

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
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Three Sermon Outlines on
Work and Faith

Need Series Title

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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

Sermon 3: “Take It or Leave It”

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Theological Point: The journey of faith is an ongoing journey of leaving certain things behind, embracing new experiences and beliefs, growing and maturing in Christ. The apostle Paul describes it as a journey we make because of “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.” It is a daily journey of pressing on to the goal of becoming more like Christ.

Introduction: Take It or Leave It

- A. Leaving Things Behind
- B. Embracing the New
- C. Moving On

Conclusion: Where Are You?

Introduction: Take It or Leave It. If you preach, perhaps you have had experiences similar to mine. You see a beautiful or disturbing sight, you hear something, or you have an encounter in everyday life, and you think, “There’s a sermon in that, but I don’t know what it is.” Sermon stories and illustrations often come to us as experiences long before we know what sermon or text they may illustrate.

I had one of those experiences when I first moved to the island of Nantucket. I heard residents of Nantucket speak often about a place on the island called “Take It Or Leave It.” It’s located out at the town landfill, our “city dump.” The stories I heard were so interesting that I decided to go experience Take It Or Leave It for myself. When I got there I realized that the place is something of a cultural institution on the island. As I left Take It Or Leave It that day I remember thinking, “There’s a sermon in that, but I have no idea what it is.”

Months later, while working on the text from Paul in Philippians 3:4-14, I found in my experience of Take It Or Leave It an illustration for a sermon on this text. I used the experience as the opening story and as a focusing metaphor throughout the sermon.

In the following outline I’ll offer some suggestions for a sermon you might do on this text. But I want to begin by giving you the opening story, much as I told it, as a set-up for the sermon I preached. Then I’ll talk about the Philippians 3 passage. Here’s the story:

For a small island, Nantucket has a large number of wonderful historical attractions and cultural institutions. They are a “must see” for visitors and residents alike. The list is long: the Whaling Museum where you can learn about the history of whaling; the Shipwreck and Lifesaving Museum; the Atheneum public library; the Lightship Basket Museum; the Maria Mitchell planetarium; the African Meetinghouse; Great Point and Sankaty Head lighthouses; and much more. Nantucket festivals, restaurants, and their fine foods, are known around the world, along with Nantucket’s sailing, the natural beauty of the island, its architecture, and its golf courses.

But little known to the casual visitor, and tucked away in plain sight a few miles out of town, is one of the great

cultural institutions of Nantucket. It's a place where island people socialize, where they furnish or decorate their homes, find clothing for their closets, books for the beach, and toys for the kids. It's a place of commerce where goods of all values change hands free of charge.

When you visit Nantucket, you must go there. It's a gray-shingled building in a fenced-in area out at the city dump. I love its name: "Take It Or Leave It." You can take old things there that you no longer want or need, things that were once of value to you. You can leave them behind. You can look for things that other people have left there, and if you want them, you can take them with you, free of charge.

Take It Or Leave It is no respecter of persons. Rich and poor alike go there. Cadillacs and BMW's pull into the parking lot next to rusty old pickups. There's a lady on duty who enforces the rules and keeps the peace.

Little known to most visitors, Take It Or Leave It doesn't show up in the visitors' guides or postcards of Nantucket. But it's one of the most interesting places on the island. When you visit Nantucket, you must go there.

My wife Debra loves "Take It Or Leave It." She has left things there that we no longer need, and she's brought home things we do need. Two of my favorite sweaters are from "Take It Or Leave It." We have a beautiful little lamp from there; a set of small juice glasses; and some white porcelain dinner plates we use all the time. You never know what you might find at "Take It Or Leave It."

The first time I went there, I remember going through the books on the shelves. What a deal! Free! I remember looking at the household goods, the toys, chairs, golf clubs, boxes full of random nuts, bolts, and nails—even windows and door frames.

I remember walking around the large table in the center of the room with mounds of clothing piled on it. J. Jill blouses next to Gap sweaters, Brooks Brothers shirts, Target and Walmart brands, all mingled together. I remember watching people standing shoulder-to-shoulder, digging through those piles of shirts, jeans, sweaters, blouses, and jackets. Clothes were flying everywhere on that table. People throwing things aside, digging deeper, looking for treasures. You never know what you might find there. As I left "Take It Or Leave It" that day I remember thinking, "There's a sermon in all that, but I have no idea what it is!"

