

Series: **The Ministry of the Market Place**
Sermon: ***Bezalel & Oholiab: God's Artists***
Scripture: **Exodus 31, 35-36**
Speaker: **Pastor Dick High**
Date: **October 1, 2006**

Introduction:

In the early years of elementary school I made a colored chalk drawing of a forest fire. After I turned it in to the teacher I never saw it again until mid-summer. At that time I found it on one of the display tables at my home town fair and rodeo. It was the recipient of a ribbon (although I don't think it was a blue ribbon). There was one factor about that picture that puzzled me for years. Burned stumps were part of the picture and to the best of my recollection I had not drawn them. It was years later (at least 40 years later!) that my Mother confessed to adding those stumps to make the picture more realistic. (Alas, my only art honor is now tainted!)

As we continue in our current sermon series, "The Ministry of the Market Place," today we focus on a specific "field" of work, that of the artist. I want to acknowledge from the very beginning that I do not consider myself an artist. So I certainly do not speak from an "insider's perspective." But I believe that in the context of this sermon series, we can identify broad Biblical principles about work while also highlighting distinct areas of work, skill, and giftedness.

If you recall, the basic thesis of this series is that **all** work has dignity and value in God's eyes. My desire today is to demonstrate that reality within the parameters that we call the arts. To do that we will examine the expression of artistic skill and effort that was invested in the creation of the tabernacle in the Old Testament. I trust as we do so that we can further embrace our basic thesis and be an encouragement to artists within our church family.

Definition of Terms

Before we proceed to the passages in Exodus that will be the foundation of our study, I want to address the issue of definition of terms. What is art? And who is an artist? In seeking to bring definition to these terms I discovered that there is a prevalent lack of consensus. Perspectives vary from that of the satirist Frank Zappa, who states that "Art is making something out of nothing and selling it," to the philosophical observation of Edgar Allen Poe, "Art is the reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul."

A collection of actual suggested definitions include the following:

For the word "art"

- In its broadest meaning, it is the expression of creativity, or imagination, or both
- The process of using creative skill
- The product of human creativity

For the word "artist"

- One who is able by virtue of imagination and talent or skill to create works of aesthetic value
- A person whose work shows exceptional creative ability and skill

One article I read gave the following examples of art: Actress, architect, composer, and ballet dancer (and all those suggested on the screen). Also included among that list are the orator, poet, and fashion designer. Another article suggested that graffiti was a kind of art! Such breadth indicates a lack of consensus regarding the definition of what is art or who is an artist. (By the way, tonight at Cessna Stadium the Rolling Stones are

in concert. I would guess that there could be significant differences of opinion regarding that group being artists or not!)

Primary Biblical Data

I invite you now to open your Bible to the book of Exodus. In the 25th chapter we will begin with the first verse: *The Lord said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give. These are the offerings you are to receive from them."* (I won't read the specific items listed here; let's move down to verse 8.) *Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.*

Here is the overall context. It is here in Exodus 25 that we first learn of God's request to construct the tabernacle. The location of this conversation is on Mt. Sinai. In chapters 26-30 God gives Moses specific instructions regarding the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings. Included in these chapters are instructions about establishment of the priesthood, their duties, and clothing. In chapter 31 Moses receives instruction regarding two specific individuals that will oversee this project. We will meet them shortly. In chapter 32 this conversation is interrupted due to the creation and worship of the golden calf. It is not until chapter 35 that Moses actually begins to convey this information to the people of Israel.

Let's go back to chapter 25 now. Please notice the explicit focal point here. The entire process of building the tabernacle is a "God thing." The concept initiates with Him. The offering requested is for God (verse 2). Moses' receipt of the offering is for God (verse 2). Specific instructions regarding needed materials which we see in chapter 25, and the design and dimensions, which begin in verse 10, are given by God. God will select the individuals who will oversee the project. This entire project is all about God! As verse 8 states: *Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.* Moses is merely a messenger.

