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Three Sermons on  
*Work and Faith*  

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*Spiritual Futurists*  
Larry Parsley

*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*

# Note from the Author

The future has collided with the workplace.

Did you know that there is an “Association of Professional Futurists”? It is said to be a thriving community which provides a unique perspective on anticipating and influencing the future. According to *Wired* magazine, a number of corporations and agencies, including British Telecom, IBM, the FBI, and even Hallmark, have futurists on their staff. *Deutsche Welle* recently reported that the Vatican convened a conference with Internet experts to try to understand the possibilities and dangers of the Internet and its future impact on the Catholic Church. Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia all brought advisors to this Vatican briefing.

Savvy business leaders and church leaders want to know where the future is going, so they can anticipate and be prepared for it. But many people who have a high degree of interest in how the future will relate to them professionally have a shockingly low interest in how the future will impact them spiritually.

In the average systematic theology textbook, there is usually a big section designated for “spiritual futurists.” “Futurist” is not the word that theologians use. They prefer the word “eschatology,” the study of the “last days.”

Jesus liked to picture the “last days” as a master returning from a journey. In Mark 13:32-37, he speaks of a particular master who goes on a trip and leaves his servants in charge, “each with his assigned task,” and puts a special servant at the door to keep watch. And the worst thing that could happen, Jesus says, is for the master to return (at some unknown time) and find the servants sleeping.

As I have observed other Christians (as well as my own relationship with Jesus), I have concluded that it is very difficult to get the needle pointing in the right place when it comes to our attitude about our rendezvous with the Master.

**Sometimes, the needle kicks into the red.** In other words, some Christians have a dangerous obsession with the end times. We watch Christian movies or read Christian novels and forget that they are works of fiction. We begin to play games called “Name that Antichrist!”

When I was a teenager, the youth ministers in my town got together and tried to collectively scare us all to death by showing us a movie called, *A Thief in the Night*. We were all afraid that one day we’d walk home from school and open the door of our house and discover that mom had been “raptured” up to heaven and we had been left behind.

These movies we watched and apocalyptic books we read did not fill us with the conviction of sin or a holy fear of God. They filled us instead with an unholy terror and an unhealthy fascination with political conspiracy theories.

And perhaps as a reaction to a fanatical obsession with end times, for a lot of us, the needle now points in the opposite direction. **Many of us today possess unhealthy, lackadaisical attitudes about the future.**

There are some very basic truths of Scripture that we often neglect. To state it very simply, one day we will meet Jesus. We will either meet him at his house in heaven, or he will come to meet us in our house on earth. We will either meet him after we die, or he will come to meet us on the earth.

Different people have different theories about what that looks like, but all of us who take Scripture seriously would have to agree that one day either we go see Jesus or Jesus comes to see us.

The Scripture is pretty clear that we are not privy to the timetable. But one thing is clear: the master expects the servants to do what the servants are called to do.

In other words, the master doesn’t want servants sitting around the kitchen table while he’s gone, poring over maps and timetables, trying to figure out exactly when the master will return. No, the master expects the servants to “watch” and to perform their “assigned tasks.”

So what does that mean for us? The point of this suggested series of sermons is to try to answer that question. The central concern of the series involves learning what it means to be “spiritual futurists.” We will be trying to answer the following question: If I were to meet my Master today, would he find me ready?

Or, to ask the question a little differently: How should we live in light of our coming reunion with our Master?

I believe we can find some good answers to that question in letters from the Apostle Paul. Paul was certainly a “spiritual futurist,” and many of his letters anticipate the coming day of the Lord. In this set of sermons, we will look at three such Pauline passages, and explore three different priorities for Christians who are anticipating their blessed future with the Lord Jesus.

**Sermon 1: Love-Abounders (1 Thessalonians 3:1-13)**

**Sermon 2: Gospel Laboratories (Philippians 1:3-11)**

**Sermon 3: Joy Connoisseurs (Philippians 4:4-7)**

## Sermon 2: Gospel Laboratories

### Philippians 1:3-11 (NIV)

*“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”*

### Theological Point

The Christian’s destiny with God in heaven causes us to look with hope on the progressive transformation of our lives into conformity with Christ. In this sense, we each resemble holy experiments, each one of us in “process.”

### Introduction

When we imagine the historical setting behind Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we typically envision a prisoner (perhaps in Rome) authoring a letter to friends in faraway Philippi. But when I read Philippians 1:3-11, a different image comes to mind. It is of the apostle Paul as a laboratory assistant, clad in a white jacket, spectacles at the end of his nose, carefully monitoring the progress that is being made in a holy experiment.

Let me see if I can explain. What I am suggesting the preacher do in this sermon is to stage this passage in the setting of a laboratory. In a high school science lab, the student marvels to see ordinary substances like baking soda and vinegar combine to form “hot ice.” In the Christian life, God-the-Scientist pours his dynamic grace into our ordinary lives, and others can observe the transformation taking place in us.

### Joyful anticipation of our transformation

It is clear as we read this passage that the apostle Paul is keenly interested in a laboratory specimen known as the church at Philippi. Although Paul is physically located a great distance away, he cannot hold back his enthusiasm for the well-being of the Philippians. Paul tells us that he thinks of that church constantly. Every thought of them is a prompt to pray for them. Every prayer fills Paul with joy (joy, in fact, is a consistent theme in this letter). If Paul’s emotional, affective language seems excessive here, wait until you get to verse 8! There Paul seems to overflow with the affection of Christ Jesus for the Philippians.

