

FOUNDATIONS FOR  
LAITY RENEWAL

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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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**“Obsessing, Digressing, and  
Progressing!”**

George Cladis

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 *Obsessing, Digressing, and Progressing!*

## *Introduction to the Sermon Series*

The workplace is where most of our congregation spend about a third of their lives so the metaphor of sacred journey fits well in this constantly changing environment. How common it is for us to seethe and obsess over a colleague's betrayal, the boss publicly holding up for ridicule some sincere effort of ours to advance the company, or a major client dropping out of our portfolio over a misunderstanding that couldn't be corrected no matter how hard we tried. Also on the journey with God at work, there are times when we are called to a higher level of creativity – seeing beyond what is expected to the fantastically new. Still, there's more. The Bible is filled with testimony after testimony of those whose lives were complete ruins, the charred remains of people who started off like everyone else thinking life would be this great arena of achievement, one great thing after another, only to find eventual disaster, either self or other inflicted, and now reduced to ash.

Three scenarios. Three real life experiences people in your church know well. Related to the journey motif, it is about getting unstuck from resentment, accepting and even valuing the detours and breaking the chains of the past to progress boldly. 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.

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George Cladis is the Executive Pastor of Liberty Churches in central Massachusetts.

## Sermon One: “I Can’t Stop Obsessing About It!”

The Text. Philippians 4:4-9

*4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. – NIV.*

[See also The Message on Romans 8:5-7].

**Theological Point:** Paul wrote Philippians as a personal, pastoral letter to those endeared to him in Philippi. Though the letter was written from a Roman prison, the letter is full of joy – as if Paul himself was able to think upon things of the Lord in a difficult context and thereby experience the depths of God’s peace. This particular passage reflects two kinds of encouragement: the first, verses 4 – 7, is particularly Jewish, referring to the traditional Hebraic practice of praise, prayer, and thanksgiving – something his Jewish readers would pick up on. Next we see Paul’s Hellenistic training in verses 8-9, using language familiar to the Greeks in Philippi, calling upon them to think upon – take into account – those things of the larger world that nonetheless reflect the creative hand of God. In both cases, Paul understood that real peace and joy, as well as the true and noble, are found in and through Christ Jesus. Key to these verses is what we set our minds upon and the nature of our daily practice of faith. When we practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, and focus our minds on God’s good gifts, we find joy and peace and live a gentler life – qualitative features of the faith-filled life that dispel fear and bring contentment.

**Hermeneutical Connection:** Bobby Jones is reported to have said that competitive golf is played mainly on a five-and-a-half-inch course: the space between your ears. Well, so is life! How we think of it and what we dwell on pretty much determine who we are and the level of joy and contentment we experience. This Scripture touches our lives with the exhortation to pay attention to, and focus upon, the things of God which bring *shalom* – a deep and abiding peace – and an equally abiding joy. If we fail to do that, we make ourselves vulnerable to obsessing about lesser things that fail to satisfy, result in unrest and discontent, and can even lead to personal ruin.

### Introduction

The preacher can introduce this series on work and faith by mentioning the three sermon titles: *Obsessing, Digressing, and Progressing*. These sermons center on the theme of faith as a journey. However, the focus is not so much on the journey itself as on three kinds of *journeying*. The first, we get stalled in obsessing over matters that freeze our ability to move forward; the second, we need to embrace the detours and zig zags as part of our ability to work better; and third, we can’t move forward when we’re carrying a crushing load of the past with us.

It is helpful to mention that the sermons are about common experiences *at work* but also *in life* – the sermons are relevant beyond the workplace, but since we spend so much time at work, they are particularly helpful in that context.

*Then, I suggest an introduction to the first sermon – perhaps something like:* Do you remember as a young adult, obsessing about a boy or girl that you liked? You had a hard time eating and sleeping, in fact, your mind was preoccupied with this person every waking moment. This uncomfortable obsession might have gone on for days, and then was gone as quickly as it came. Well, do we ever really grow out of it? Maybe we don’t obsess about the things we did as kids, but do we ever really get over that occasional and brief possession of our minds by obsessive thoughts that just won’t let go?

