

When Pastor Dave Hataj took over his family's gear shop, he was surprised to discover how blue-collar business can change people, communities, and the world. Drawing on stories of his business, Edgerton Gears, Dave examines how to cultivate inner goodness, meaning, and mission at work—no matter what you do.

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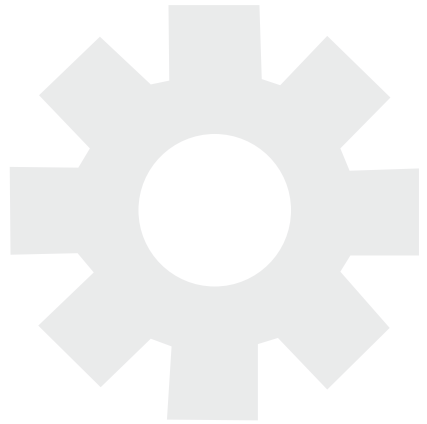


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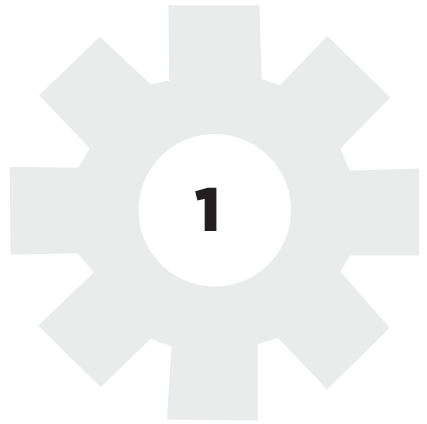
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Called to Do Business

Two percent! It was only 2 percent. Was I willing to risk losing our biggest customer over a measly 2 percent reduction in our pricing?

I'd driven three hours to visit this customer, who comprised approximately 7 percent of our annual sales. I'd prayed for wisdom, since I knew I'd be on the hot seat. The customer had recently been bought out by a larger corporation, whose culture it was to hammer vendors by insisting they lower their prices if they were to continue doing business with them.

It didn't matter that health insurance for our staff was rising 10 to 15 percent annually, that raw material prices were up, along with wages, utilities, and taxes. The new corporation's strategy was to send in a hatchet man from corporate headquarters and, along with the purchasing agents, bring in the vendors one at a time to bully them into submission. It was now my turn.

A gear is a simple machine based on the principle of rotation. It's a variation of the wheel, that simplest of machines. But where a wheel might work alone, a gear is a wheel that moves other wheels, using its cogs or teeth.

Once a series of gears mesh, tooth to tooth, a more complex machine operates, and greater tasks can be done. I've watched, helped build, and sold many thousands of gears over the decades. Round and round they go, wheels within wheels, much like the culture that has grown over the years around our workplace, where the gears are made. Here, people mesh with people. One person's movements and work help another's.

Like teeth engaged with the next gear, we gently assist others along their paths, and keep them from slipping. A kind of dance if you will. And when the human machinery works well, we do greater, more complex work.

If you look up *gear* in the dictionary, you'll see that, when used as a verb, this word means "to fit exactly"; "to be in gear." We motivate someone by saying, "Get it in gear." If you wear your team *gear*, you fit in.

But as we all know, not every job seems a perfect fit. Sometimes the gears of work seem to grind and squeal, nothing is more unpleasant. There's slippage. When gears are damaged, out of alignment with others, or not maintained properly, the results are destructive. They strain other components, breaking down the whole system. It's the same way when we're not a good fit in our job setting.

What is it that makes work *work* for us? How can we bring the pleasing precision to the workplace that we can establish with iron and steel? What has led me to contend the workplace can be a place with a measure of joy, significance, and community?

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I didn't choose to be born into a family business; none of us do. It just happens. Before I was in kindergarten, my older sisters and I were down at the shop after dinner, putting set screws into sprockets. We were cheap labor, but that's what Dad needed us to do.

By age seven, I was cleaning out chip barrels, sweeping floors, and wiping down the lathes, mills, and gear hobbers. I was expected to work after school, during summers, and whenever I had a day off from school. By age twenty-one, I was a journeyman machinist and I'd had enough. I ran away to California, swearing I'd never be back. So how in the world was I sitting in this conference room with this "hatchet man," wondering if I should risk calling his bluff?

