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*Transforming Daily Life*

719 Earl Garrett Street  
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on

*Work and Faith*

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**“Downward Mobility:  
Humility & The Workplace”**

Rich Roush, M. Div.

SERMON NOTES

*The  
High Calling  
of Our  
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,  
a grand design, an abundant life.  
Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!  
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge  
TheHighCalling.org

# Three Sermon Outlines on Work and Faith: Downward Mobility: Humility & The Workplace.

Rich Roush, M. Div.

## *The Intent of the Outlines:*

Within the past six months or so I have been punched in the gut by a couple books from the '80s. The two books are Gordon MacDonald's *Ordering Your Private World* and Henri Nouwen's *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*. The takeaway from both, for me at least, is one thing: Humility—more specifically, gospel-centered humility as foundational for my vocation as a pastor. I know that these sermon outlines are typically given as resources for pastors to pass along as sermons to their congregations. But, if I may, I would like to not just resource the pastor with these sermons but also address the pastor in them. That is, the person I would specifically like to both encourage and challenge is the one receiving these sermons. As a pastor myself, I often feel that I read resources with the intent to share them with others before I internalize them myself. My hope is that these sermons would first minister to the original reader before they are ever considered for ministry to a congregation. Now, knowing that I am addressing an audience of pastors, I do not expect to share anything groundbreaking that you all have not heard before. My desire is to encourage each of you and maybe eventually your congregations to join me in remembering our call to what Nouwen describes as “downward mobility.” He writes, “Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I am a part.”

I will not pretend to be qualified enough to speak for all persons, but I am qualified to speak for myself—I think. I feel the tension that Nouwen describes. I struggle with being an humble pastor. I can feel myself desiring upward mobility, desiring power and recognition, desiring reputation, etc. In all honesty, I desire glory. I might be on an island by myself with this one, and if that is the case, then these few sermons have at least served a purpose in bringing my heart back to a place where the gospel is the center of all life and purpose for me as a pastor; a place where grace abounds and humility comes not in my effort to become humble but in proper recognition and response to who Jesus is and what he came to do. But, if I am not alone in this struggle then maybe these few sermons can help bring you and your people back to that place as well, if necessary.

## *The Three Sermon Outlines Presented Are:*

*Jeremiah 18:1-6 – Refusing God's Hands*

*Matthew 15:21-28 – Desperate Dogs*

*John 3:25-30 – More of Him*

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portrait. This is something greater than you and me. We are all dogs, yet in Christ, we find help and hope. Think about it—God has grafted the dogs into his family and in Christ; we are no longer called dogs, but beloved children of God—his sons and daughters. This is the beginning, NOT of a self-portrait, but of a family portrait full of desperate dogs grafted into the family as sons and daughters.

## **Sermon 3: John 3:25-30—More of Him**

### *The Main Text:*

*Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:25-30 ESV*

### *The Big Idea:*

Our lives, our ministry, must point to Jesus . . . and Jesus only. He must increase. We must decrease.

### *The Major Movements:*

*Verses 25-26—John the Baptizer Being Out Baptizer'ed?*

*Verse 27—The Source of His Calling*

*Verses 28-29a—The Substance of His Calling*

*Verses 29b-30—The Result of Being Obedient to His Calling*

The first sermon reminds me that we are all on the Potter's wheel, we are all stubborn, and we all refuse the Potter's hands. The gospel is the only remedy for our refusal. The second sermon gives me a peek into what life was to be like on this side of the Cross—the mercy that is shown us. We are all dogs grafted into the family of God through desperate faith. This sermon is intended to help us remember our role in Kingdom work—we are not the Christ. We do not do the saving. Our job is and always will be to point to the Messiah. He must increase. We must decrease.

### *Introduction:*

My Christian hero has for the longest time been Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his book *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer writes on the tragedy of success, "In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things, the figure of him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger." Christ will always be an outsider in a world where success is the standard. So, we ask, "What does successful ministry look like?" Whether or not Jesus remains a stranger in our world, in our ministry, depends upon our answer to this question. Answer the question the way most of the watching world might and "the figure of him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger." John the Baptist had an interesting response to the question; a response which made John the figure and made Jesus the center of all things. Our lives, our ministry, must point to Jesus . . . and Jesus only.