*To the preacher: it is important here to separate the various obsessive disorders from the run-of-the-mill kind we all experience. You could say something like:* There are some who suffer from different forms of mental illness or lesser struggles that include obsessive behaviors. These are, of course, clinical challenges and we have a pastoral heart for those who experience them and there are some new ways to help people who suffer from them. But today, and for the purposes of this sermon, I’m simply referring to that common experience we all have of occasionally thinking too much, about a person or experience and, for a short time, it seems to take possession of us.

For example . . . *Illustration. Here is one of mine:* I once knew a man who was convinced he was going to win the next Power Ball lottery. He bought what he was certain to be the winning ticket! I’m not sure why he was so sure he was going to win, but he was. For two days it was all he could think about: how he would spend the money! There was

going to be a new condo for his mother, a car for his son, and a vacation somewhere warm! And he said to me: “Pastor, I will tithe my winnings to the church, so you might want to meet with the church board and plan how you’ll spend the offering!” I just nodded, smiled, and added – “I’m amazed you are so sure of this.” “Pastor, it is all I can think of, in fact, I’m ready to quit my job to show God that I believe this will happen.” At this point, I strongly cautioned him about quitting his job and, thankfully, he didn’t. He was devastated when he didn’t win. He returned to work the next day with his head down, his coworkers mocking him.

Well, we may think his story is a bit “out there,” but seriously, don’t you sometimes get in a place where your mind won’t let go of a thought or resentment? How common it is for us to seethe and obsess over a colleague’s betrayal, the boss publicly holding up for ridicule some sincere effort of ours to advance the company, or a major client dropping out of our portfolio over a misunderstanding that couldn’t be corrected no matter how hard we tried. Experiences like these can freeze our movement and we may feel stuck in bitterness. The challenge is to keep one’s mind from obsessing over them to the point work becomes a place of sizzling resentment and we retreat into a paralyzing state where we just want to hide – or we go into inappropriate rage, firing off piercing emails like a rattling gatling gun!

### **A. Unpack the Scripture.**

*Preacher: here you can give the context and background of the text. I personally like imagining what it was like for Paul to be in prison. While his conditions might not have been as severe as a non-Roman citizen, he was nonetheless locked up and awaiting trial. What went through his mind? Don’t you sense that we get Paul’s already worked out exhortations in his letters but miss out on the trying thoughts that led up to them? He discovered that through praise, prayer and petition, and focusing on God’s lovely and true things, a peace that flowed over him – a shalom! But what might have been his thoughts prior to that – struggles with his situation, fears, conflicts? And then, finding great joy and peace in his spiritual practice and “obsessing,” you might say, on the things of God. Here’s an illustration of mine, but think of your own: I have trouble with insomnia. I think it’s partly chemical – my father doesn’t sleep well, my siblings don’t and neither do my children. We keep sharing notes on how we manage to get a good night’s sleep! My mind at night is thinking of all the day’s activities and the things I need to remember to do the next day – not good thoughts if you want to sleep! So what works the best for me? Philippians 4:4-9! I am training my mind to be in a state of prayer and thanksgiving, setting my mind on things of God, and when I do, I begin to feel a peace – a shalom – that flows over me like an ocean of relaxation and, working this meditation, I find myself falling into sleep. This is a form of practicing faith, where faith is more than a creedal statement of belief; it is a state of mind that equips you to rest, but also as the text says, to approach life with gentleness.*

### **B. Shalom**

The Greek word used in Philippians 4 for peace is *eirene* and it means the absent of conflict. It’s like a family with teenagers who fight a lot. One evening, everyone after dinner was off doing their own thing and there was no fighting – ahhhh, *eirene!*

But Shalom is so much more! Remember that Paul was a Jew and so, when he used the Greek work *eirene*, he was likely referring to the Hebrew concept of *Shalom*. Shalom is about much more than the absent of conflict; it is a qualitative state. Shalom means:

To make amends

To make good

To be (or to make) peace

To restore

Prosperity

Wellness

The use of shalom in the Scriptures always points towards that transcendent action of wholeness.

When you practice prayer, petition, and thanksgiving, and set your mind on the things of God, you feel *Shalom* overtaking you, embedding in your life deeply, and you sense that you are changed by it.

