine what we're doing with our gifts. What am I building? And what can I do to help build this holy place? Pray to the Lord for guidance and opportunity. He'll give them, just as he's given you your gifts.

When the work on the Tabernacle was finally completed, Moses inspected everything: the ark, the altars, the lamps, the curtains and coverings, the oil and incense, the priestly garments, and even all the tent poles and bases and hooks. You know what he found? He found that everything Bezalel and Oholiab had done was perfect. Everything had been made exactly as God had commanded. Without a doubt, God had guided the hands of the workers; he had been with them every step of the way.

I'm not sure we'd claim all our work was perfect. But God's work always is. He gave us his perfect Son Jesus, who served perfectly. Jesus took all our sins away with his perfect death and resurrection. God has given us faith and filled us with his Holy Spirit. He's given us every good thing we need for body and life. This is the God we serve, and even if our service is less than perfect, in Jesus, it is everything God asks of us. And if that's the God we serve, isn't that the greatest boss we could ever have? Wouldn't it be a joy to work for him and carry things out just as he asks?

So after this morning, you'll be able to say, “Oh, yeah, Bezalel and Oholiab! I know those guys. They built God's Holy Place. But you know what? That's me, too. I'm Bezalel. I'm Oholiab. The builder, the maker, the administrator, the worker, the servant. God's given me the skill that I can use for his glory. He's given me the opportunity to serve him. He's filled me with his Holy Spirit as he's called me to faith. And he's chosen me to build his Holy Place.” Amen.