

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

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Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Managing Workplace Anxiety

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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

Is Work Stressing You Out?

Three Sermon Outlines on Work and Faith: Managing Workplace Anxiety

Introduction to the Sermon Series

The Bible is not a stranger to anxiety in the workplace and fear of losing one's livelihood. In some cases, people of their own volition chose to take a risk and follow the Lord, even if it cost them dearly. One can only imagine what it cost Matthew in denarii to leave his lucrative tax collecting business to go after Jesus, the itinerant rabbi. And then there were his fellow disciples changed by tongues of fire dancing on their heads who made career changes from relatively stable vocations such as fishermen to Apostles of a new Way—none of them struck it rich, and it appears all of them lost their lives preaching the resurrected Christ except for one (John, the Beloved Disciple).

In other cases, people lost their jobs or livelihood kicking and screaming. I don't imagine Adam and Eve, in retrospect, thought their arrogant act of disobedience was worth the sting of losing their all-expense paid bungalow in Paradise and having to resort to actually *work* for a living (before, they were living off their Father's inheritance!). Nomadic Hebrew shepherds could no longer produce the usual seasonal grass and flowing brooks for their flocks due to drought and ended up living in an Egyptian ghetto. At first, conditions weren't so bad because their COO (Joseph) was pals with the owner (Pharaoh) until the company was sold to another owner who turned their lives into hopeless desperation. I sometimes wonder about some of those whom Jesus healed—the blind, the lame, and lepers. At first, they must have been elated! But take, for example, the fellow trying to get dipped into the sparkling water at the Pool of Siloam for 38 years; the poor soul had only known the base, but reliable, job of begging. What's he to do now that he has no excuse asking for spare change?

We could mention Roman soldiers who went AWOL because they could no longer confess Caesar as Lord or prostitutes that came to believe their bodies were temples of God; or what about Jonah who tried to run away from his Boss's orders and Jeremiah who loathed he was ever recruited as a prophet of God (Jer. 20:9). I cannot imagine a company today hiring someone the likes of Saul turned Paul and then subjecting him to the conditions he endured for The Cause!

So, how did biblical people live, even thrive, under such conditions?

Faith! Trust in God and accept the unknown future as belonging to the Lord—more on this to come.

The preacher today has a marvelous opportunity to touch a raw nerve of those bedraggled folks who shuffle into pews Sunday after Sunday, searching for a way to make sense out of an unpredictable present and frightful future. Stress in the workplace has gone up like a Roman candle on the Fourth of July. May I connect with you for a moment and say this is God's moment for you to have compassion for the plight of many and an opportunity for you to share Hope in a way that gives a deep and holy sigh of relief to the fearful and renewed confidence for the overwhelmed. Every weekend I look out at the same and pray that God would touch each and every one—as God has touched me—with grace over the past, hope for the present, and confidence in God's future. We are fellows together in this great work.

These three sermon outlines on this subject are an offering for you to use as God guides you. My hope would be that a comment here or there would spark your own development of these thoughts, scrambling down paths I never considered. My illustrations are just that—mine—you can use them as you like, but let them also stir up your own stories that you can tell from your own life and experience. Of course, you can preach these outlines just as they are—or use them as springboards into something radically different.

My hat's off to you. Ministry is tough work, especially when you have your own life to contend with as well! I guess, as Martin Luther prayed, if it were left to us alone, we'd make a mess of it (or a worse one).

Blessings,

George Cladis

Statistics

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health issued a report that cited the following:

- 40% of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful
- 25% view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives
- 75% of employees believe that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago
- 29% of workers felt quite a bit or extremely stressed at work
- 26% of workers said they were “often or very often burned out or stressed by their work”
- Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems

“Attitudes in the American Workplace VI” Gallup Poll sponsored by the Marlin Company found that:

- 80% of workers feel stress on the job; nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage stress; and 42% say their coworkers need such help
- 14% of respondents had felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn’t
- 25% have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress; 10% are concerned about an individual at work they fear could become violent
- 9% are aware of an assault or violent act in their workplace; 18% had experienced some sort of threat or verbal intimidation in the past year

