

Find and Focus on the
Work You Were Created to Do

MASTER *of* ONE

Jordan Raynor

Best-selling Author of *Called to Create*

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*To Kara, whose loving sacrifice
allows me to pursue mastery of the
work the Father has created me to do.*

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Contents

Introduction ix

PART I: THE PURPOSE *of* MASTERY

Chapter 1: Excellence in All Things 3
Chapter 2: Proclaiming the Excellencies of God 21
Chapter 3: The Ministry of Excellence 39

PART II: THE PATH *to* MASTERY

Chapter 4: Start with “The One” in Mind 57
Chapter 5: Explore 77
Chapter 6: Choose 97
Chapter 7: Eliminate 117
Chapter 8: Master 135

PART III: THE PROMISE *of* MASTERY

Chapter 9: Salt and Light 157
Chapter 10: The Room Where It Happens 175
Chapter 11: Share the Master’s Happiness 189

Acknowledgments 201

Notes 207

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Introduction

There's an old saying that goes, "He's a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none," used to describe someone who is good at many different things but not excellent at any one of them. Early in my career this described me perfectly. By the time I was twenty-five, I had already had nearly a dozen jobs, including working in a call center, playing piano for tips, selling newspapers, working for a tech startup, starting and selling my own tech startup, running a political campaign, and interning at the White House. Along the way I picked up a diverse set of skills that helped me achieve a reasonable level of success and a more-than-healthy dose of self-confidence.

But one of my mentors and personal heroes was about to cut me down to size. Sitting across the table at lunch was Rick Mortensen, a master of one craft, whose career looked quite different from mine. Rick had spent nearly three decades building an incredibly successful civil engineering practice. It seemed like everyone in the community knew and respected Rick due to his excellent work and that of his firm. But Rick wasn't just excellent at the office; he was also an excellent husband, father, and follower of Jesus Christ. Rick was the real deal, and every time he agreed to have lunch with me, I tried to soak in as much wisdom as I could.

The topic of conversation at this particular lunch was my career. I was considering leaving the company that had bought my first startup, and I wanted Rick's advice on the next professional move I should make. As I reminded him of the winding road my career had taken up

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to that point, he leaned forward and asked me a question I'll never forget: "Jordan, what is the one thing you want to *really* sink your teeth into?" The question caught me off guard. *One thing?* I repeated in my head. The question seemed unanswerable. There were *so* many things I wanted to do in my work. How in the world could I choose just one to focus on?

While Rick was too gracious to say it, he was pointing out that I was a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. While it pained me to admit it, he was right. I had yet to find "my thing" that I was prepared to go big on, or in the words of my mentor, to "sink my teeth into." But as the weeks and months after that lunch went by, I realized Rick was asking an essential question that I had to answer for myself.

MASTERS OF NONE

I don't think my story is unique. In fact, I think it is more common now than ever before. Perhaps the most significant research ever conducted on the topic of excellence in the workplace was completed by Dr. Anders Ericsson, who found that in order to achieve mastery in any field, one must spend roughly ten thousand hours purposefully practicing that skill.¹ *Ten thousand hours!* To put that in perspective, let's do some quick math. Let's assume that you work an average of fifty hours per week, and you spend twenty of those fifty hours checking email and responding to the seemingly endless inbound requests that demand your attention. That leaves you with thirty hours a week to work on the particular skill you are seeking to master. Even if you were somehow able to lock yourself in a room and never take another meeting or call again, it would still take you more than *six years* to achieve mastery.

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Given the way we work today, it's no wonder we are a society of jacks-and-jills-of-all-trades and masters of none. A recent study found that 21 percent of millennials reported changing jobs in the last year.² Another study found that this most recent generation of workers will change jobs four times in their first decade out of college.³ But perhaps the most significant trend in our society's move away from mastery is the rise of the "gig economy" with people of all ages trading in traditional full-time employment for a smorgasbord of different part-time jobs. Some experts estimate that more than 40 percent of the American workforce will be independent contractors by the time this book is in your hands!⁴

But this is not a book about the gig economy, and I'm not trying to make you feel guilty about hopping from job to job. Trust me, I am the *last* person who can criticize professional exploration. (My average tenure in any given endeavor is roughly two years.) I cite the research above to make a point I think we all intuitively know to be true: many of us are making "a millimeter of progress in a million directions" with our lives and our careers.⁵ We are good at a lot of different things, but we aren't excellent, masterful, or exceptional at any one of them. We are overcommitted, overwhelmed, and overstressed, spending way too much time focused on minutiae rather than the work we believe God created us to do.

We are overcommitted, overwhelmed, and overstressed, spending way too much time focused on minutiae rather than the work we believe God created us to do.