The ancient rabbis said that a father was obligated to teach his son a trade: "He who does not teach his son a trade teaches him to steal."¹

My father taught me to be a machinist, not a pastor. But like many young, zealous believers, when God got hold of me at age nineteen, I thought He was calling me to "full-time" ministry, which everyone seemed to define as either being a pastor or a missionary.

I soon found myself on the fast track for a career as a pastor. I did youth ministry, became a donor-supported staff of a parachurch ministry, and eventually found myself on the pastoral staff of a megachurch in Southern California. I even ended up at Regent College, a theological graduate school in Vancouver, BC.

However, during that time, my wife and I believed God was "calling" us back to the one place I swore I'd never return, back to the family business as a gear maker. The business had taken its toll on my father, and he was desperate to retire. He tried selling the

company to the employees, but with so little unity among them, they couldn't come up with a fair offer.

His next option was to find an outside buyer. But the shop was his baby, and it would break his heart to see someone overhaul it and possibly cause his staff to lose their jobs. As the only son, I felt a sense of obligation to honor my parents and help transition the business to new ownership so my parents could enjoy their later years. I'd worked at it since age five—I'm sure my dad violated all sorts of child labor laws.

I remember running a power hacksaw when I was about seven. It was bigger than I was. I drove a lift truck by twelve and became pretty proficient on a lathe by fifteen. Shop classes in high school were a breeze, as I probably knew as much or more about machining than our shop teacher—though he did teach me a lot about welding, drafting, and shop math.

By age twenty-one, I could run any machine in the shop; I was running entire departments. But for a variety of reasons, after I left for California shortly before my twenty-second birthday, I knew I'd never be back. I thought I was destined for more than just working in a machine shop, making gears. Supposedly, I had a special calling to do "divine" service to God by being a clergyman.

Then, during my second year of theological school, when I was married with a newborn son, it seemed clear we were to go back to what I considered the darkest and most depressing place on earth.

Could this be true? It was oily and grimy blue-collar work. Pornography and beer were part of the work culture. In fact, there was so much beer that my father even put a quarter-barrel keg in the lunch room refrigerator for the employees. Surely God

wasn't calling me back to such a depraved place. What could this possibly have to do with being in "ministry"?

That was more than twenty-five years ago, and guess what? I'm still here! My wife and I originally thought we would come back, help reorganize the company, and after a few years, God would reveal His real plan for our lives; we would be called to go somewhere in the world to do real ministry. Never in my wildest dreams (or nightmares) could I imagine I would eventually be convinced that this little gear shop was exactly where God wanted me for the long haul.

Not only that, I came to believe there was nowhere else in the world I could do such effective "ministry" than in and through this small business.

What changed? Maybe it was just a matter of perspective. Unfortunately, the world's religions don't seem to do an adequate job of affirming most of us in our work worlds. The Christian subculture is especially guilty of conveying the idea that a calling is only for those who work in churches or are missionaries—as in "being called to the ministry."

This is not only wrong, but it's just plain stupid! God uses and orchestrates our life experiences for His purposes.

For many years, I had a hard time believing this. As a young, zealous believer at the age of twenty-one, I desperately wanted to serve God in a significant way. But I was "just" a journeyman machinist. Being a gear maker for God didn't seem significant, adventuresome, or sexy. What could God possibly do with a machinist?

I remember going to two Urbana mission conferences in my twenties, trying to discern God's call for my life as I believed being a missionary was the ultimate act of discipleship—in other

words, living my life for God. This conference is held every three years for college students to help them figure out what God may want to do with their lives. I was probably the only machinist out of the nearly 17,000 students, as I wandered up and down the aisles packed with booths of seemingly every mission agency in existence.

I kept asking if this agency or that one could use a machinist.

In both conferences, I didn't receive even a maybe! If I couldn't be a pastor, teacher, doctor, social worker, or airplane pilot for the mission field (which to me meant some far away, exotic place), then no one wanted me.

**Our work is where
God calls us to
minister, to serve.**

The word *ministry* in its simplest form means to serve. We're all called to serve, to be ministers, no matter what our job or profession is. But somewhere along the way, the word got hijacked to refer only to what religious professionals do. One of the unintended consequences of this is that too many of us have come to leave "ministry" to the professionals. We fail to realize how critical our role is in bringing the world in line with how God intended it to be.

