

How to Know if God Is Calling You to Grad School

The road to graduate school begins in different places for every person. For me, it began at home. My father became the first person in his immediate family to earn a master's degree, and he served in two different full-time positions, working in both public education and on staff at a church.

As a result, even from a young age, my view of vocation and calling were never separate. They flowed from admonitions like Colossians 3:17a—"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus"—and Ephesians 4:1 (NIV), in which Paul writes, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."

My father was led to complete his master's not only to position himself to better provide for his growing family, but also to fulfill a call and desire for greater service. Years later, I too would wrestle with whether to further my education.

The question I asked then—"Is God calling me to grad school?"—is a common one for many people. The answer to that question may lead you to deeper reflection on God's plan for your life and how to steward the person He has made you to be. This includes considering your service to Him in terms of your vocation.

The Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 highlights the kingdom principle of strategic investment. The owner provided talents, or money, to the servants left in charge of the farm. When the owner returned, the servants reported on the results of their stewardship. Doing nothing with the money earned a rebuke. The two servants who multiplied their talents earned commendations and received added responsibility.

This parable challenges us to ask, "What do I need to do with what God has invested in me?" You have capacity and competency. However, if you see individuals more highly skilled in the field God has you in, and you want to move beyond where you are today, you will likely need to step into an education process that will impart knowledge and hone your competencies to a completely new level. A seminar will not do it. Graduate school is an in-depth educational experience that will personally, intellectually and spiritually transform you.

To begin a career in the industry where I believed God was leading me, I knew I needed a lot more knowledge, insight and wisdom. College laid a great foundation. The discipline required of academic work—reading, writing and completing assignments on time, as well as being personally accountable for my grade, bills and living on my own—were all good training for my first job. God used those years to develop, educate and mature me.

The early Christian evangelist Timothy was a young follower of Christ, headed into a situation where he would need to have high emotional intelligence, thick skin, a soft heart and impeccable conflict resolution, management and leadership skills. To him, the apostle Paul gave this counsel: "Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, NLT).

I believe Paul would give that same advice to prospective graduate students. Those who muster the self-discipline to stick long-term to the path of self-education are rare. Good people have good intentions, but life happens, and it has a way of interfering with one's educational plans. I found entering into a program of intense, professionally designed study over a course of time was an effective way to keep me on task. Graduate school shaped my character and exposed me to the type of information, experiences and range of perspectives necessary for me to be at the place God needed me to be.

Another individual who told me about his graduate school journey called it a “real transformative process”—but he said more than the challenging academic work or balancing life, the single largest factor was the relationships he developed. Close relationships with the right people are critical to our development. While the crowds were recipients of Jesus’ public ministry, He selected a small group for close and private instruction, coaching and mentoring.

For trekkers and mountain climbers, a Sherpa is an essential individual for providing expert support during their climbs. Likewise, graduate school professors—scholars in their field who are recognized for their knowledge, understanding and insight—take you from base-camp living to the upper elevations. Both the climb itself and the view when you reach the top are life-changing. Graduate school changes you, your views and your perspectives, and it increases the amount of knowledge you can draw on for the rest of your life. Graduate school is an investment in you.

Graduate school has been personally and professionally essential in God’s work in my life, and it has for generations of others as well. But if there’s one thing I know, it’s that some things do not happen without an investment. God may be calling you to graduate school. If He is, it will be hard work—but your foundation will become even wider and deeper, enabling you to carry the weight of responsibility and influence He wants to give you. {eoa}

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