As you will see later in this book, being a jack-of-all-trades is not bad in and of itself. Most of the time, it is simply a good and inevitable

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by-product of exploring our calling. But the idea of being described as a mediocre “master of none” should make us Christians sick to our stomachs. Why? Because mediocre work fails to accomplish the essence of the Christian life: to serve others and to glorify God.

You and I are called to be image bearers of the exceptional God. In Ephesians 5:1, Paul instructs the church “as beloved children” to “be imitators of God” (ESV). Commenting on this passage, theologian Andreas Köstenberger wrote, “How should we respond to God’s excellence? In short, we should seek to imitate and emulate it. . . . As God’s redeemed children, we are to strive to be like God. This, it appears, includes striving for excellence.”⁶ John Piper put it this way: “God created me—and you—to live with a single, all-embracing, all-transforming passion—namely, a passion to glorify God by enjoying and displaying his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life.”⁷ Are we as the Church doing such masterful work that the world can see the “supreme excellence” of the Father shining through his children? Or are we masters of none, doing mediocre or perhaps even good work but little that’s excellent enough to make the world take notice of the exceptional God we serve?

One of my favorite descriptions of Jesus comes from Mark 7:37: “People were overwhelmed with amazement. ‘He [Jesus] has done everything well.’” As followers of Christ, we are to seek to imitate Jesus in every way imaginable. Can we honestly say we are doing *everything* well? Can we say we are doing *anything* masterfully well?

When we are stretched as thin as most of us are today, we are all but guaranteed to do everything with mediocrity rather than mastery. As Köstenberger pointed out, “This mediocrity has in many cases become a curse—a curse that has kept us from reaching our personal, creative, and [professional] potential given to us by God, and has prevented us

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from impacting other believers as well as unbelievers for the glory of God and for his kingdom.”⁸

Years ago, Franky Schaeffer summarized this idea in a book titled *Addicted to Mediocrity*. While I agree with much of what Schaeffer says in that volume, I take issue with the idea that it is mediocrity to which we are addicted. Nobody enjoys feeling as if they are doing shoddy work. We all yearn to be masters of a craft. But *we are* addicted to something else that leads to mediocrity: the idea of more. For too long, we have believed the lie that more activity, more roles, and more responsibility equals greater effectiveness. As this book will show, nothing could be further from the truth. The path to doing our best work for God’s glory and the good of others is the path of “less but better.”⁹

So, in a world with an unprecedented flexibility and number of options for our work, how do we avoid becoming masters of none? How do we find the work we can do most exceptionally well in service of God and others? What is the solution to being a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none? The solution is becoming a *master of one*.

MASTERS OF ONE

While you’re likely familiar with the phrase “jack-of-all-trades, master of none,” you may not know that the saying is rumored to be a misquote of Benjamin Franklin, who supposedly encouraged his readers to be a “Jack of all trades, and a master of *one*.”¹⁰ It appears that Franklin was making an entirely different point than the phrase is used to make today. He was saying that, while it is good to be well rounded and have a wide variety of interests, skills, and hobbies, there ought to be one thing that we go big on, that we sink our teeth into, that we pursue mastery of.

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Whether or not Franklin was the one to utter this phrase is irrelevant. The fact is that in order to best glorify God and love others through our vocations, we must do our work with excellence. And we can't do our most excellent work until we discern the work God has created us to do most exceptionally well, and then, once we've found it, focus on becoming a master of that craft. Throughout this book, I will build a case around this core idea, leaning heavily on God's Word, extensive research of the world's best business and scientific literature, my own personal experiences, and the stories of more than twenty Christians who are undeniable masters of one vocational thing. I am confident you will walk away from this book convinced of what so many others have come to hold as a central truth of life: the path to making the greatest impact through our work is the path of less but better, of continually pruning our careers in order to focus on the work we were created to do most exceptionally well for the glory of God and the good of others.

Except for God's Word, perhaps no book has influenced this one more than Greg McKeown's *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. In it, McKeown said, "When individuals are involved in too many disparate activities—even good activities—they can fail to achieve their essential mission."¹¹ I don't think anybody in history understood this better than Jesus himself. Even though the Son of God was omnipotent—fully God *and* fully man—he still displayed a remarkable understanding of the natural limits time and attention place on our ability to fulfill our "essential mission," or what Jesus referred to as the work the Father gave him to do (see John 17:4).

