



Laity Renewal Foundation

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Three Sermons on

Work and Faith

Sermon Notes

*So that God may be glorified
and the nations come to faith . . .*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge

TheHighCalling.org

Note from the Author of this Issue

Faith and work are often separated in the minds of those who hear us preach Sunday after Sunday. What has faith to do with work beyond desperate prayers to find a job or help a business make it through a stormy season? Can they exist together under the same roof? Having been a pastor, preacher, business owner, and business executive, I can attest to a subtle thought in the minds of business owners and managers that faith might put the brakes on a successful business, cause reflection on ethical questions that will cost the business time and money, and otherwise make a business less competitive.

This three-part sermon series outline enables you, the preacher, to address this important issue for today: Can faith and work coexist and thrive in today's fast-paced business environment? Part of the challenge we face as digital, post-moderns in the 21st century is a clear separation from the land. A hundred years ago, most of us were farmers living intimately with agricultural cycles and rhythms—a kind of life that had easy parallels to Jesus' parables and application to agrarian work. Much of our work today is behind a computer screen, in a mechanized factory, or otherwise further removed from the land. This growing divorce from natural creation can lure us into ways of behaving and managing that are driven by goals and motivations contrary to the Kingdom Jesus embodied. One who daily grapples with crops and tares, who regularly toils under the expansive canopy of the stars and who knows first-hand the connection between labor and life simply is in a better position to feel an utter dependence upon an awesome God than one who travels daily in an automobile from suburban cookie-cutter house to fluorescent-lighted, dropped-down ceiling module office—perhaps never setting foot outside or only for moments.

There is a real need, then, for preachers to help congregants find ways to experience God in the workplace and infuse offices with spiritual meaning lest they become a secular wasteland. The effort represented in this sermon series is to bring together God's Kingdom culture with our work environments in hopes of making our work a vital offering to the Lord. God bless you as you make these sermon outlines come alive for your parishioners, infused with your own life experiences, and with your own theological convictions woven throughout.

Lastly, I encourage the preacher to look for ways to make these sermons applicable to everyone from business owner to hourly wage earner. Management, essentially, is an enterprise we all engage in, whether we manage a billion dollar corporation or simply our own lives and simple labors. I have endeavored to provide you ways to speak across the board so that no one feels left out.

Here is the course of our journey in the proclaimed Word:

Sermon 1: Work as Realm of Prayer

Sermon 2: Work as Prayerful Relationships

Sermon 3: Work as Prayerful Activity

Sermon 3: Work as Prayerful Activity

Mark 6:30-44

Then the apostles gathered around Jesus and told him everything they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come with me privately to an isolated place and rest a while” (for many were coming and going, and there was no time to eat). So they went away by themselves in a boat to some remote place. But many saw them leaving and recognized them, and they hurried on foot from all the towns and arrived there ahead of them. As Jesus came ashore, he saw the large crowd and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he taught them many things.

When it was already late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is an isolated place and it is already very late. Send them away so that they can go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said, “Should we go and buy bread for two hundred silver coins and give it to them to eat?” He said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.” Then he directed them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they reclined in groups of hundreds and fifties. He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. He gave them to his disciples to serve the people, and he divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the broken pieces and fish that were left over, twelve baskets full. Now there were five thousand men who ate the bread.

Theological Point: Jesus takes the offering of the people—an offering of scarcity in the face of great need—and works the miracle of provision for thousands. In addition, the disciples are here called “apostles”: a prefiguring of what they would become—those who take the miracle food of Jesus and feed others. This is prayerful activity: having compassion on the people and responding with the food of Jesus.

Hermeneutical Connection: Our offices and workplaces can be transformed when we view our labor as prayer activity: a compassionate response to the needs of others.

Introduction: So far, we have examined how amazing it would be to consider work as a realm of prayer. Prayer, we’ve said, was once regarded as work; and work as prayer. How would the offices of America be different if they were considered places of prayer?

In our second sermon, we looked at difficult work relationships and wondered what it would be like if we considered these to be prayerful relationships: we suggested that this vision is not entirely “Polyanna-ish” but is grounded in research indicating that an environment managed to care about employees can result in higher productivity as well.

Today, we see what can happen when we view our tasks at work as prayerful activity.

So, we have moved from:

Work as Prayerful Realm, to

Work Relationships as Prayerful Relationships—Even the Most Difficult of Them, to now . . .

Work as Prayerful Activity.

- A. **Describing the Scene.** I suggest the preacher describe the scene in this passage. Be vivid. Allow your congregants to feel the grief of Jesus over the death of John the Baptist; the need for him to get away and be alone with his trusted followers; the horde that will not leave him alone. Then, an apparent turning point when Jesus, trying to find an isolated place, instead is filled with compassion for the needs of a

hungry people and decides to feed them. The apostles (interestingly called “disciples” here) complain that their resources are too scarce to take care of the crowd—there is never enough to do what God calls us to do! Jesus asks them to find out what resources are out there, and they surface a meager offering. Yet Jesus takes what little was given and works the miracle. (Note: the miracle belongs to Jesus—we are only witnesses to it and distributors of it.) The disciples get organized (a case for good church management!) and put the people in groups. Then, these same disciples act out what would be their later apostolic roles by taking the miracle food from Jesus and feeding the people who are gathered in groups. [I like to add that the disciples themselves must have fed on the same miracle bread—workers must not toil without also being fed lest they collapse from exhaustion!] At the end of the feast, there is more than enough! A wonderful symbol of the extravagant love, compassion, and grace of God extended to those who hunger for the Almighty.