A. Leaving Things Behind. How did Paul's words in Philippians 3:4-14 lead me back to that earlier experience of "Take It Or Leave It"? Paul's words about "loss" (vv. 7-8), "rubbish" (v. 8), and "forgetting what lies behind" (v.13) led me there. As I studied the passage I asked myself what metaphor or experience from everyday life might help me illustrate Paul's strong statements about leaving his past behind. I thought about what it means to lose things, throw things away, or give them away. Then it came to me. My experience of Take It Or Leave It at the town landfill might be a helpful metaphor. It's a place where you leave things behind, give them away, or throw them away.

Later in the sermon I told my listeners how I came to realize Take It Or Leave It was a pretty good illustration for a sermon on this text. What metaphors or experiences from everyday life might serve to illustrate a sermon you might do on this passage? Or, what everyday examples of things of "gain" or of "surpassing value" might help you illustrate Paul's words? Think about it.

Now some comments on points in this passage that one needs to study and consider carefully in shaping a sermon.

1. Paul is speaking here of the life-changing experience he had when, as a devout Jew, he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and became a follower of Christ. Coming to know Christ, Paul says, turned his world upside down. It changed him personally and it changed him theologically. Using the language of the accounting ledger, Paul says that what he had previously regarded as "gains"—certain things in his Jewish past—he came to regard as "loss"—things to let go of—because of his newfound relationship with Christ. So he left behind certain things from his past because of that new faith experience.

2. Paul goes on to make a strong statement about the things he left behind. He says: "*I regard them as rubbish.*" Those words of Paul especially got me to thinking about Take It Or Leave It. The analogy is not perfect, but helpful. Paul's description of the great change in his life is like going out to Take It Or Leave It and leaving something there—something that once had value and perhaps still does. But now it's something to be left behind or thrown away.

3. Paul, who often speaks with passion and hyperbole, uses the strong word "rubbish" to describe what he left behind. The word means "garbage" or "refuse"; it can even be translated "dung" or "excrement." Why does Paul speak so strongly? Does it have in part to do with the false teachers he was dealing with at Philippi? Does he have in mind the problem of certain Jewish Christians who were insisting that new Gentile converts be circumcised and observe Jewish rituals in order to be true followers of Jesus? See the commentaries on Philippians.

4. What exactly is Paul referring to when he speaks of “loss” and “rubbish”? Scholars differ in how they answer that question. Is Paul here completely rejecting Judaism or his Jewish past as of no value? Or is he rejecting a certain confidence in religious and ethnic pedigree and observances (vv. 4-6) as a way of being right with God? Be aware of differing scholarly views on these questions. One thing is certain. Paul *is* celebrating his new life in Christ. He *is* describing his consuming desire to know Jesus Christ, to be in Christ, and to have a righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ.

5. In verses 4-6 Paul recounts highlights of his devout Jewish past. He says that if anyone could boast or have confidence about their relationship to God, it would be Paul. He recites his credentials and accomplishments in Judaism. In the past, Paul says, he was proud of those credentials and accomplishments. But now, because of Christ, his perspective has changed entirely. The very things that were once central to Paul—his God-given religious identity, his tribe, his circumcision, observance of the law, and pride in being a Pharisee—all of that he could now let go of. He could take them to Take It Or Leave It and leave them behind. Perhaps some of them still of meaning and value in themselves, they were no longer central to Paul’s life.

In the process of working on this sermon I remembered a sermon I had once read by Fred Craddock. It’s called “Throwing Away the Good Stuff” (*The Cherry Log Sermons*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, pp. 94-98). Craddock takes a somewhat different approach but talks about going to the city dump. My gratitude to Craddock for inspiring me to stay with the metaphor I chose.

B. Embracing the New. Leaving things behind is an important theme in this passage. But Paul gives even stronger emphasis to the new faith and life he is embracing—“the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Paul’s description of his new life in Christ is rich in its language and content. Any of the sentences or phrases in vv. 9-11 could be developed as the focus of this middle portion of the sermon.

1. Theologically, Paul says, I have a new center: not a righteousness of my own based on my Jewish pedigree or observance of the law, but a righteousness that comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 9). Paul has one consuming goal: to grow and mature in his faith and to be like Christ.