In the gospel of Luke, we are told, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Another translation says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusa-

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lem.” The picture here isn’t one of Jesus scattering himself across a myriad of nonessential activities. Jesus was laser focused on his one thing: preaching the good news of redemption in word and in deed from Galilee to Judea and ultimately to a cross in Jerusalem. Along the way to fulfilling that mission, Jesus stopped by the home of Mary and Martha in what has become a legendary biblical account. As Luke shared:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (10:38–42)

Jesus had the mind-set of an essentialist on his way to fulfilling the one thing the Father called him to do, and here he is teaching Mary and Martha to do the same. In that moment, the one essential thing was not cooking another dish or cleaning up the house—it was sitting at the feet of Jesus. Commenting on this passage, Pastor Timothy Keller hit the nail on the head: “[Mary] decided what was important, and she did not let the day-to-day get her away from that. As a result, she was drawn into a greatness we don’t even dream of. Because we are more like Martha than Mary, we’re sinking in a sea of mediocrity.”¹²

The world is constantly pressuring us to be more like Martha than

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Mary, convincing us that the path to happiness and impact is the path of more—more jobs, more skills, more responsibility, more information, more fun, and more money. But here Jesus offers us a better, simpler, saner way. He offers us the path of less but better: “*Few things are needed . . . indeed only one.*” In a world full of Marthas, let us allow Jesus’s words to permeate every aspect of our lives, especially our work. Instead of scattering our gifts and energy in a million different directions, let us seek the one vocational thing we believe the Father has given us to do and then master that work for his glory and the good of others.

A GUIDE TO THIS BOOK

In my previous book *Called to Create*, I made the case that our work is one of the primary ways we reveal God’s character to the world and love and serve our neighbors as ourselves. This book builds upon that theme, helping you find, focus on, and master the work God has created you to do most exceptionally well.

I’ve divided the book into three parts. In part 1 we will dig deeper into “The Purpose of Mastery,” a topic we have just begun to explore. These first three chapters will continue making the case that, as Christians, we ought to have the highest standards for excellence in our work and that the strategy for producing exceptional work is to master one vocational thing at a time. In chapter 1, NFL Hall of Fame coach Tony Dungy will help us understand the biblical mandate for “excellence in all things” and how that mandate forces us to be incredibly focused in our work. In chapter 2, we will see how masterful work can proclaim the excellencies of God by taking a visit to la Sagrada Família, the world’s largest church, and by getting to know an Olympic gold

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medalist before and after his salvation. Finally, in chapter 3, you will meet a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) nurse and the National Basketball Association's first female CEO, both of whom demonstrate how focused, excellent work is necessary to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Part 2 is the longest and most practical section of the book. In it we will walk together along “The Path to Mastery”: a biblical approach to finding and focusing on the one thing God has created you to do most exceptionally well in your work. This is a process so nuanced that it can't be reduced to a one-size-fits-all formula. However, through my extensive research and interviews, I have uncovered clear themes that will help you discover and master the work God has called you to do. In chapter 4, we will define what we're looking for in our “one thing” and make the important distinction that our chosen area of focus can be specific or quite broad, as in the case of C. S. Lewis, who applied his one masterful skill of teaching in many different contexts. Then, with a clear picture of what it is we are looking for in our one thing, we will spend chapters 5 through 8 walking down the path to mastery together, with each chapter dedicated to one of the four steps: Explore, Choose, Eliminate, and Master. In this part of the book, we will answer questions such as:

- What is the quickest path to experimenting with and choosing your one vocational thing?
- How do you know when you've found your one thing or, in other words, your calling?
- Is a calling something you choose or something that chooses you?
- Once you've said yes to your one thing, how practically do you say no to everything else?

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- How do you get masterful at something if you can't find the right mentor?
- What are the keys to mastery that separate masters from their less masterful counterparts?

To help answer these questions, you will read compelling stories of masters you may know (such as Fred Rogers, Chip and Joanna Gaines, Emily Ley, and charity: water's Scott Harrison) and many you likely don't know (including a teacher, a pilot, and a social entrepreneur).

Finally, in part 3 you will hear inspiring stories that illustrate "The Promise of Mastery." In chapter 9 you will hear from Lecrae, Andrew Stanton (director of *Stranger Things* and *Finding Nemo*), and Douglas Gresham (producer of *The Chronicles of Narnia* films), who make a compelling case that masterful work helps Christians fulfill their role as salt and light (see Matthew 5:13–15). In chapter 10 you will meet masters who have leveraged their power for the good of others, including Sherron Watkins, a Christ follower who, through her excellent work as an accountant at Enron Corporation, was in a position to help bring down one of the largest and most corrupt companies in American history. Finally, in chapter 11 we will unpack the biblical promise that when we pursue masterful work as a means of glorifying God and serving others, we are invited to share in our heavenly Master's happiness.

Throughout this book (and especially in part 2), you will likely find yourself wanting a more hands-on tool as you seek to find, focus on, and master your one vocational thing. To facilitate this, I have developed a free "Master of One Notebook," filled with practical prompts, additional resources, and plenty of space for you to work out how the ideas in this book apply to your own work. This is also a great tool to help you work through the concepts of this book with a small group. To download the free notebook, visit jordanraynor.com/MOO.