An **Integra Survey** similarly reported that:

- 65% of workers said that workplace stress had caused difficulties, and more than 10% described these as having major effects
- 10% said they work in an atmosphere where physical violence has occurred because of job stress, and in this group, 42% report that yelling and other verbal abuse is common
- 29% had yelled at coworkers because of workplace stress; 14% said they work where machinery or equipment has been damaged because of workplace rage, and 2% admitted that they had actually personally struck someone
- 19% or almost one in five respondents had quit a previous position because of job stress, and nearly one in four have been driven to tears because of workplace stress
- 62% routinely find that they end the day with work-related neck pain; 44% reported stressed-out eyes; 38% complained of hurting hands, and 34% reported difficulty in sleeping because they were too stressed-out
- 12% had called in sick because of job stress
- Over half said they often spend 12-hour days on work-related duties, and an equal number frequently skip lunch because of the stress of job demands

Source for the above and for more information, go to: <http://www.stress.org/job.htm>.

Overview to the Sermon Series

The three sermons in “Is Work Stressing You Out?” are based on research concluding that the greatest fears in the workplace today are represented in these three sermon titles.

Sermon One: **I Don’t Want to Look Stupid**

Sermon Two: **My Boss Is a Tyrant (And I Might Be the Boss!)**

Sermon Three: **I’m Afraid of Losing My Job!**

The first sermon focuses on Christian identity. One of the greatest fears in the workplace is looking stupid, either when speaking to a group or one-on-one encounters with our supervisor. We can feel a greater sense of confidence in the workplace if we view ourselves as children of God who provide a necessary service at work but also represent a Higher Order. This identity lifts up our heads from being burdened with stresses at work to finding the joy and meaning in our jobs.

The second sermon builds on the first using the theological concept of covenant. When we view employment as a covenant between two equal parties—my labor for a paycheck—then we feel more in control of our work situation and keep it in perspective. Employment contracts between equal parties assume (and sometimes are made explicit in writing) that each party will be treated with respect and dignity rather than as slaves. The relationship should not involve emotional or economic bondage.

The third sermon brings it all into focus with teachings from Jesus on worry and anxiety. Throughout the biblical narrative, people of God were encouraged to live in a relationship of faith and trust in the Lord, who is the God who tabernacles with us and makes provision for our needs. The more we are able to trust the future to God, the greater our freedom from worry and anxiety.

Sermon One: I Don't Want to Look Stupid

The Text. Luke 13:10-17

Luke 13: ¹⁰ On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹ and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” ¹³ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

¹⁴ Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

¹⁵ The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶ Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”

¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. (NIV)

Theological Point: There are several theological points that can be mined from this text, but my focus is upon this rare phrase Jesus used, calling the woman a *daughter of Abraham* to the synagogue leader. The term *son of Abraham* was widely used at this time as was the phrase *children of Abraham*. But *daughter of Abraham* was extraordinary and quite rare. There is an obvious miracle here—the lifting up and healing of a bent-over woman who for years could only look at dirt and the feet of others: *looking down!* There is another miracle here: Jesus gave her dignity and identity by calling her *daughter of Abraham* to a religious leader of the faith of Abraham. He restored her physical ability to *look up* and he gave her spiritual ability to *look up as a daughter of Abraham!* [Note: the preacher might also want to tie in the relationship of identity as a child of Abraham—a child of the covenant—to being a child of God in the New Covenant so that the congregants feel like the text refers to them].

Hermeneutical Connection: We often find ourselves burdened and *looking down*, bent over by the pressures and stresses of life. Jesus is able to bring healing to us, enabling us to *look up* by lightening our load and also by giving us dignity and identity as sons and daughters of God! Our theological identity gives us courage to live it out in our daily lives, especially at work, reducing stress and increasing self-confidence.

Introduction

The preacher can introduce the series mentioning some of the statistics that indicate the severity of the problem of stress at work. Here is an opportunity to catch the interest of the congregation by focusing on a very real problem in their lives.