As a result, we lose our sense of purpose and fail to embrace our profound influence in cultivating meaningful relationships. We fail to recognize how influential our businesses can be in our communities. Many of us intuitively know that our role in business is important, but the lack of recognition, affirmation, and encouragement we receive from the religious professionals often causes us to doubt and even question whether our work even matters to God.

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Thus, we often get involved in some form of volunteer work in a church or a nonprofit organization, thinking there we'll discover and fulfill a sense of calling to ministry. In the meantime, ironically, the one place we spend the majority of our lives is the one place we're actually making the most impact for God's kingdom—in our places at work.

We're fulfilling God's call for our lives and we may not even realize it.

In his book *Why Business Matters to God (And What Still Needs to Be Fixed)*, Jeff Van Duzer addresses the role of business in the grand scheme of God's intent for us to fill the world and make it fruitful.

There are two legitimate, first order, intrinsic purposes of business: as stewards of God's creation, business leaders should manage their businesses (1) to provide the community with goods and services that will enable it to flourish, and (2) to provide opportunities for meaningful work that will allow employees to express their God-given creativity.²

Considering Van Duzer's first purpose of business—providing goods and services for our communities and the world to survive and thrive—the mere fact that you're reading this means your life has probably been touched by the gears we make at Edgerton Gear. Almost every aluminum can, paper cup, tissue, piece of paper, book, and numerous items you use daily have been produced by the assistance of our gears. You're able to enjoy the conveniences of modern life, and probably to do your own work, because machinists and manufacturers build stuff.

Consider Van Duzer's second purpose for business: providing meaningful employment. We supply employment for three dozen or so hardworking, skilled tradespeople who have families, dreams, and unique talents. Edgerton Gear also offers, as our employees often say, a safe place, an environment that is stable, predictable, and open to them expressing their God-given creativity and talents to contribute to the good of the world.

Furthermore, God continues to use this little machine shop to breathe life and hope into numerous young people. We created a curriculum called Craftsman with Character for high school students. These high school students are introduced to the trades and manufacturing as not only a viable career path, but also as an avenue for discovering their uniqueness and place in the world.

Much of the curriculum is based on job shadowing, as the students follow experienced and sometimes crusty machinists, who end up opening their hearts to these kids. And that's exactly what some of these kids need, as they may well be lost and dejected; we often find they don't fit into the current educational model followed by our public schools.

Since 2012, we've had dozens of boys and girls come through our class, held here at Edgerton Gear. Other businesses and school districts have also embraced our curriculum. I've had numerous opportunities to speak with educators, helping to direct the needed change in our local schools. Just recently, I had the privilege of hosting 130 elementary school teachers in our shop, sharing the "good news" of helping young people find their place in the world.

So can business be a "calling"?

I can honestly say my career in business has been more instrumental and fulfilling than it could ever have been if I'd been working in a church building as a pastor. The work world needs

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pastors too, of course. Yet I can think of no better place to fulfill my calling than in this family business.

Although I originally thought God was calling us back here for not more than five years, it took ten years before what I call Kingdom Values began to take root. Creating a culture rooted in compassion, respect, trust, humility, service, gratitude, and a commitment to excellence is akin to sowing seeds and growing a garden.

The effort, sacrifice, and commitment to cultivate the soil, nurture new growth, and be diligent in dealing with weeds and harmful pests has worn me out over the years. But I'm constantly reminded that this machine shop, which makes gears for equipment all over the world, is God's shop and part of His kingdom. I'm just the caretaker—the steward.

WHAT'S YOUR CALLING?

So what's your calling? Or another way we might ask the question is: What is your life purpose?

What motivates you to get up and go to work every day? Is it to make money? To be your own boss some day? To provide a secure future for you and your family? Are you an entrepreneur who has a burning desire to bring a new product or service to the marketplace? Are you taking over a family business and wanting to keep it going?

Maybe it's all the reasons above. Or maybe you've never really thought about it as anything more than just a job. Whatever your situation or mindset is, let me make one thing perfectly clear: no matter if you're a business owner, a new employee, or in any position in a company, you're in a deeply profound position of

influence, whether you want to be or not. What is your sphere of influence where you work?