Here is more on Shalom: <http://www.thehighcalling.org/reflection/salvation-and-ishalomi#.Ux3TdvdWck>.

Also at: [http://www.thehighcalling.org/attitude/working-well-theology-work#.Ux3T\\_PldWck](http://www.thehighcalling.org/attitude/working-well-theology-work#.Ux3T_PldWck).

*Illustration: I suggest you bring up ways to meditate on Scripture. Some preachers may be quite adept at this, practicing various breathing and posture exercises combine with mantra-like Bible verses to focus on the Lord and center one’s life for the day. Other preachers may not be so accustomed, but most must have some sort of **practice** (v. 9) of faith that*

*brings Shalom into your life. You can bring out different ways to do this: while you are exercising or jogging, sitting on the porch or in the living room in an overstuffed chair, in a prayer position or lying down. Help the people of your congregation develop a practice of the experience of Shalom in their lives, the peace of God, which overcomes the stresses and anxieties of life, those petty obsessions and preoccupations of the workplace, and set's one mind and heart at ease. Remember that you're preaching to people who are struggling with a relationship or an incident at work. You have the opportunity here to re-tool them spiritually for moving through those uncomfortable experiences with the Shalom of God!*

### **C. Living Out Shalom at Work.**

The experience of Shalom in our lives is palpable! We are changed as we engage in the practice of prayer, petition, and thanksgiving, and also by focusing our minds on the true, the noble, things of beauty and things admirable. However, this spiritual experience isn't meant to stay within us alone. It isn't designed by God to be just our own private religious technique to be less stressful. Rather, we are called to experience Shalom and then live it out in the world, in our homes and in the workplace. Otherwise, it becomes like attempts to store manna – the bread from heaven in Exodus 16:20 – it turns to worms unless it is consumed and made part of your life and your life's work.

*Illustration. Wherever Jesus went, he exuded the Shalom of God. He was, after all, the Prince of Peace who lived it out in every word he spoke and every gesture and action. He was the personification of Shalom.*

*Check out <http://www.thehighcalling.org/blogs/ramblindan/shalom#.Ux3SJPldWck> for a good description of this kind of peace. Also [http://www.thehighcalling.org/blogs/ramblindan/participating-shalom#.Ux3TH\\_ldWck](http://www.thehighcalling.org/blogs/ramblindan/participating-shalom#.Ux3TH_ldWck). You can find good quotes and illustrations at these sites. Also, here is one of mine: I once got into a tense conversation at work with a coworker when working for a company in California. We both stood our ground and neither one was going to budge. Looking back, it was a ridiculous argument, but at the time it seemed important. After a volley of sharp exchanges, I caught myself. It was clear our disagreement was not going anywhere good – what could I do differently to de-escalate the situation? I changed tactics. “OK, I said, we both think we're right. I'm going to back up for a moment and listen to how you arrived at your view. I want to fully understand what you're saying. After listening to him more carefully, I discovered two things. While I did not agree with him, I understood better how he got to his stand on the problem. Second, I was able to validate those things he brought up that I thought were important. My listening to him opened up his own ability to then listen to me. We never did agree – and our boss settled the matter – but we left that argument in peace. Now I find myself able to catch myself more often in tense situations, less inclined to argue or stand my ground, without first taking time to listen and understand. The quality of Shalom is not one of being a floor mat where everyone walks over you, nor giving in on issues important to you; rather, it is a mood, an aura about you, that is willing to engage, listen, understand, value, and then respond according to your own convictions.*

**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: People filled with Shalom – so that it flows out of them and into their homes, schools, offices, and neighborhoods – can change the world. Look, I know this is hard. I'm certainly not as good at living out Shalom as I hope to be. But to the degree I am, I am free of those worries and stress and preoccupations that otherwise terrorize my life. And people around me are touched by the Shalom that touches me! I suspect this is true of you too.*

In the first few chapters of Genesis, we find Shalom – a wonderful peace of God in the Garden prior to the fall of humanity. Then, after our disobedience, those things that oppose Shalom entered our lives and our world. God now wants to enlist you and me to take Creation back! To begin to live the Light of Shalom in the world and, in some small way God has given us, work to restore in our world, what is also restoring our souls!