Then, I suggest an introduction to the first sermon—perhaps something like:

According to recent research, one of the greatest sources of anxiety in the workplace is speaking out. This can range from being asked to give an oral report to a group to addressing concerns alone with your supervisor or the head of the company. Otherwise confident individuals can begin to stutter, lose their train of thought, and even totally freeze when called upon to speak up. Some have been known to excuse themselves quickly and race to the restroom, relieving themselves of lunch! It is terrifying for many to be in a situation where they might be called upon to speak up at work. Research indicates that the primal fear at work here is one of identity: I'm afraid of looking stupid by saying something ridiculous or unintelligible.

Note: many preachers may find it hard to identify with this fear since they are in a vocation that calls them to speak often! Still, notice the statistics or do an internet search of “fear of public speaking” or “fear of looking stupid in the office” and you'll see that this is a very real concern for many.

A. Unpack the Scripture

The narrative of the bent-over woman is so graphic it is worth describing as the first part of the sermon. What was it like to be bent over *for eighteen years!* She could not look people in the eye, struggled with pain, sleeping was dreadful, and she couldn't lift her face to the sun and sky. What would it be like to look at feet all day?

The disease may have been Ankylosing Spondylitis: a chronic progressive form of arthritis distinguished by inflammation and stiffness—and in some patients even ossification of joints—especially in the lower spine. Treatment

focuses on relieving back and joint pain and preventing or correcting spinal deformities. Even today we don't have any medicines that can actually cure this condition.

Early in the course of the disease, sufferers often find that the pain is relieved somewhat when they lean forward. So they often go through the day leaning slightly forward, and gradually their spine begins to fuse. The more they lean in order to relieve the pain, the greater the angle, until a patient might be bent almost double, as the woman in this narrative.

Illustration: [The best illustrations come from the preacher's heart and life experiences. Look there first.] Persons with a physical or mental ailment might be tempted to think of themselves as less of a person and hang their heads. I met a young man named Robert at the Genesis Club in Worcester, Massachusetts, who has Down Syndrome. He attended a high school for four years in an adjacent affluent suburb and was occasionally ridiculed. Compared to the popular kids and athletes, he felt like a "loser" and unable to be fully part of the community in a respected way. At Genesis Club, however, he found acceptance and more. The Genesis Club participants provide a supportive, loving community and also offer him resources to be skilled so that he can work and be productive [<http://www.genesisclub.org/>]. It is as if Genesis Club said to him: *You are no longer called "Loser" or "Retard"; you are now called Robert, a Son of God, who has much love and life to give.* His new identity has given him new confidence in his life and work. He looks up!

B. Spiritually "Bent Over"

Life has a tendency to bend us over to the point that all we see is broken pavement, dirt, and shoes. The stresses and strains weigh us down—we are crooked with anxiety. Looking down, we see only finite things and we take in the dust of life. Looking up, we look into the infinite handiwork of God. Looking down is to be in despair; looking up is to praise and celebrate.

Illustration: We have a time in worship service when we greet one another. I walked up to a woman and said, "Welcome to the worship of God." She looked me straight in the eyes, shook my hand firmly, and said, "Pastor, I am going through bankruptcy, I lost my job, my house is being foreclosed on, and my husband told me this morning he is leaving me..."

I wonder if she saw my jaw drop!

I will never forget what she said next: "But I'm here because I am confident that God will lead me through this mess!"

To this day, I am amazed when I think of her. She had all the reason in the world to be bent over with grief and sadness, but she held her head high and spoke with such faith and confidence. Her trust in God moved me!

C. Daughter of God at Work

One of the greatest fears at work is looking stupid or being put on the spot. Research indicates that a large number of people are terrified of participating in focus groups or saying much on a work team. They lack the confidence to speak out. In their minds, they may feel like they have something to contribute, but the idea of actually *saying it* is full of anxiety. They'd rather say nothing than risk looking ridiculous or irrelevant. And so, they look down rather than in the eyes of others. Many of these people are bright and have much to share, but their wisdom is a prisoner of their fear.