At this point let's meet Bezalel and Oholiab, two artists. We can do that in Exodus 31:1-11. *Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts - to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. 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: the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent - the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand - and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you."*

I recognize that some may view these individuals more as craftsmen than artists on the basis of what is described here. Allow me to use the term with some breadth this morning. (Regardless of definition, the list of skills requested here is impressive: metal working, jeweler, wood working, garment making, weaving, design, and embroidery.)

As we look at the information provided about these two artists, what can we observe? First, as we've already noted, what occurs here is ultimately not about them. God is the explicit focal point. Second, we know very little about these two men (or any of the craftsmen) identified here. Our primary information is here in Exodus 31, and later at the end of chapter 35 and beginning of chapter 36. We are told that Bezalel was the individual who crafted the Ark of the Covenant, the most prominent furnishing of the tabernacle. (Exodus 37:1) In Exodus 38:23 we are given a glimpse into Oholiab's sensitivity to and use of colored fabrics.

Beyond that we must make reasonable assumptions. It is likely that these individuals had learned or developed their abilities while living in Egypt. Thus they could be considered artists on the basis of giftedness, training, and occupation (although we can only speculate how that was now expressed among a nomadic people). Third, the task requested of them here primarily involves following a specific blueprint.

This is not to imply that they were not creative. Rather it is apparent that those skills are minimized here. Fourth, some of the work that they oversee and accomplish is not for public viewing. I am thinking specifically of the interior of the tabernacle. The holy place with the table, lamp stand, and the altar of incense was only viewed by and usable to the priests. And the Ark of the Covenant, which resided inside the holy of holies, was seen only once a year by one individual, the high priest.

None of this is stated to minimize the skill or ability of these individuals. The artistic work in the tabernacle is in some respects very original and creative art. There is nothing like it in existence. But it is not original in the respect that all the directions for what they make come from direct communication from God Himself. There clearly are distinct parameters around what they are requested to do relative to the construction of the tabernacle.

Acknowledging all of that, what can we observe about these individuals? The text tells us (Exodus 31:2 and 6) that they are God's choice for this work. As we'll see, that likely is because of both skill and attitude. More specific to Bezalel we are told that God filled him with His Spirit (verse 3). That reality provides both a reminder and encouragement to every believer that we have resources through God's Spirit, regardless of the work that we do. We can pray for the Spirit's guidance, seek His empowerment in doing our work, and enjoy His affirmation that we are God's children as we go about our work! Granted, there appears to be specific aspects to Bezalel's filling of the Spirit in this context.

The fact that Bezalel is filled with God's Spirit and that God has also filled him with skill ability, and knowledge (again, verse 3), emphasizes that God is the source of both our skill and ability and the spiritual impact that can occur as we use those skills. I believe that is an especially important reminder for those with artistic abilities. God is a creative God. These abilities are His gift to us, to be used to accomplish His purposes and to reflect His character. That is not, however, to exclude the personal enjoyment that an artist has from their work or the enjoyment that their work can bring to others.

Another important factor noticed in the life of these individuals is uncovered when we turn ahead to Exodus 36. I only want to look at verses 1 and 2. *So Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord has given skill and ability (we've already addressed that) to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the Lord has commanded. Then Moses summoned Bezalel and Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work.* Giftedness and skill are certainly important. So is attitude. The individual that God uses is one who is both available and obedient.

I want to thank those artists among us who demonstrate their availability in such ways as participation in this past summer's art and music camps. I want to thank you for your availability in allowing us the privilege of viewing some of your work as we walk through the halls of this building. I want to thank those who have made themselves available as resources for interior decoration and design. As with any work offered to the Lord the attitude of your heart is noticed and appreciated.