Paul’s affection is based on two closely connected factors. First, Paul and the Philippians are “gospel partners.” Gordon Fee has said that when you read the letter to the Philippians, you discover a three-way bond that exists between Christ, Paul, and the Philippian church. In the context of the sermon, you might say it this way: the grace of Christ is a dynamic experimental variable. Grace has had a radical, transformative impact on both Paul and the Philippian church. And the third leg of the triangle, if you will, is that now Paul and the Philippians are partners in a grand gospel enterprise. They experience *koinonia*—an intense, personal sharing in the activity of Christ’s kingdom on this earth.

Many of us have experienced something similar in the workplace. Being engaged in a common goal (starting a new company, pulling out a new product line, etc.) can create incredibly deep bonds among teammates. And it can happen in a relatively short period of time.

The Apostle Paul's words provide a great reminder that in the church, we should never allow ourselves to be defined by our differences—older versus younger, traditional versus contemporary, contemplatives versus activists. No, we too are “gospel partners” in a grand endeavor.

### **Confidence in the progress of the experiment**

This brings us to the one sentence in this passage that has seized my imagination for some time and provides the source of imagery I am suggesting for this sermon. The line comes from verse 6: “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Paul seems to be saying that God is the grand experimenter. God loves to watch his subjects experience positive growth and change and transformation. And while this change begins decisively in our introduction to faith in Jesus, change is not like the flip of a switch. Change most often happens slowly and progressively. To use an image from Jesus, the change in us is like a seed that germinates underground. And God superintends the whole process. He begins a “good work” in us, and he will see that good work through to its completion on the day of Christ Jesus. In other words, what God starts, God will finish. And Paul relished the role of being a lab assistant, a stenographer's tablet in hand, monitoring the spiritual progress taking place among the Philippians.

Have you ever conceived of your life in that way? Have you thought of God pouring his gospel into the test tube of your soul? Have you considered the privilege of observing, over a period of time, this slow and steady transformation (in us and fellow believers)? Sometimes we conceive of spirituality as something that is totally managed by us. And certainly, in this very letter, Paul instructs Christians to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12). Yes, we are active participants in our own spiritual growth. But Paul assures us that, while we are participants, we are not the engine of that growth (as Paul puts it in 2:13, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”). God started the whole process, and God will bring it to completion. To use the language of Hebrews 12:2, Christ is both the “author” or initiator of gospel transformation, and Christ is also the “perfector” or finisher of the gospel work in us. And one of the most exciting privileges we have as Christians is to monitor that differential between who we once were and who we are becoming in Christ.

*Illustration:* Last week, I had the privilege of being on a mission trip in Guatemala. I preached at a Sunday evening service, at an embryonic mission church in a poverty-stricken mountain near Guatemala City. And I spoke on this text. I noted how this little mission church was just two years old. And many of its members (in a congregation overwhelmingly made up of children) were at the very beginning of their relationship with God. But I exhorted this group of Guatemalan believers not to lose hope, though their work had many challenges. They minister amidst the obstacles of poverty and illiteracy and many other social ills. I assured them of the words of Scripture, that God finishes what he starts.

I shared with this Guatemalan church a chapter from my own spiritual development. As a child and teenager, I struggled greatly with shyness. My timidity had an almost debilitating impact on my social interactions at school and my involvement in church. And yet, somehow, in the providence of God, as a 15-year-old boy, I began to hear whispers of God's plan for my life. These plans included me becoming a preacher. I would regularly lament to God, “If I turn red like a tomato when I speak casually to one person, how will I ever proclaim your Word to many people?” I shared with my Guatemalan friends that God is faithful and what he started in me, as a 15-year-old boy, he is continuing to grow and develop, and one day he will create a finished product. I am grateful to be in process in the laboratory of God.

### **Assurance that one day our transformation will be complete**

What will that finished product look like? We get hints of it in Paul's prayer in 1:9-11. Paul has already referenced in verse 6 the “day of Christ Jesus.” Now, Paul reveals the goal of his constant prayer for the

Philippians. And in Paul's prayer, we see what the finished product will look like. One day, when God has finished what he starts, the Philippians will be filled with abounding love for one another. One day, they will have progressively grown in their knowledge about the things that really matter. They will be filled with deep wisdom and spiritual discernment. They will think and speak and act in such a way their motives and actions will be pure and blameless. One day, they will be filled with the fruit of Christ's character, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). One day, God will finish what he starts, and the result will be glorious (1:11).

As you prayerfully consider your own congregation, you might be tempted to reflect on your personal experiences of God's transforming growth in your own life. You might want to acknowledge the impatience that we sometimes feel, as we are caught somewhere between the Now and the Not Yet of God's unfolding plan, between the "Before" picture and the "After" picture. You might want to ask the congregation to consider their own metrics in these key areas of spiritual transformation. Are we growing in our love for others (including difficult coworkers)? Do we find our minds increasingly filled with truth of God that causes us to adopt better priorities and goals and the wisdom of God that helps us make better decisions about how we spend our time, our emotional energy, and our money? Are our lives slowly but surely becoming more loving, more joyful, filled with a deeper sense of peace, more patient in frustrating situations, kinder than we once were to those who irritate us, filled with a deep sense of goodness and integrity, faithful to the promises that we make, gentle with the fragile people around us, and filled with a sense of self-control when it comes to our appetites and impulses?

### **Conclusion**

One day, as Scripture clearly teaches, we will meet Jesus, here or there. Let us tend the good work that God has begun in us, knowing that what he starts he will finish.

### **Connection to Faith and Daily Life**

One of the most effective ways we can integrate a faith dimension into our workplace is by yielding our lives to the experimental work of God in us. Coworkers who observe positive changes in us—in our work ethic, in our interpersonal relationships, in our sense of peace and joy, and the many quiet and humble ways we serve others we come in contact with—will be inevitably curious about this catalytic gospel substance that has been poured into our lives.