You're daily making decisions that affect people's lives in numerous ways. Your job is every bit as important as being a pastor in a formal, religious setting such as church. I'll go even further to say you're probably even more influential than most pastors, because you get to spend forty, fifty, or even sixty hours per week with these folks, compared to just a few hours a week that the religious professionals spend with their constituents.

Not only that, you contribute to the financial livelihood, medical care, and to a large extent, the emotional and spiritual health of those around you. You have the power to create an environment that builds them up as God's beloved creations. Or you can tear people down, using and abusing them as mere objects or tools to make you money.

**What's your
sphere of influence?**

Everyone plays a role in creating a life-affirming culture in the workplace. You help set the tone of how much (or little) your coworkers are valued and appreciated. You're also able to

either allow them to express their unique gifts and talents—or not. You have a unique role to play in developing and growing the morals and ethics in your workplace. It's in the culture you help create that allows them to grow in their capacity to communicate, and to trust and love others.

You also play a role in reining in the dark sides of others, since being in relationship means calling out and confronting selfishness, bitterness, laziness, jealousies, and prejudices, as these can't

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be tolerated if you're striving to have your organization exhibit true inner goodness.

Either you embrace this role and recognize it as one of your primary responsibilities in making your workplace better, or you ignore it and eventually wonder why your company is struggling. Ultimately, we all contribute to making our workplaces better or worse. Which side are you on?

Now, if you've been in the workplace for a while, please don't think that I'm trying to put a guilt trip on you, that you're not living up to some super-spiritual sense of calling. On the contrary, it's my hope that you'll be affirmed not only to realize how awesome you are for having the courage and compassion to go to work every day and provide goods, services, and jobs—but that you'll also be inspired to live on a new level of faith, as you recognize how pivotal a role you play in the kingdom of God.

WHY “THE KINGDOM OF GOD”?

By this point, you probably noticed I've used the phrase “the kingdom of God” several times, and you might be wondering why I think it's important.

In my quest to make sense of what I'm doing in a gear shop that smells of cutting oil, steel, and cast-iron dust, I've come to realize that much of what we have come to believe or think about Christianity has much less to do with going to church than it does with the kingdom of God. The words are pretty impressive, especially if you think of James Earl Jones or someone else with a deep baritone voice booming it out. Simply “going to church” doesn't sound nearly as compelling as **THE KINGDOM OF GOD**, does it?

GOOD WORK

I may not be thrilled about sitting in a pew, but the possibility of being part of God's kingdom gets my attention.

At age nineteen, I hadn't had much experience in going to church or having a religious education. My mother took me to Sunday school when I was a small child, so I knew some of the major Bible stories, but I was still pretty much a blank slate. In my quest to make sense of the world, I started reading the Bible on my own, which I suppose can be dangerous.

As I read the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and took in four different accounts of the life of Jesus, I was impressed by how similar they were and yet different. I later came to understand that it was like four different eyewitnesses giving their story of how they saw and understood a particular time in history. I noticed right away that there wasn't nearly as much talk about "being saved" or church attendance as there was about God's "kingdom."

Jesus repeatedly says things like, "The kingdom of God has come near" and "the kingdom of God is like . . ."

As the scholar and theologian R. Paul Stevens states,

It's not an overstatement to say that the Kingdom of God was the master thought of Jesus. It's used over a hundred times in the Gospels in comparison to only three references to the church. . . .

The Kingdom is not a realm, a territory, but the rule of God as King.³

I tend to think Jesus' words about the new "kingdom" resonated on a much deeper level with His listeners than it does with us today. But that doesn't mean His words don't have huge ramifications for those of us in business or in positions of affluence and

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influence. In fact, I propose that seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness should or could be the determining factor in how we conduct business. But again, if you're wondering what exactly Jesus is talking about, you're not alone. I've been trying to figure this out for the past twenty-six years! I don't claim to have a lot of answers, but I can say with a high degree of confidence that the more I grasp what Jesus was talking about, the greater impact I see our shop making in our community and, ultimately, the world.