Shortly we will step out of these particular passages, but there is a final area that I want to address before we do that. Some research suggests that artists have general personality traits that lean toward independence and even rebellion. (I make that statement without anyone specifically in mind!) If there is any truth to that general pattern it is all the more significant to note the cooperative effort demonstrated by those artists

involved in the construction of the tabernacle. These individuals worked together on a common project, for God and His purposes. It was the kind of artistic work where such cooperation was both needed and effective.

Arts and Worship

As we step away from these passages in Exodus I want to take just a few minutes to think about art and worship. These passages certainly place art and worship together. Is this normative? Are there principles we can establish regarding the relationship between art and corporate worship?

One principle that I believe we can establish is that an artist can have the privilege of publicly offering their work to God for worship. There are aspects in which an artist can offer their work to God for worship beyond that of an engineer, nurse, or mechanic. That is because their work, especially as observed in the construction of the tabernacle is not only visible it is also integral to the worship that occurred there. While we do not have these specific pieces of furniture as part of our worship today, we do have art work in our worship center and we have chosen to display work by artists within our building. Our intent in doing so includes a desire to enhance our worship. In that way an artist has the privilege of offering their work to God for worship. (In contrast, we don't do that with an accountant's spreadsheet or a manager's business plan.)

On a more individual level, consider these words by Harold Best in his book, Unceasing Worship. They address the reality that an artist can offer their work to God as a personal expression of worship. "There is nothing, not even in the most remote places of my abstract lexicon, that God did not venture into first. All I can do is bow down before the unimagined Imaginer and thank him that he has allowed me to imagine and make after the originating manner of just a few of his thoughts. And as I kneel in my humble station, as I place the fruit of my imagination at the Creator's feet, I can at least say this: 'Honored Creator, whatever I have tried to see, you saw first. But thank you for allowing me to suggest just one more way of seeing it.' Then I rise from my knees and give witness to the world that God's greatness outshines anything I can do." (The willingness to offer our work to the Lord in gratitude and worship is appropriate for each of us regardless of our field of work.)

Here is another aspect of the relationship of art to worship. The pieces of artwork that were part of the tabernacle conveyed significant symbolism. They give affirmation of the character and work of God and aspects of His relationship with people. Some of that imagery is ultimately understood and fulfilled in the person of Christ. As an example, there is the Ark of the Covenant that indicates God's desire to be in relationship with us, while also proclaiming His holiness; thus the necessity of shed blood for that relationship to be bridged. The lamp stand recalls God's guidance of the nation of Israel through the pillar of fire. The New Testament gives further depth to its symbolism when it states that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all (I John 1:5b). Further, the Gospel of John records the proclamation by Christ that He is the light of the world. The altar of incense was representative of the need for and privilege of prayer. Hebrews 10:19-20 instructs us that today we can have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...

The use of those specific symbols has faded, particularly in comparison to the reality of a personal relationship with Christ. However, the use of art in the context of worship is still appropriate and useful. Certainly the cross is one such example. Often as I sing during corporate worship I give my focus to the cross and what it symbolizes. It becomes a visual focal point. The banners that we display on a rotational basis are designed to call our attention to specific aspects of the person of Christ at various times of the church year. One of the banners currently hanging gives a single word of encouragement - rejoice. It is a choice we each need to make as we gather together. The other simply presents a Scripture reference; John 15:5. *I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart*

from me you can do nothing. By taking the time to look up that single verse I am brought to consider the reality of my dependence upon Christ. Beyond the walls of this worship center the art work displayed in the hallway immediately behind us is placed there with the intent that we celebrate God's gifting of our fellow believers, that we worship the beauty of His creative ability whether that be through photography or through an example of craftsmanship, and that we gain a depth of appreciation for His word, as much of what is displayed is accompanied by a verse of Scripture.