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YOUR ONE THING

In the months and years after that lunch with my mentor Rick, his question stayed tucked away in the back of my mind: “*What is the one thing you want to really sink your teeth into?*” Through many years of trials and failures, prayers and pivots, the Lord made it clear to me what my one thing is: I am an entrepreneur, skilled at the art of taking calculated risks to create new things for the good of others.

While my one thing is fairly broad, I apply it with an ever-increasing amount of focus. When I started writing this book, I was applying my skills as an entrepreneur to just two projects: writing books like this one and running the venture-backed tech startup, Threshold 360,

The path to doing our most exceptional work is the path of less but better.

as its CEO. Through tremendous personal sacrifice, I was able to fulfill both of those roles with excellence for a while; but as this book began to take shape, I became so convinced of its core thesis that I decided to do what many people told me was crazy—I replaced myself as CEO of Threshold in order to focus all my professional energy on creating products like the one you hold in your hand. That was the most difficult decision I’ve ever made professionally. And while it required me to leave a team I love (and a relatively stable income), I’m totally convinced the decision was necessary. Why? Because I’ve learned what I believe you will be convinced of by the end of this book: the path to doing our most exceptional work is the path of less but better. It’s not about filling up your calendar or spreading yourself so thin that you can’t possibly fulfill your commitments with any degree of excellence. You achieve true mastery when you identify the few things God has created you to do

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most exceptionally well and work at them “with all your heart, as working for the Lord” (Colossians 3:23).

Maybe you’re at a turning point in your career but you have no idea where God is calling you next. Maybe you’re doing work today that you believe to be “your thing,” but you’re looking for fresh perspective on the topic of vocation. Or maybe you committed to your one professional thing years ago, and you are looking to better understand what you can do to become a world-class master of your craft. Wherever you are on the path to mastery, this book is for you. I pray the Lord uses this book to build stronger conviction about the work he has called you to do and that you walk away with a treasure trove of practical wisdom to help you do more exceptional work for the glory of God and the good of others.

Let’s begin!

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Part I

THE PURPOSE
of **MASTERY**

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Chapter 1

Excellence in All Things

Whether you eat or drink or whatever
you do, do it all for the glory of God.

I CORINTHIANS 10:31

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There's no denying that Tony Dungy was a master of his craft. During his twenty-eight-year career, Dungy rose to become one of the most successful and beloved coaches in the history of the National Football League. In his first job as a head coach, Dungy did the seemingly impossible by turning the perennially pathetic Tampa Bay Buccaneers into a playoff-bound powerhouse. Then, after a move to Indianapolis, Dungy led the Colts to their first Super Bowl victory in thirty-six years, making Dungy the first African American head coach to ever hoist the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

As anyone close to Dungy will tell you, the soft-spoken coach is intensely passionate about the pursuit of excellence, holding the highest standards for himself and his players. But what inspired Dungy to work with such a passion for exceptionalism? Much like the other masters throughout this book, Dungy's motivation for excellence in his work stemmed from something much deeper, more sustainable, and more God honoring than the pursuit of fame, fortune, and trophies. Dungy was inspired by his parents—both of whom were masterful educators—to pursue excellence as a means of glorifying God and serving others. Remembering his parents' example, Dungy said, "My parents were definitions of excellence in teaching. It was important to them to be the best that they could be—not for personal reasons, but that was their concept of serving. They wanted to serve people in the best way possible."¹

That commitment to mastery had a lasting impact on Dungy, who

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has thought a lot about excellence throughout his career. “Excellence is doing something at the very highest level it can be done using all your capabilities and everything God has given you,” Dungy said. “I talk about excellence a lot, because I think from a Christian perspective, that can get lost sometimes. . . . We don’t always think of excellence as a Christian concept, but I think God does desire us to be excellent at what we do. . . . Just because we’re Christians doesn’t mean we should take the approach to just move forward and let the Lord handle it. . . . He wants us to be excellent in what we do. He’s placed us in our careers. . . . We do have a responsibility to be the very best we can be in whatever field we decide to take up. We all run to receive a prize and to win. I never want to forget that part of it. We should run to win.”²

Throughout his career, Dungy won a lot. If there was ever a doubt that Dungy was a master of his craft as a coach, his induction into the NFL’s Pro Football Hall of Fame certainly removed that skepticism. As Dungy took the stage in Canton, Ohio, to receive the Ring of Excellence, the audience of adoring fans, family, and former players erupted in rapturous applause. Clearly these fans were celebrating Dungy’s excellence on the field. But as anyone who knows Dungy will tell you, they were applauding something much more; they were celebrating a man who understands that, while he is called to be excellent in his work, his faith commands him to be excellent in *all* things, including as a husband and father.

