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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 1: Work as Realm of Prayer—The Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. “He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.” The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came, and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “These men who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” But he answered one of them, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Theological Point: This parable is about the extravagant love and grace of God. Similar to Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son, this parable is likely addressed both to the faithful who are with God from the beginning and the sinners who come in late—will the early comers (Pharisees, Jews) accept the latecomers (sinners, Gentiles)? Jesus turns our ways of thinking upside down (cf. *The Upside Down Kingdom*, Donald Kraybill): “the first will be last and the last will be first.”

However, another way to look at this parable: the true “wage” is not the denarius but the opportunity to be at work in the Master’s vineyard. From this angle, deep joy is *to be* in the vineyard—to enjoy the Master’s labor and arrive as soon as possible! And, we celebrate the latecomers who may “lose out” by not being in the vineyard earlier, but at least they finally came to their senses and got in the gate! In this view, the denarius is not central to the passage; it reflects our “justice” orientation and what is business “correct” but distracts us from the fact that to labor in the Master’s vineyard is all the reward necessary.

Hermeneutical Connection: The first goal of our work is to be at work in the Master’s Vineyard (and not merely work for *denarii*). True joy is found when we labor for the Master as opposed to mammon. The worker who realizes that his or her work is first *for the Master* finds true joy and fulfillment.

Introduction: The preacher may want to introduce the entire sermon series either here or before the reading of Scripture. These three sermons on work and faith hinge on each other: first, work as prayerful realm of God; second, work as prayerful relationships with others; third, work as prayerful activity.

Illustration: (It is always best for preachers to use illustrations from their own lives and experience. Here, I suggest one that shows the common separation between work and faith. I offer one of my own as an example.) Years ago I was flying to Ecuador on a mission trip. I sat next to an elder in the church: a respected and successful businessman. We started to talk about work and faith. He remarked, “Pastor, the world of faith and the world of business are far apart. I keep them separated. I can’t get soft at work and expect the same strong results. Frankly, my faith has little to do with my work.”

Whether we are at work in a business or a factory or at home, is there a way to bring the two together? Can we view our work as an extension of what we believe?

Today we start a three-part sermon series on work and faith, and how they are intimately interconnected. I don't believe we have to check our faith at the door when we leave home for work. In fact, Scripture holds the key to finding real joy in the workplace.

A. The Workers in the Vineyard.

Describe the scene of the parable. I suggest you help your congregation "feel" the parable in its original context. Explain some historical notes such as the meaning of "the third hour" (likely 9 a.m.), sixth hour (noon), ninth hour (3 p.m.) and eleventh hour (5 p.m.). Many people, especially business people, find this parable offensive—so did the people of Jesus' time. Describe here the offense: How could a business owner get away with paying wages in this manner when everyone knows what each makes? Wouldn't this lower morale? This seems so unfair!

Illustration. I suggest you help people feel outraged at this parable. Make the person in the pew feel the indignation of the early listeners of Jesus. Perhaps quote statistics of CEOs who make enormous salaries compared to anyone else in the company. Or, cite other injustices of compensation. End with something like: Is Jesus poor at business? Is he capricious and unjust? Is he playing with people's minds? Why would he tell such an outrageous story?

The preacher could also describe a children's party with one child getting a large portion of cake and ice cream while another gets a considerably smaller portion. Imagine the protest! We simply have an innate desire to keep things fair. This parable is outrageous.

B. The first meaning of the parable.

The preacher now has the opportunity to explore why Jesus would tell such a parable. First, the meaning most likely: the incredible love and grace of God. It *is unfair!* And we all benefit from the "injustice" of God's extravagant grace. Elaborate on the "unjust" nature of God's love that even an eleventh-hour sinner can find forgiveness for his transgressions. Note how this kind of math is totally contrary to our normal sensibilities and represents the radical nature of the Kingdom of God touching down on earth in the person of Jesus Christ. The stunned and bewildered reaction of the crowd then is the same as today. How can this kind of love be possible?

Illustration. This is a wonderful time to say something enriching and beautiful about God's grace. The person in the pew is now moved from outrage to a sense of feeling forgiven and redeemed. God's love is incredible and extended to all, even the latecomers. Consider commenting on the relationship between Pharisees and "sinners"—such a parable would make Pharisees angry at the thought that sinners could so easily obtain the same reward given to those with years of dedication and service to God. Yet that is the love and grace of God. Also, consider appealing to those in the pew who live with deep regrets, who have discovered the meaning of faith later in life—they have the same inheritance!

Another angle for an illustration: The preacher could bring up Jonah who fled from obeying God's command to preach repentance to Nineveh. He hated the people of Nineveh and did not want the possibility of God's grace to be poured out upon his enemies! It simply seems so unfair that the wicked should enjoy the same benefits as the righteous. But the Kingdom of God is unlike our sense of what is fair.

Now, you might end this section by saying something like: How wonderful is this parable when it comes to salvation and redemption. But what does this have to do with work and faith? It only seems to underscore the separation of the two—i.e. the parable is about spiritual things and not actual work! Many theologians are quick to say that this parable is not at all about work but about "spiritual things."

C. Another meaning of the parable.

There is, however, another way to view this parable. Certainly it refers to the love and grace of God. But, perhaps, it also has something to say about work itself. What if another meaning of this parable—a related meaning—is that everyone has wrongly focused on the denarius. The real joy and delight of the parable is the great benefit of serving in the Master’s vineyard! It’s another kind of “upside down” twist. The assumption is that the *labor* is toilsome and, therefore, it is unfair to reward the latecomers with the same pay. But perhaps another meaning Jesus intended is to view the labor as delight: how wonderful it is that latecomers *eventually got in!* Work, in this regard, is a delight because it is work for the Master. So, *work* is a kind of spiritual exercise with the ultimate focus on the greatest Worker (Creator) of all: the Almighty God; and our work is a reflection of the work of God!

Illustration. The root word for “office” in Latin is work. *Opus Dei* is actually “office of God” or “work of God.” Centuries ago, St. Benedict created the “offices” of a Benedictine monk: These were times of prayer because St. Benedict equated prayer with work—and work with prayer. Benedict said, “*Orare est laborare, laborare est orare.*” “To pray is to work, to work is to pray.”

This parable teaches us that the workplace can be thought of as *a realm of prayer*—our work then is an offering to God, and the whole realm of the workplace is the province for living out our faith. For, ultimately, the Master we serve is God who enables our good labor.

Illustration: There are many illustrations at www.TheHighCalling.org. Most of the radio messages, in print on the website, are about just this idea: work as prayer, prayer as work. Pick one of them or one of your own. Even though work includes difficult challenges and one’s boss may be a bear to work for, what difference does it make to view it as sacred work? I have heard that Quakers viewed their work as prayer. Women who met to quilt considered “every stitch a prayer” as they created works of art that were actually quite practical. See what difference it makes for you this week as you go to work and consider “every stitch a prayer.”

Conclusion. *Preacher: excellent time to do a holy pause with your congregation: Is your work a prayer?*

Now, you really get to bring this sermon home! You could go the direction of: “What if we were to view our work at the office, at the factory, or in our homes as a *prayer* to God? What if *work* is actually holy vocation even though it is not in a church!? What if each of us went to work and saw it as ultimately *working for the Master*? How would that change us? The workplace? Those with whom we work?