Expanding Our Consideration – Music and Musicians

Admittedly, the passages that have been the focal point of today's message lead us to think primarily about the visual arts. We need to realize that we could expand our considerations of the arts and worship, if time would allow, to include music and musicians. David was a skilled harpist. Music was an integral part of his life and his communication with God. It was at his request that a choir and orchestra were brought together to celebrate when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem. In I Chronicles 15: 28 it is recorded that *all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the Lord with shouts, with the sounding of rams' horns and trumpets, and of cymbals, and the playing of lyres and harps.* In the following chapter, verse 7 we read; *That day David first committed to Asaph and his associates this psalm of thanks to the Lord.* (It is not surprising that a number of David's psalms have this heading – For the director of music. A psalm of David. A song.)

In Exodus 15 we find that Moses sang after the Exodus from Egypt. In verse 20 of that chapter we are told that Miriam, his sister, incorporated the use of a tambourine and dancing as she sang this song. We could also go to the book of Revelation. It is interesting to me that there is a significant amount of singing that is noted there. In Revelation 5:9-10 we find that the four living creatures and twenty-four elders gathered around the throne "sang a new song." In verse 12 we find a multitude of angels singing in a "loud voice." In 7:9-10 an innumerable multitude cry out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." Adrian Howard and Pat Turner are the musical artists that have crafted the accompaniment for these words. We sing this chorus with some frequency. It is personally one of my favorites. In singing it I am benefiting from the gift of artists who invested their skill and ability in ways that impacts my worship.

There are additional examples that we could consider. Even though we will not do so today, I have selected these with the intent that we understand that the relationship between the arts and worship does have significant breadth. And this does provide an opportunity to say "thank you" to all our artists who offer their skill and ability for the enhancement of our worship.

Principles for Implementation

It is my sense that I have barely scratched the surface of this issue. It is obvious to me that there is much more that could be said, and certainly much more that has been written. I would remind us of the context in which we ventured into the consideration of this issue. This is a sermon series about the dignity and value of **all** work in God's eyes. The intent today was to focus on a specific kind of work, that of the artist; whether that is currently being pursued as a full-time occupation or not.

As we conclude I ask that we step back for more of a broad reflection. As we do so I suggest four principles of application.

- It is the believer's privilege to have his or her work empowered by the Holy Spirit, regardless of its nature.

I encourage each of us today to acknowledge again that the presence of the Holy Spirit is intended to have

significant impact on our work. One of the primary reasons we contend throughout this series that there should be no division between the sacred and secular in regards to work is that the Holy Spirit indwells every believer, wherever we work. His presence and resources are available to each of us. Obviously the situation of the Spirit's presence in Bezalel and Oholiab occurs in a unique context. But we need to be conscious of the reality that each of us as believers has a profound resource that can empower and direct us each day at work, regardless of that work.

- We should accept, celebrate, and develop the “niche” God has for us.

And I might add that we should be encouragers of one another in this process. On a personal level, it would be appropriate for every believer here today to thank God for who He has made us to be. Also, we should thank Him for every opportunity of training and education. And we should ask God to give us clear direction in how He desires to use us with and through the skill and ability He has given to us.

- Fame or recognition from the use of artistic skills can be fleeting; but all work done for the Lord can be offered to Him for His glory.

Do you recall the story with which I began today, about my chalk drawing? The rest of the story is that when my Mother “confessed” her added touch, she gave me the picture, now nicely framed! She had kept that picture for decades! I’m unsure why she had done that. But reflection on that entire situation has been a reminder that anything done for the Lord, even if I have long ago forgotten about it, is that God doesn’t forget. As I Corinthians 15:58 tells us, *you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain*

- As with any work that we do, the artist can be tempted toward pride, which forgets that God is the source of our skill and ability.

I believe it is true that the greater our gifting, the greater the temptation toward pride. That reality is clearly evident in one of the Old Testament descriptions of the King of Tyre, who some believe is a symbol of Satan. Ezekiel 28 describes him as “perfect in beauty.” He is described as having been adorned in precious stones. In verse 17 the following statement is made: *Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor.*

May we be alert to that temptation and each day offer our giftedness, our skill and ability in humble thankfulness to God and in dependence upon Him.