In a moving speech, Marvin Harrison (Dungy’s former player and fellow Hall of Fame inductee) addressed his former coach directly, saying, “Coach Dungy. My final head coach. I could sit up here for . . . fifteen minutes and tell you about how important it was to have you as my coach and talk about football. But what you brought to our team and to me was more important than anything. You taught us how to be

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teammates. You taught us how to be men. But the most important thing is you taught us about fatherhood. . . . So, I want to thank you for that.”³

Harrison’s sentiment has been echoed by countless players Dungy has coached and mentored throughout his career. But Dungy didn’t just tell others how to be an excellent father; he modeled it. I grew up in Tampa Bay, and I still remember seeing Dungy with his kids at sporting events where my friends and I were playing. Even at the height of his career, Dungy always seemed to make the time to cheer his kids on from the sidelines.

“If you’re only focused on excellence in your job or excellence on the field, you will get totally out of balance and out of whack,” Dungy said. “Yes, I need to be excellent as a coach. I need to be excellent as a Christian. I need to be excellent as a father. I need to be excellent as a person in the community and strive for that excellence everywhere and not just in one area.”⁴

Dungy’s comments bring to mind the motto of the late great pastor, Dr. D. James Kennedy, who encouraged his congregation to pursue “excellence in all things and all things to God’s glory.”⁵ While this book is primarily about excellence in your chosen work, Kennedy and Dungy remind us of a biblical truth that is critical to understand before we progress past this first chapter: As Christians, God has called us to be excellent in *all* things, not just in our chosen vocation. 1 Corinthians 10:31 makes clear the standard we are called to: “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” In

It is precisely because we are called to be excellent in all things that we can’t commit to being excellent at many things.

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whatever we do, we are to do it *all* for the glory of God, never settling for anything short of excellence.

Glorify is a word we throw around so much in Christian circles that it has become tragically difficult to define. In fact, one of the most highlighted passages in the Kindle edition of my previous book is John Piper's definition of *glorify*. Since so many people found that definition helpful, allow me to reintroduce it here. According to Piper, "Glorifying' means feeling and thinking and acting in ways that *reflect his greatness*, that make much of God, that give evidence of the supreme greatness of all his attributes and the all-satisfying beauty of his manifold perfections" (emphasis added).⁶

You and I are called to reflect God's greatness and imitate his character to the world. This is the very essence of what it means to glorify God. But what is his character? Scripture describes God in many ways, but it is his character of excellence that is perhaps most visible to us. So, when Scripture commands that in "whatever you do," you "do it all for the glory of God," we are being called to the passionate pursuit of excellence in whatever we commit ourselves to.

All of us have been called to multiple roles in life. We have been called to be excellent wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, friends and church members. If we are going to fulfill all these callings with excellence while also pursuing excellence in our chosen work, it is going to require a tremendous amount of focus in our careers. Again, recall Dr. Anders Ericsson's study, which states that mastery of any vocation requires roughly ten thousand hours of "purposeful practice." The reality is that excellence requires an unusual amount of hard work and dedication. Given this, and the many things outside our careers that God has called us to be excellent in, there is simply no way we can pursue mastery at many things professionally at

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the same time. It defies the laws of science and time. It is precisely because we are called to be excellent in all things that we can't commit to being excellent at many things.

You and I have a choice to be either a master of none or a master of one. We must pick a path. The path to excellence in our work is the path of singularity. If we want to make our greatest contribution to the world for the glory of God and the good of others, we are going to have to adopt the mind-set of a craftsman and get really focused and insanely good at the thing God has put us on this earth to do.

The path to excellence in our work is the path of singularity.

If you are still harboring some resistance to this idea that the path to excellence is the path of less but better, I'm willing to bet that you have been a victim of being sold one (or more) of three lies about work and calling that are so pervasive today they often go unchecked. If we are to pursue excellence in all things for the glory of God and the good of others, we need to challenge the following conventional wisdom and replace these lies with biblical truths.

LIE #1: YOU CAN BE ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE

John Mark Comer would love to have been a professional basketball player. As a kid, he loved watching *Pistol Pete*, the classic movie about Pete Maravich who, through years of practice, grew to become a basketball great. Comer dreamed of living a similar story and eventually playing for the National Basketball Association (NBA). "There was just one problem," Comer said. "I *suck* at basketball. I mean, I'm really, *really* bad at it. It took me a while to figure that out, and then I had to

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go bury the dream in my backyard, along with my ball and jersey. It was a sad day.”⁷

Today, Comer is the teaching pastor at Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon. He’s also one of my favorite authors.* One of the things I love about Comer is that he is super clear about the work God has called him to master. “Usually God’s calling is a short list—just a few things,” Comer said. “In my case, I’m called to lead my church, teach the Scriptures, and bring my family along for the ride. That’s what I’m saying yes to.”⁸

But while Comer is clear on his mission, he empathizes with others still searching for the work God has created them to do. This is largely due to Comer’s recognition that for way too long we have been sold the pervasive lie that we can be anything we want to be. “I was brought up in a culture that essentially said, John Mark, you can do anything you put your mind to,” Comer said. “If you work hard enough, if you believe in yourself, if you’re patient, you can do anything. This is *such* a middle-class-and-above American way to think. Nobody in the developing world would ever talk like that. . . . But . . . this idea of ‘I can be anything I want’ is bred into us by our ancestry. And it’s not all bad. It gave me the courage to dream and ideate and step out in life.