### *MVMT 1: Verses 25-26—John the Baptizer Being Out Baptizer'ed?*

The few verses preceding John's conversation with his disciples tell of a conversation between the disciples and a certain unnamed Jew about purification. Different sources have different opinions about what was said concerning purification. Who really knows? The purpose of the story is that the conversation probably ended with some confrontation. Whose baptism is most effective? Is it the baptizer's baptism? Or, is it Jesus' baptism? A straw poll would suggest that most people were choosing Jesus. Jesus' popularity was growing and John the Baptist was fading into obscurity. John's disciples wanted an answer. And they will soon have it.

In his book *Xealots*, Dave Gibbons reflects on the nature of true success as a leader:

*Charlotte's Web* is a classic children's story by author E. B. White about a spider named Charlotte who lives in a barn just above the stall of a pig named Wilbur.

Charlotte and Wilbur develop a close friendship, and as Wilbur grows larger, he grows more and more concerned that the farmer is going to turn him into bacon. Charlotte writes messages in her web to convince the farm's owners that Wilbur is a pig worth saving. The story builds to the final chapter titled "The Moment of Triumph."

So what was Charlotte's moment of triumph?

As the story draws to a close, Charlotte the spider is in the barn dying [Wilbur the pig is being judged at the county fair in a pig contest], and she can hear the roar of applause for Wilbur [as he wins a special prize and thus his life is spared]. Charlotte finds great joy in knowing that her life has meant the success of another, her close friend, Wilbur. Though no one will remember her, the things she has done, and the sacrifices she has made, she is satisfied, having loved her friend in life and in death.

Gibbons adds, "[Leadership] is about fading. The great ones willingly move into irrelevance."

But who wants to move into irrelevance as a leader? Not me. In fact, if we were to poll our fears as leaders of the Church that would probably rank higher than just about any other thing—irrelevance. What are you when you are no longer wanted or needed? What good is a pastor when he or she is no longer thought of as significant in the lives of the people? By human standards, John the Baptist was a man who was slowly becoming unimportant. The baptizer was losing his job. But his reaction was far from what we would expect—He must increase. I must decrease. And let me tell you why.

How was it that John the Baptist was so willing and ready to fade into black? Gordon MacDonald, in his book *Ordering Your Private World*, talks about John the Baptist as being a "called person." During the course of his life, he had come to understand three things about his calling: 1) The Source of His calling—everything he had was given to him from God, including his purpose for living. 2) The Clarity of His Purpose—purpose was made clear in knowing who he was and who he was not. 3) The Result of His Purpose—fullness of joy comes in fulfilling one's purpose.

#### *MVMT 2: Verse 27—The Source of His Calling*

John says he has nothing more than what God has given him, which included his very purpose for living. One who is "called" understands that he or she is merely a steward of what God has given him or her. The word "steward" implies that what is given must be given back upon the return of the giver. John the Baptist knew this. So, he was able to recognize that his disciples were not his own. God gave them to him. He was to watch over his disciples until he was able to point them to Jesus. Consider John 1:35. John the Baptist is with two of his disciples and Jesus walks by them. What does John say? "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Those two disciples heard John's testimony and began to follow Jesus instead. This was how John operated. Everything he has was given to him from God—including his very purpose for living. I wonder how differently our lives and our ministries would look if we lived each day the same way as John. Living like everything we have is a gift from God—including our salvation, our congregations, all of it, everything. Not only that but knowing it all must be given back. How does John get to a point where he understands this so clearly?

