

Not that many years ago, a little saying started popping up quite a bit, especially in places where younger college students and their influencers hang out. That saying was *follow your passion*. In fact, that saying is a mainstay in discussions of career in one of the most popular textbooks I have used to teach business majors. And I love that! I love that because that saying can be very misleading and is even often very bad advice...and so its inclusion in a college textbook gives me the opportunity to address it directly with students before it might become a problem in their lives.

Now, let's step back for a minute. I am *not* in the least objecting to someone finding a way to live their passion out in their everyday lives. No, it would indeed be and *is* wonderful when someone finds a way to be passionate about their vocational work every day for about 50 years in a row.

But the way this saying of "follow your passion" is typically couched is that you should select your passion and then somehow the world owes you a vocational journey that fulfills your wildest desires, each and every day. But, by and large, that isn't the way the world works, unless your idea of a wonderful vocation is the bliss of cleaning toilets. More importantly, that isn't the way that I have found the Lord works either.

You see, this formulaic saying of "follow your passion" largely owes its very existence to wildly successful innovation and free markets and invention and free choice that has developed robustly in many areas of the world over the last three centuries. In contrast, for millennia, people simply quite often just did the few tasks needed to survive, often just doing what their parents did. In fact, English surnames are often built around family vocations that people did, often for several generations. Last names like Farmer, Baker, and Miller indicated what you and your family did for a living. You see, vocational choices were often quite limited in top-down feudal systems: farmer, soldier, baker, soldier, miller, soldier. So grind it out. Your parents did it, your emperor requires it, it's good enough for you. You get the idea.

But with the explosion of political freedom and free markets and innovation in leading nations the past few centuries, suddenly a typical person *could* possibly end up doing all sorts of quite interesting things for their vocation, like designing fashion or writing novels or playing in a symphony orchestra. But the reality is that not all the people who want to follow their passion can *or even should* try to make that work. So, not to gleefully crush any dreams or unnecessarily burst any bubbles, but let's take a deep breath and analyze all this by breaking this out into a few ideas...and then arrive at a fruitful conclusion.

First, *just because you want to do something really cool for life does not mean that enough people will sustainably pay you to do it for fifty years...or, for that matter, even one year.* Do lots of people want to pay someone to weave baskets in the traditions of a lost tribe from long ago? Well, maybe. But very likely not. This is why that, centuries ago, even some of the very best master painters in Europe had to find even one patron to support them. Earning sustainable income from a narrowly appreciated passion can be quite brutal unless your great-aunt Maggie wants to totally support you for a long time.

Second, *your vocational passion needs to defeat the competencies of competitors in your field of endeavor.* Hey, do you yourself pay people well because it's their passion...or because you value their services highly? Would you pay me to watch me play basketball or would you prefer to pay to watch LeBron James? Practical assessment requires that you thoughtfully determine whether your passion is truly marketable.

Third, *even work with a very passionate dimension includes a lot of boredom or drudgery.* Many young people have a personalized dream of what doing a vocation entails, but the young are necessarily ignorant of the drudgery required to attain and sustain skills at the standards required to make a living. How much study, practice, and then continuous learning does it take for a doctor to perform cutting-edge surgeries?

Fourth, *young people may not grasp the demanding, everyday dimensions of their passion clearly.* In an age of highly protective parenting and ample leisure, and because of the unavoidable ignorance of youth

itself, some young people are far away from having an accurate perspective of the everyday perseverance needed to produce great work. Remember what Thomas Edison, the American inventor with over 1,000 patents, said, “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” Edison’s name lives on robustly as one of the greatest inventors ever—and this happened, in Edison’s own opinion, because of the perspiration factor!

Fifth, *your passionate work may very well get replaced by a computer which dispassionately does what you do, only better.* From music to art to a host of other areas, digital software capabilities have replaced or radically altered what the human involved often does in order to deliver strong results—often much improved results, at least from the standpoint of the ultimate consumer. Are you passionate about old processes that are being overwhelmed by digital innovations? Ever-improving technology can and does grind away with magnificent results that often dispassionately replace human effort at much less cost.

Sixth, *the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence.* Disenchantment can quickly set in and passion for “something else” can set in quickly. Will that new focus really be significantly different? Really?

Seventh, *you can robustly fulfill your passion in non-vocational ways, like hobbies or volunteering.* Period.

Eighth, *your gifting does not always automatically align with your passion.* Here, we’re talking specifically about Scripture. God surely made you with natural gifting in the womb—the Psalmist points the way on that—and the Holy Spirit will equip you with supernatural gifting, as the Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians. If you work diligently over a long period of time at using and fulfilling these giftings, you can be sure you will become very competent. You may not be passionate about your gifting. But being competent in serving others can still be richly rewarding.

Ninth, *since God made you for a purpose of His, then your gifting—which is not necessarily your passion—well, then, that gifting is likely where God will most effectively use you.* Are you so blinded by your passion that you don’t work at developing your gifting? Are you prepared to renew your mind as commanded in Romans 12:2 and become passionate about using the practical gifting God has given you?

Tenth, *Jesus did not say, “Follow your passion.” Instead, He actually said to deny yourself and “follow Me.”* People who follow Christ fully become passionate about what He’s passionate about...and merely human passions can very much fade in comparison...and perhaps they should, if that is part of denying ourselves. Bluntly, are we focused on more fleshly dimensions of our passions or the spiritual depth of God’s direction for our lives?

Here’s the deal. Each of us will be most fulfilled when sincerely following Jesus...and that may be exactly what your passions line up with. But perhaps not. Are you prepared for that?

A fitting word here, this coming from Psalm 37:4 (ESV), which says, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” This is profound. First, we’re commanded to delight ourselves in the Lord...yes, delighting in Him so much that we want to serve Him in ways important to Him, say, like “going forth and making disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19-20) That’s God’s passion!

Hey, God’s interests are designed to become our overriding passions. We might not have any reason whatsoever to give up our human passions. But I would bet those human passions rightly take a distant second position to our appointments in life for serving God. So. Should we follow our passions? Yes, if our passions are grounded in or congruent with denying ourselves and following Jesus. But the sure way, the narrow way, the Way of the Lord, is to follow Jesus and let the chips of our human passions fall where they may, for better or for worse. Now, *that’s* a robust life in Christ—for His purposes and His plans.

A&A: Application & Action

1. When you were born again or when you were going really deep with Christ for the first time, did your passions change? Should they? Explain. And next consider this: since that time, have your passions wandered from the initial “fire” you had for Jesus and His purposes, here and now?

2. In your experience, how does a Christian distinguish between passions that are largely fleshly or worldly and those directed by God? Do you think worldly passions are “fun” and fulfilling while Godly passions are necessarily the opposite of that...a distasteful grind?

3. What does Christian maturity look like when thinking about passion and vocation? Explain.