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Three Sermons on
Work and Faith

My Work, Christ's Home!
Dr. George Cladis

*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

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Introduction to the Series

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, because reflection on ethical questions 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?

In the mid-20th century, Presbyterian minister Robert Boyd Munger wrote an inspiring little book called *My Heart—Christ's Home* (reprinted by Intervarsity Press in 2001). Munger's book was essentially an extended metaphor of the Lord who knocks on the door of one's heart and is invited in. Over time, the Lord is allowed into more and more rooms of the heart that are like rooms in a house. Eventually, the Lord is not only allowed into all the rooms, but the deed to the home is turned over to Jesus, symbolizing a life fully surrendered to the Lord by a faithful follower.

This three-part sermon series on Faith and Work, in part, applies Dr. Munger's metaphor to the workplace. The first sermon is about the Lord applying for a job at a believer's business—the desire of the Lord to be present in the workplace. The second sermon is about the Lord wanting to give suggestions to the same person at work—the desire of the Lord to be not only a presence in the workplace but a guide. The third sermon is about the Lord desiring now to own the labor of the believer—the desire of the Lord to be Lord of our work.

There is a need 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. This sermon series seeks 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 for a billion-dollar corporation, a small company, our homes, relationships, or our own personal lives.

The course of our journey in the proclaimed Word:

Sermon 1 Jesus Applies for a Job

Sermon 2 Jesus: Working Beside You

Sermon 3 Jesus: Your Lord and Ultimate Manager

Sermon 1: Jesus Applies for a Job

Text: Luke 19:

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’”

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Theological Point: Jesus is the incarnate God who comes to earth as one of us to pursue us with the invitation to redeemed life. Jesus described the summons to new life with God using similes such as an invitation to a wedding feast or to a celebration for a returning prodigal. After spending time in prayer, Jesus issued invitations to twelve to follow him as his closest disciples. John portrays Jesus standing at a door and knocking, “if anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in, and sup with him and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Ours is an invitational God who initiates a relationship with us by being present to us and inviting a response to the Lord’s marvelous grace.

Hermeneutical Connection: Jesus is present and invites us to new life that involves *all* of ourselves, including our work. We are encouraged to invite Jesus into our workplace and make him part of what we do at work.

Introduction: The preacher may want to introduce the sermon series either here or before the reading of Scripture. These three sermons on work and faith hinge on each other, resembling the theme of Dr. Munger’s book *My Heart—Christ’s Home*. The first is about Jesus as job applicant—Jesus gives us the opportunity to include him in our work. The second is about Jesus as work colleague—Jesus is not only present with us at work, but serves as a guide to us in the workplace. The third is about Jesus as Lord of our work who not only guides and instructs us in our work relationships and activities, but becomes Lord of them.

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 experiences as an example). *For several years, I led a Bible study in the old Pan American building (today called the MetLife building) that overshadows Grand Central Station in mid-town Manhattan—once the largest commercial structure in the world. On one particular day, I was riding up the elevator with a young investment banker who was part of the group. “I am really getting a lot out of this Bible study,” he exclaimed. “I’m glad,” I responded. He brightened up and added, “I just never thought that my Sunday religion had much to do with what I do Monday through Friday here in the city. I love the connections we’re making! But it’s frankly hard to do.”*

“I just never thought that my Sunday religion had much to do with what I do Monday through Friday.”

Whether we are at work in a business or a factory or in a trade or at home: is there a way to bring our faith and work 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. We do not have to check our faith at the door when we leave home for work.

A. The Zacchaeus Narrative

I suggest that the preacher have some fun with this passage. Describe it: the dust, the pushing, gawking, and overall noise. Jesus, stopping at the tree, looking up—the eye contact, the recognition (of a lost humanity), the hush of the crowd, the sense of risk (even danger)—a pregnant pause. Then, the invitation, the meal, the gossip and the glad response of Zacchaeus showing early fruit of a transformed life. Work the passage and let your people feel and experience it! Make it visual. Consider throwing a free lunch for your congregation afterward with an invitation to the meal from God in the bulletin or distributed during the sermon. Have children create sycamore trees out of cardboard or colored paper and position them in the hall where the meal will be served.