THE KINGDOM IN THE WAREHOUSE

Now, many are familiar with Jesus' famous admonition in Matthew 6:33 to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness. Many of us heard it in church when we were in Sunday school and even sang songs about it. But it's not just a sweet children's song. It's radical and disruptive. These were powerful words back then, and I propose they're still powerful words for us if we understand what they really mean.

Perhaps we've lost how radical this kingdom talk really is. Jesus wasn't referring to being holier-than-thou or religious. There was too much of that already, and it was arguably one of the big problems.

In fact, Jesus hated religion when it got in the way of authentic goodness and how people truly connected with God. Being in God's kingdom wasn't just for Sunday. It should impact every part of our lives, including business. In fact, I argue this especially applies to business, as many of us spend the majority of our lives at work, and this is where the vast majority of our world's corruption takes place.

So what did Jesus mean? For the answer to that question, we

need to step back in time and imagine ourselves in first-century Galilee and Judea, where Jesus lived.

Similar to today, it was a cultural, political, and religious hotbed. Because it was part of the Roman Empire, it was under military rule, with an occupying military force of Romans. Steeped in religious tradition, there were strict religious rules and temple rituals that were to be followed if you were Jewish.

The Romans were concerned about civil unrest and radical uprisings from the poor and marginalized. If you were a Jewish man, at least you had some degree of social respectability, but you were still subjected to Roman laws and oppression. If you were a woman or child, you weren't as fortunate, because your social standing wasn't much higher than that of dogs or cattle.

Human trafficking was common, and the ruling class rigged the system so they could keep their positions of wealth and power. There was no social welfare or easy access to medical care. Begging and prostitution were a means of survival. Being an average citizen was a daily challenge since you never knew who would oppress you next—soldiers, politicians, religious leaders, landowners, or anyone who had a monopoly on power and wealth.

With all the competing forces, it was a dog-eat-dog world. In the midst of all this, Jesus came on the scene announcing a new kingdom and the reign of God.

Naturally, if you occupied a position of power and influence, such talk was considered a threat. Immediately, Jesus was targeted to be silenced and killed if necessary. And yet the masses were drawn to Him. Something about His message and teaching inspired hope, and maybe even provided an answer to being used and abused by a multitude of oppressors.

In this context, imagine this homeless carpenter standing

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before the weary masses on a hillside outside of town, who came to hear a possible fresh word from God.

WORDS FOR SEEKERS

“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Matt. 6:25–27)

Jesus went on to ask why anyone should worry about clothing, when the flowers are clothed beautifully by God while doing no work at all. What’s the point of worrying in a world where God cares so wonderfully for birds and flowers? Godless types spend their time chasing their own anxiety, but instead, Jesus says, we should “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (v. 33).

I think an argument can be made that the majority of Jesus’ teachings can be summed up with this simple yet profound instruction: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.*

TRUE INNER GOODNESS

As Dallas Willard points out in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, in the Greek, the righteousness Jesus spoke of is not just a set of moral principles, or an ethic of perfection. Jesus’ word choice

for righteousness could be defined as the quality in people that makes us really right or good—or, in short, “true inner goodness.”⁴ But it’s not our own subjective definition of goodness;

**God’s righteousness =
true inner goodness**

rather it is God Himself, the ultimate standard and reality of goodness. He is what we should seek. For in so doing, our inner

most being is transformed to a vessel of His true inner goodness.

Isn’t that what we all long for in our lives? Consider a world where we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that our government leaders exhibited true inner goodness in their public service, truly being public servants. What would it be like to work for a boss and company that embodied true inner goodness in how they treated employees, vendors, and customers? Imagine a world where advertisers, car sales staff, pastors, priests, roofers, plumbers, the IRS, union bosses, insurance companies, financial advisors, managers, administrators, and anyone else in authority were truly good.

It’s hard to think the world could be like this, yet this is the life Jesus sees for us.

In the following pages, I hope to illustrate how radical and relevant these words are for us in the work world. You want your place of work to stand out? Exhibit true inner goodness.

You want to make a difference in the world? True inner goodness is a force to be reckoned with.

Or maybe you simply want to earn a decent living, support your family, and have a clear conscience in doing so? I’ve yet to come up with anything better than seeking God’s kingdom and His true inner goodness.

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