“But it’s also dangerous because, sadly, *it’s not true*. I *can’t* be anything I want to be, no matter how hard I work or how much I believe in myself. All I can be is me. Who the Creator made John Mark to be.”⁹

Comer hits the nail on the head, expounding upon a truth that is embedded deeply in Scripture: God has created each of us uniquely, with particular passions and gifts. The Bible doesn’t portray God as

* Seriously, if you have yet to read Comer’s Garden City, put this book down and go read that.

some manager of a cosmic manufacturing plant, pushing a button and sitting back to watch the production of millions of homogenous humans. No, all throughout Scripture, the biblical authors use beautiful language to portray God as an intentional craftsman, putting time and great care into the design of each unique human being. Consider the following verses (emphasis added):

Before I *formed you* in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart. (Jeremiah 1:5)

Your hands *shaped me* and *made me*. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you *molded me* like clay. (Job 10:8–9)

For you created my inmost being; you *knit me* together in my mother's womb. (Psalm 139:13)

You get the point. God has meticulously designed each one of us. As the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:6, this includes God's granting of "different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us." God created you and me with a unique mix of passions and talents, and he has called us to steward those gifts well. In other words, there are certain kinds of work that God has designed us to do exceptionally well and, naturally, other kinds of work at which we are unlikely to excel.

But haven't technology, access to information, and economic prosperity made it possible for us to choose to do any work imaginable? No doubt. We are living at a time when we have an unprecedented number of options for our work. Now more than ever we have the ability to

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choose virtually any career we want. However, just because we have more options doesn't mean we can do everything with excellence.

Pretend for a second that you have decided you want your car to be a boat. You live near a lake and have the option to drive your car into the water; but if you do, you aren't going to get very far. Your car may be an excellent car, but it is never going to be an exceptional boat. Why? Because your car was designed to be a car, not a boat.

The same is true for you and me in our careers. Yes, you can choose to be anything you want to be. But if our mandate is "excellence in all things and all things for God's glory," we would be wise to understand how God has created us and choose work that aligns with his design, ensuring that we make our greatest possible contribution to the world. If we choose work that is out of line with the gifts God has given us, we may be temporarily satisfied, but we won't be on the path to mastery, with the potential to become the very best versions of ourselves for the sake of God's glory and the good of others.

No matter how hard John Mark Comer tries, he's never going to play basketball in the NBA. He may enjoy shooting hoops in the front yard with his kids, but basketball is never going to be the one thing that Comer does masterfully well. In the words of the old US Army slogan, we can only "Be all we can be." You and I aren't called to "Be all we *want* to be" or "Be all we *choose* to be." We are called to be the most excellent versions of who God has *created* us to be. Comer put this well when he said, "Our job isn't to fit into some mold or prove something to the world; it's to unlock who God's made us to be, and then go be it."¹⁰

The lie that we can be anything we want to be is particularly dangerous because it paves the way to a second, more subtle lie that so many of us have fallen for.

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LIE #2: YOU CAN DO EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO DO

Lounging in the living room of our townhouse in Tallahassee, I declared to my college roommates that I wanted to move to Nashville to be a songwriter.

“Of course you do,” my roommate Ryan said, rolling his eyes as he hopped off the couch and exited the room. When he returned, Ryan was carrying a pen and a pad of paper. “Okay, let’s make a list of everything you’ve ever said you wanted to do.” It took almost no time for my roommates and me to fill the page with a long and diverse list of my ambitions, which included (but were certainly not limited to) president of the United States, Oscar-winning composer, cast member of a Broadway musical, best-selling author, flight attendant, cruise ship piano player, speechwriter, Josh Lyman from *The West Wing*, and television producer.