B. The Meaning of the Narrative

Now is the time for the preacher to switch from a colorful description of the biblical scene to application. Suggest that four key points can be drawn out of this Scripture:

- 1) Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a better look at Jesus. In this one picture, we have summed up the spiritual hunger of the human population for God. Even, or perhaps especially, those most aware of their faults seek a view of the One who can renew and restore. *Consider including a brief quote or film sequence that describes this hunger. Have you noticed all the films about God (e.g. “Evan Almighty”)? Films about angels? There is a spiritual hunger and yearning for God! Even “The Matrix” has a close resemblance to the Gospel story (he lives among us, dies, resurrects, ascends).*
- 2) Jesus did not wait for people to find him: he went out into the highways and byways, seeking the lost, the outcast, the downtrodden—any who would respond to the message of grace and new life. In the same way, Jesus is not locked up in a church somewhere waiting to be brought out on display on Sunday mornings: he seeks to be a part of all we do and go wherever we go. His love flows through us wherever we go. *Imagine if God wanted to reach biker gangs: how might Jesus have come to redeem them? What would Jesus have looked like? Use your imagination and own experiences to illustrate.*
- 3) While the Zacchaeus narrative has been somewhat “tamed” by its use as a children’s story—Jesus befriending a short man and inviting himself to a meal—it is actually full of danger and intrigue. Here the preacher has an opportunity to describe the role of a Jewish tax collector taking money for the Roman army. Jesus not only goes out in pursuit of the lost, he even reaches out to those most hated among his own people. This is not a Lord enclosed in stained glass but one who walks the streets and seeks entry to even the most desperate and dangerous of places. Some do not think of church as extending to such urban settings; some do not think of church extending to the workplace as well.
- 4) Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house for a meal. Note, however, that nothing in this passage feels forced or coercive. On the contrary, Jesus’ own self-invitation was responded to with gladness and enthusiasm, as if it were, in fact, the invitation for God to be with even a hated sinner at supper. The preacher will want to note the scandal and risk of Jesus *eating* with a known sinner. *In a sense, we have sanitized communion. It was originally the family meal of the church hosted by God, followers of Jesus sitting around the table, eating symbols of grace and redemption, and displaying a wonderful diversity and unity to a fragmented world.*

C. Jesus: Job Applicant

Now, in the vein of Robert Munger’s creative book, the preacher has the opportunity to describe a contemporary scene: Jesus applying for a job where congregants work. The preacher may want to begin this section by applying what has been learned to a simple picture of God wanting to be a part of the workplace. For example, you could develop it along these lines.

God does not manipulate you or coerce you to faith. The Lord invites you to Life Abundant. Similarly, the Lord does not force into the rooms and closets of your life. Rather, we willingly open them up to God as we grow deeper in faith, wanting God to fill more and more of who we are. It is as if God applies for a job where you work and, in this analogy, you get to decide whether or not to hire God! Later you might ask the Lord: “Why did you apply for a job at my company?” And, in the vein of Munger’s book, the Lord might respond, “Because I want to be with you wherever you go, but I do not want to force myself on you. I want to be present with you. Whenever you are stressed and worn out and under pressure, I want to appear at your desk to give you peace and vision and energy.” The preacher can elaborate further along these lines. I suggest you keep it simple in this sermon, emphasizing the calming, restorative presence of Jesus. Later, in sermons 2 and 3, as you will see, Jesus takes on a greater role in the workplace.

Conclusion: The preacher sums up the theme and issues a challenge. It might go something like this:
Some of you remember the movie scene depicting African Americans walking past a whites-only church in a southern state. One of them said, “Did I tell you about the time I accidentally wandered into that white church? I was lucky to get out alive! But then, when I thanked Jesus for my escape, he said, ‘You’re one up on me. I’ve been trying to get into that church for two hundred years!’”

Jesus is trying to get into your workplace. He won’t force himself in. He won’t break the door down. The Lord only has you to invite him in and make a difference where you work. Have you let the Lord in? It is as if Jesus is applying for a job where you work and you are the hiring manager. Are you going to let him in? Zacchaeus threw open his doors and gladly, enthusiastically welcomed Jesus into his home. Have you done the same at work?

Sermon 2: Jesus: Working Beside You

Note: the preacher may want to shorten this passage, summarizing parts of it.

Text: Genesis 14:

¹ When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, ² when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. ³ After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. ⁴ And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

⁵ He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. ⁶ After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. ⁷ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.

⁸ In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.

⁹ Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. ¹⁰ Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. ¹¹ Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. ¹² Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. ¹³ And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged.”

¹⁴ So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.

¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

¹⁶ “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh, “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile, ¹⁸ when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds. ¹⁹ After them, seven other cows came up—scrawny and very ugly and lean. I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt. ²⁰ The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first. ²¹ But even after they ate them, no one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before. Then I woke up.

²² “In my dreams I also saw seven heads of grain, full and good, growing on a single stalk. ²³ After them, seven other heads sprouted—withered and thin and scorched by the east wind. ²⁴ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven good heads. I told this to the magicians, but none could explain it to me.”