2. At this point in the sermon one could ask the important question: What does all this mean for us as people of faith? What does it mean for us to leave certain things behind, to count them as “loss” or “rubbish,” because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord?

3. One thing I believe leaving the past behind and embracing the new life in Christ means is to think critically. It means to reflect critically on our faith by studying the Bible, understanding what others believe, and examining what we believe. It means growing deeper in our understanding of what it means to be like Christ and to live our faith in practical ways. Think of all the ways in which the church in its ministries can help people grow in this way. This can be a good place in the sermon to talk about specific programs available in your church that help people grow in their faith (Bible studies, prayer and support groups, retreats, mission trips, and so on).

4. One way to talk about leaving the past behind and embracing the new is to talk about the theological and practical aspects of growth and change in the life of faith. One might talk about stages of faith development people go through. Or, one may ask listeners to think about how they have changed in their theology, beliefs, or practices as a result of growing deeper in their faith. Some examples of this from your own faith journey could serve as good illustrations.

5. Christian theologians sometimes speak of two types of theology that we all have: *embedded theology* and *deliberative theology*. *Embedded theology* is what we absorb beginning at an early age from family, home, and church. It’s our earliest understanding of what faith is about. Embedded theology is what we grow up with, what influences and shapes our faith from an early age.

Deliberative theology is the understanding of faith that emerges from a process of carefully reflecting on embedded theological beliefs or convictions. Sometimes crises in life, new experiences of God, or new insights into the Bible or faith lead us to reflect critically on what we have believed in the past. Deliberative theology helps us ask, “Do I still believe that? What do I believe now?” As we grow older we sort through our beliefs, retaining some of our embedded beliefs, and changing others because of our new experiences or insights (See a discussion of this in Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd edition, Fortress Press, 2006, pp. 13-25).

In a sermon one could use this distinction between embedded and deliberative theology to help people think about how their faith and understanding of God have changed and why. Paul met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and it changed his life forever. Paul’s embedded theology gave way to a new deliberative theology. He left some things behind,

embraced the new faith experiences, and moved on. In what ways have those kinds of transforming experiences happened to you or to people you know? Share the stories to illustrate the faith journey.

C. Moving On. It's also clear in this passage that Paul's transforming encounter with Christ has now become his daily rule of life. Paul's desire to know Christ is an ongoing, daily journey of letting go of the past and coming to know his Lord in new ways. "Forgetting what lies behind and pressing toward what lies ahead," Paul says, "I press on toward the goal of knowing Christ more fully and completely, and living the life Christ calls me to live" (vv. 13-14). Here are some thoughts about moving on in faith:

1. It's easy in the life of faith to settle in, to become comfortable in one place, and stay there. Or, to opt out of faith and the church altogether. We quit growing, learning, studying the Bible, or reflecting critically on our faith. There is none of that in this passage from Paul. Paul describes faith as a journey or race that never ends. We are in constant motion. God is always calling us into new and deeper experiences of knowing Christ—who Christ is, what it means to be like Christ, and how to live as Christ lived. That's the model of the faith journey Paul gives his Philippian readers. It's a daily experience of growing and deepening in faith.

2. So visiting Take It Or Leave It reminds me of this journey Paul describes. Faith is like looking through all those books, dishes, and toys to discover what hidden treasure God has in store for us. It's like standing at that table, digging through those piles of shirts, jeans, sweaters, and jackets. It's like digging deeper, throwing things aside, looking for what God has in store for us. You never know what you might find there, do you? The journey we're on means leaving behind the old and discovering the new.

Conclusion: Where Are You? Toward the end of a sermon I often ask a question or series of questions as a way of asking people to respond to the sermon. A good question to ask in a sermon on this passage is: Where are you on the journey of faith? Are you settled in and comfortable? Or are you growing deeper in your experience of God? Is yours a faith that is open, like Paul, to leaving the past behind and pressing on to a future of knowing Christ more fully? Where are you on that journey? That's the question.

Connection to Daily Life and Work: When we think about how we do our work and how we relate to people in our relationships, are we growing toward knowing Christ more fully and becoming more like him? Where are we on the journey of faith? Are we comfortable, indifferent, stuck in one place, or growing deeper in our experience of God? What, if anything, needs to change?