“You’re going to need nine lives to accomplish half of this,” Ryan said. The comment made in jest illustrates a more serious point: when we adopt the lie that we can be anything we want to be, we can easily fall for the tangential lie that we can do everything we want to do, ignoring the laws of time and trade-offs. In his book *Essentialism*, Greg McKeown put it this way: “The idea that we can have it all and do it all is not new. This myth has been peddled for so long, I believe virtually everyone alive today is infected with it. It is sold in advertising. It is championed in corporations. It is embedded in job descriptions that provide huge lists of required skills and experience as standard. It is embedded in university applications that require dozens of extracurricular activities. What *is* new is how especially damaging this myth is today, in a time when choice and expectations have increased exponentially.”¹¹

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The truth is, you can't "do it all" so long as you accept that God has called you to excellence in all things. I'm reminded of this every time I look at a restaurant menu that offers a smorgasbord of different cuisines. Sorry, but there is simply no way a restaurant serving Mexican food and

You can't "do it all" so long as you accept that God has called you to excellence in all things.

barbecue and pizza and sushi is going to produce any dish with excellence. It's just not possible.* The same is true in our vocations. We can't be anything we want to be and we can't do everything we want to do so long as we are committed to offering the Lord and the world our very best.

There are two primary limits on our ability to do everything we want to do well: time and attention. Throughout Scripture, God is constantly reminding his people of the brevity of life. We only have so much time on this earth to accomplish the mission God sets before us. For this reason, the biblical authors call for us to carefully consider our lives and to think intentionally about how we are utilizing the time that God has gifted us. Consider James, Jesus's own half brother. In the letter bearing his name, James addressed his readers saying, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). In John 9:4, Jesus put it this way: "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work." In light of eternity, we all have but a moment to "do the works of him who sent [us]"—loving God and loving others through excellent work.

But time isn't the only thing limiting our ability to do everything

* Unless you're The Cheesecake Factory: the exception that proves the rule.

we want to do with excellence. We also have limited attention. Perhaps one of today's most widely accepted ideas of productivity is that of multitasking, a myth that the scientific community continues to refute in study after study. It turns out that what we refer to as "multitasking" can be more accurately described as "task shifting," with our brains being forced to shift from one task to the other and back again. These shifts in attention don't make us more productive. In fact, they are terribly detrimental to our pursuit of excellence. One study in particular reports that multitasking decreases overall productivity by up to 40 percent!¹² In order to do our most excellent work, we must focus our full attention in one direction at a time.

So then, how should we respond to the brutal reality of our limited time and attention? As Christians committed to pursuing excellence in all things and all things for the glory of God, we respond by accepting the fact that we can't do everything we want to do professionally, at least not at the same time. Scattering our time and attention across many disparate endeavors will almost assuredly lead to mediocrity, not mastery. Andrew Carnegie once made this case eloquently to a group of college students, saying:

The concerns which fail are those which have scattered their capital, which means that they have scattered their brains also. They have investments in this, or that, or the other, here, there and everywhere. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket" is all wrong. I tell you "put all your eggs in one basket, and then watch that basket." Look round you and take notice; men who do that do not often fail. It is easy to watch and carry the one basket. It is trying to carry too many baskets that breaks most

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eggs in this country. He who carries three baskets must put one on his head, which is apt to tumble and trip him up. One fault of the American business man is lack of concentration.¹³

In Ephesians 5:15–16, the apostle Paul implores us to “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” In light of the reality of trade-offs and our limited time and attention, it would be unwise for us to scatter ourselves across many professional pursuits at the same time. The wiser path is the one we will be exploring throughout this book, making every effort to discern the one vocational thing God has called us to in this season of life and working at it with all our hearts (see Colossians 3:23). It is there—in the pursuit of becoming a master of one—that we Christians have our best shot of bringing glory to God and serving our neighbors well through our work. When we say yes to everything, we say yes to nothing, including the unique work the Father has put us on this earth to do.

LIE #3: YOUR HAPPINESS IS THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF WORK

I’ve saved the most pervasive and deeply entrenched lie for last, as it really sets the tone for the rest of this book. For decades, well-intentioned Christ followers have been doling out a piece of advice that seems loving on the surface but in reality is quite dangerous. The advice goes something like this: “Do whatever makes you happy. Follow your passions. Chase your dreams.” Cal Newport, a professor of computer science at Georgetown University and the best-selling author of *Deep Work* and *So Good They Can’t Ignore You*, calls this conventional wisdom “the

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passion hypothesis” in which we are told that “the key to occupational happiness is to first figure out what you’re passionate about and then find a job that matches this passion.”¹⁴ As we will see in chapter 5, identifying our God-given passions is an important step on the path to mastery; but making the pursuit of vocational happiness our primary and most immediate aim turns out to be terrible advice.