Jesus described the woman he healed to a leader of the community as *daughter of Abraham*—a title of distinction. He lifted her up, both physically and spiritually. He freed her of a demon of self-abasement to a Spirit of liberty and supreme identity as a child of God. When a person is so seized by God—redeemed, restored, renewed—and free of those things that crush our spirits and weigh us down, his or her eyes go up to God in praise and also in the eyes of others as fellow esteemed and beloved children of God. When we really believe we are sons and daughters of Abraham—and of God Almighty—we are able to look up and speak with confidence because we are not defending ourselves, or afraid of what others think of us, but confident that the One who is in us, and calls us by name, gives us the confidence to speak and share as needed. Our terror of what others think of us is minimized by our confidence in what God calls us: child of God!

Illustration I led a church leadership team for years that included highly competent people. I noticed, however, that one of our female leaders I'll call Sarah was quiet in our team meetings. I knew from her emails and conversations that she was quite capable and had great ideas—but in these meetings she went silent and spent most of the time writing in a notebook. After a few months of this, I asked Sarah, "You have such great ideas! Why don't you speak up in team meetings so that the rest of the team can benefit from your perceptions?" "I try to muster the courage," she said, "but wind up keeping my mouth shut. I'm afraid it might come out wrong. Everyone on the team is so good at what they do and articulate. I'm afraid they'll think I'm an idiot!" Sarah was terrified of speaking out.

It took some time, but with encouragement from the team, and some effort on my part to draw her out, she started to speak up. And the more she spoke up, the more her eyes met ours—she *looked up!* It was amazing to see her demeanor change as she developed the confidence to share her thoughts. “I feel like I have something to share and now I have the confidence to share it,” she said.

Wrap It Up! *Here is a chance for the preacher to drive in the point and really connect with people who are deeply encouraged by this message. Perhaps something like this:* We can change the way we think of ourselves by letting God persuade us deeply that we are indeed sons and daughters of the Lord. The encouraging team to help you do that might not be at work, but it’s right here in this church! This preacher and this congregation want to support you in helping you unpack your identity as a child of God and develop that confidence to look straight into the eyes of others and speak your thoughts with confidence. God may have given you what others need to hear, but they’ll never receive your important word of wisdom if you lack the confidence as a child of God to speak it.

God is the God of those who are straightened up, looking up, and speaking forth with confidence as sons and daughters of the Almighty!

We bow our head only to God.

Sermon Two: My Boss Is a Tyrant (And I Might Be the Boss!)

The Text. Genesis 31:44-54

⁴⁴ Come now, let’s make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.”

⁴⁵ So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶ He said to his relatives, “Gather some stones.” So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷ Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, and Jacob called it Galeed.

⁴⁸ Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” That is why it was called Galeed.⁴⁹ It was also called Mizpah, because he said, “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. ⁵⁰ If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.”

⁵¹ Laban also said to Jacob, “Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. ⁵² This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. ⁵³ May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.”

So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac. ⁵⁴ He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there. (NIV).

Theological Point: There are several types of covenants in the Bible. Covenants ranged from simple contracts for goods and services to the New Covenant between God and humanity in the cross of Jesus. Some covenants are between a superior party and a subordinate party, as between God and God’s people. Our text, however, refers to one between two equal parties—Laban and Jacob—who are settling their differences with a covenant of peace. Covenants were an important part of life throughout the history of Israel, symbolized in objective ways with a sign of the agreement. For example, the heap of stones in this narrative was erected as a visual reminder that an agreement was made between these two parties. Similarly, Jonathan solemnized his covenant with David by giving him tokens of his royal house and military conquests (1 Sam. 18:3). The covenant between Laban and Jacob was also consummated with a meal.

Hermeneutical Connection: Employment is best understood as a contractual (covenantal) exchange with an objective sign of agreement (e.g., a written contract). The contract is essentially: “I give you my labor in exchange for a paycheck.” The contract is made between two equal and free parties and can be freely terminated by any party at any time within the terms of the agreement. Employment contracts between equal parties assume (and sometimes are made explicit in writing) that each party will be treated with respect and dignity rather than as slaves. The relationship should not involve emotional or economic bondage. Rather, it is a clear contractual accord: labor for pay between two equal parties in an environment of respect. Interestingly, many hirings today also involve a meal.