#### *MVMT 3: Verses 28-29a—The Substance of His Calling*

John does not get angry. John does not get envious or jealous, but rather shows true humility. But how did he learn it? He had come to know the substance of his calling—who he was and who he was not. He states it clearly and wants to go on record, "I am not the Christ." The picture John paints of himself and his relation to Jesus, as the "friend" or "best man" of the groom, is a brilliant parallel. We have all seen movies where the best man interrupts a wedding ceremony or causes a scene in his wedding toast. Any person who would do such a thing is a terrible choice for the groom's best man. The wedding party is there to stand beside the bride and groom, to support them, and make sure (at all costs) that the attention is always and only on the wedding couple. I can recall a disastrous surprise that would have ruined the wedding day for my wife (which would have ruined the wedding day for me). My wife had picked out beautiful bridesmaid bouquets made of white hydrangeas. About an hour and a half before the ceremony was supposed to begin, the flowers began to wilt. We are not talking about a subtle wilt but "afternoon wedding in Texas summer heat" kind of wilting. My best man drove to the nearest florist with a few ladies and came back with a single plan B flower for each bridesmaid that was perfect. He was determined to make sure this day's focus was on my bride and me—not on wilted bouquets. This is the role of the best man.

John's purpose was clear. He is the friend whose only job is to keep all of the attention on the bride and groom. One of the things so fascinating is this—John knew who he was, in part by knowing who he was not. He knew his place. He knew that he was not and could not be the Christ.

The application here for pastors is obvious. Do we know our place? Do we know the substance of our calling? Do you and I live as though our purpose is to be the anointed ones for those around us? Maybe you are a workaholic? Do you find yourself routinely skipping genuine Sabbath rest? Are you the end-all “go-to” in your church? People in powerful positions often face the temptation of an “I am the Christ” complex. Paul warns us not to think too highly of ourselves. Consider 1 Timothy 1:13-14 and remember the gospel message for a moment—who you are and who you are not. Jesus saves. And only Jesus saves. Our lives then, our purpose, is to point to him and him only.

#### *MVMT 4: Verses 29b-30—The Result of Being Obedient to His Calling*

The watching world would assume that the mass exodus of John's followers to pursue Jesus would upset John, but he was not upset. He knew something others did not. Joy for the lover of Christ is made full and complete in being obedient to the one who sent him. After John the Baptist is gone, Jesus himself will say, “*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*” Obedience to our calling brings greater intimacy with God—a sureness of his presence and joy that is unshakeable. John knew this to be true and was satisfied. His joy was made full in seeing his disciples go to Jesus. He had fulfilled his calling. He had obeyed and found joy.

Ministry is not always joyous for me. It is hard. I am often frustrated. In fact, this week after reading an email from a parent, I joked with my assistant that I thought about quitting for about five minutes. I was kidding—sort of. So much in the life of the pastor can rob him or her of true joy. What is robbing me of true joy? Could it be that I am measuring success in ministry in a way that God never intended for me to? Could I be focusing far too much on things other than that which God has called me to? I like to listen to Timothy Keller podcasts; I looked up an excerpt from a sermon of his titled “Joy.” In the sermon, he talks about finding true joy in Christ, saying:

*Do you remember when your mother used to say, “Don’t eat candy before meals?” Why did she say that? Because she knew it would ruin your next meal. The trouble with eating candy is that it gives you a sugar buzz, and then you don’t feel hungry. Candy masks the fact that your body needs proteins and vitamins. The sugar buzz from candy masks your hunger for the real nutrients that you don’t have.*

*Things like sex, power, money, and success—as well as favorable circumstances—act like spiritual sugar. Christians who have these spiritual candies may say, “Sure, I believe in God and I know I’m going to heaven,” but they’re actually basing their day-to-day joy on favorable circumstances. When the circumstances change, it drives us to God, because when the sugar disappears, when the candy gets taken away, we’re forced to pursue the feast that our souls really crave. We’ll hunger for the spiritual nutrients we really need.*

#### *Conclusion:*

The joy John experienced is certainly not dependent upon favorable circumstances. It was dependent upon God and being obedient to what God asks.

Will you consider a question or two? 1) *What is God saying to you?* 2) *What will you do about it?*

When we know the source of our calling, the substance of our calling, and experience the joy that comes as a result of being obedient to our calling, we will then be able to gladly and willingly go unknown if it makes known the name and good news of Jesus the Christ. May he increase and we decrease—into nothing, if that is what it takes. Holy Spirit, lead us into humility. More of you. Less of us.