Why? Put simply, it doesn’t work. As scientists are beginning to understand, passion *follows* mastery, not the other way around. In his excellent book *So Good They Can’t Ignore You*, Newport cites the work of Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor of organizational behavior at Yale University, who has spent years seeking to understand what leads people across a variety of professions (from doctors to clerical workers and computer programmers) to describe their work as a “calling” as opposed to a “job” or “career.” In one study, Wrzesniewski surveyed a group of college administrative assistants, people with the exact same job responsibilities in roles that few people would choose if they were following the overly simplistic advice to just do what you love. In the study, Wrzesniewski discovered that “the strongest predictor of an assistant seeing her work as a calling was the number of years spent on the job. In other words, the more experience an assistant had, the more likely she was to love her work. . . . In Wrzesniewski’s research, the happiest, most passionate employees are not those who followed their passion into a position, but instead those who have been around long enough to become good at what they do.” Surprisingly, Wrzesniewski was able to find zero evidence to support the conventional wisdom that if you simply seek to do whatever makes you happy by following your passions, you are guaranteed to find a satisfying career. Instead, she discovered that passion is a byproduct of mastery.¹⁵

This startling conclusion flies in the face of conventional wisdom.

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In our culture, which demands instant gratification, many of us have bought the lie that we'll discover the deep satisfaction of vocation almost immediately upon finding the job that perfectly matches some preexisting passion. However, that is almost never the case, as scientific studies and the stories of masters throughout this book will show.

As Newport points out, subscribing to the passion hypothesis has dangerous consequences, which, ironically, make us less happy in our work. "The more I studied the issue, the more I noticed that the passion hypothesis convinces people that somewhere there's a magic 'right' job waiting for them, and that if they find it, they'll immediately recognize that this is the work *they were meant to do*," Newport explains. "The problem, of course, is when they fail to find this certainty, bad things follow, such as chronic job-hopping and crippling self-doubt."¹⁶

As we have already explored, we are seeing more chronic job-hopping today than ever before, with people constantly jumping from gig to gig, intent on finding the immediate satisfaction of vocation, only to be disappointed time and time again. We are failing to take

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the time to become masterful at any one thing, and this is leading to unprecedented levels of unhappiness. According to Mental Health America, "less than one-third of Americans are happy with their work," and "half of the workforce is 'checked-out.'"¹⁷ We have never had more opportunity to do whatever makes us

happy, and yet so few of us love what we do. Clearly, the advice of making our happiness the primary aim of our work isn't working.

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For the Christian, this shouldn't come as a surprise. Why? Because this advice is out of line with Jesus's example to serve rather than be served. The passion mind-set focuses exclusively on what value your job offers you. But if our work is to be a calling, we must submit ourselves to the agenda of the One who called us. Following Christ means viewing our entire life (including our work) as service to God and others rather than as a means of getting something from this world.

I don't know if Newport is a Christian, but I do know that he and Wrzesniewski have uncovered a deeply biblical truth at work in the real world: *Happiness follows service*. Nowhere in Scripture does it say to follow your passions or do whatever makes you happy. In fact, in some ways, the Bible says the exact opposite. The Christian life is one characterized primarily by service, pouring our lives out as living sacrifices for the sake of God's glory and the good of others (see Romans 12:1). The point of work isn't primarily to make us happy. The point of work is the point of life, summarized by Jesus in Matthew 22: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself" (verses 37, 39).

Let me be clear: I am not saying that our desire to derive happiness from our work is a bad thing. Far from it. In the words of John Piper, "The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful."¹⁸ But, as we will see throughout this book, the way we find the greatest happiness in our work is by prioritizing the joy of God and others above our own, of viewing our work primarily as a means of glorifying God and serving our neighbors rather than ourselves. As we will see in the next two chapters, focused, excellent work accomplishes just that, leading to the deepest, truest, and most sustainable satisfaction of vocation.

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Chapter Summary

As Christians we are called to pursue excellence in all things as a means of reflecting the character of our exceptional God. This truth, coupled with the laws of time and trade-offs, means that we simply cannot pursue mastery at many things professionally at the same time. It is precisely because we are called to be excellent in all things that we can't commit to being excellent at many things vocationally.

Key Scripture

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

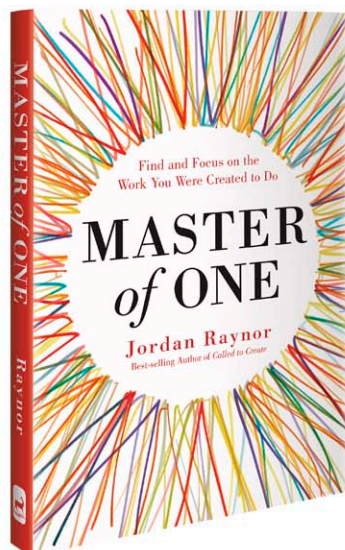
Next Action*

Which of the three lies of work and calling have you believed most fervently in the past? Take a few minutes to think about this and then summarize in your own words how the scriptures in this chapter helped you replace that lie with biblical truth.

* In the “Master of One Notebook,” you will find space dedicated to writing out responses to this and other “Next Action” suggestions throughout the book. You can download the free notebook at jordanraynor.com/MOO.

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