Illustration: If the preacher gives a vivid recollection of the scene, an illustration here is likely not necessary. The preacher could end the recollection by saying something like: “This is the extravagant abundance of God offered to us to relieve our deepest hungers and needs!”

However, I offer here an example of a type of illustration that could be used if desired: I was a part of a two-week-long scout adventure in the High Sierra back-country when I was a kid. The last day of the trek was long and hot. We were a band of dirty and tired youths, clomping down the dusty trail with heavy packs on our backs. We came near the end of the trail at the hottest hour of day and, rounding a corner, there was a parent of one of our fellows standing there with a cooler full of iced drinks, handing them to us—oh, a cold drink has never tasted so good! Just so: the bread of Jesus feeds our deepest hungers and needs and finds us in our most desperate hour!

- B. **Work as Prayerful Activity.** So far, I have suggested how different things would be if offices and homes—your workplace—would be considered a Realm of Prayer: the place where God dwells! Second, I have suggested how different things would be if we viewed work relationships—even the most tested and trying of them all—as prayerful relationships and that doing so does not necessarily result in a less competitive workforce. Lastly, I suggest to you that we link the tasks we do at work to prayerful activity: We are meeting needs for our God of extravagant love!

If you think about it, work tasks are essentially about meeting needs. Perhaps your company offers a product or service that meets a particular need. Similarly, the work of homemaking meets the needs of those who live there. You, as a worker, can view your tasks at work as meeting the needs of others. There are two ways you can view this: First, your product or service is helpful to others in meeting a need. Second, your company’s success results in creating jobs for others thereby meeting the needs of the employees for livelihood. Good commerce is essentially about the meeting of needs of people and, in the process thereof, having one’s own needs met as well.

[Preacher, if we climb into the minds of our listeners, we may hear them thinking, *But my company is evil!* We might want to add something like: If you have ethical issues about your company, then you have another set of concerns. These problems you may have to take up with your management and, if the unethical behavior is such that you cannot continue, you may need to consider relocation.]

We are endeavoring now to view work tasks as prayerful activity because you are about the good work of meeting needs: both for your customers/clients and for your fellow workers.

Have you ever considered your work in this way? Your labor helps others put bread on their table!

Some of you, however, may wonder how something you feel is trivial about your product or service is helpful to others! For example [Preacher, here is an example of an illustration but it is always best to

dig deep for your own!]: I know of a Christian man who worked for a hair brush company. He sold principally to hairdressers who loved his products. However, he was in a quandary because he wondered if his products only served to enable vanity. Then, while calling on a client at a beauty salon, he realized that his real work was enabling hair stylists to make a living! He watched his clients; how they labored to help others look their best. He began to consider them as “hair artists.” And he was providing them art brushes. Not only was he helping their hair art emerge but he was enabling them to make a living and put bread on their tables. This new realization not only gave this Christian salesman new energy for his work but also a sense that he was contributing to a noble purpose beyond himself.

C. It Matters if It Is Only You! Now we come to the last point of this sermon and the last point of this sermon series. What if it only matters to you that your workplace is the prayerful realm of God? What if only you consider your work to be service that matters to God? Certainly we might consider it ideal to work in an environment where spirituality is valued and God is honored. However, few of us do. Most of us find ourselves in corporations or companies that are purely secular and have no interest in matters of faith. What do you do if you are the only person who sees your work as prayerful activity?

Illustration: Preacher, I suggest you come up with an illustration of something alluring, something toward which we are attracted. The point is to illustrate that a worker in the workplace who views her work as offering to God is something illuminating! For example: I worked in an office that had a poor heating system. The warmest part of the office was near a colleague’s desk—his name was Bob. On cold days, it was not unusual for us to gather around Bob’s desk with a cup of hot coffee and hold our staff meetings there rather than in the colder, draftier conference room. In the wintertime, Bob was the most popular worker in the office! In a similar way, in most circumstances, your attitude of work as offering to God and in service to others becomes attractive. Such an attitude is like warmth in a cold room or like a bright light in a dark place. In fact, godly work is contagious: others will want to know what makes you hold your work in such high regard. Practicing the principles of these sermons is actually a form of evangelism, giving testimony to the original Worker who created all and saw that is was good!

Conclusion. So, even if you are alone . . . YOU can make a difference for the Kingdom of God in your home, your cubicle, your office, your trade . . . wherever you conduct your work as prayerful activity. Try it out. Imagine your work as a Realm of Prayer, your work relationships as Prayerful Relationships, and your work tasks as Prayerful Activities—see if that doesn’t entirely change your attitude about work and even result in making you an irresistible worker!

To God be the glory! Amen.

These sermons are by Dr. George Cladis. He is Executive Pastor of Liberty Churches in the western suburbs of Boston. He also serves as the Chief Operating Officer of the New England Dream Center, a faith-based social service agency created by Liberty Churches in Worcester, Massachusetts. Cladis authored *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), and he is adjunct Assistant Professor in the Fuller Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry program teaching church leadership and team-based management. George and his wife Martie live in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, with their rescue dog, Emily.