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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

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.”

²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine.

²⁸ “It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, ³⁰ but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. ³² The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.

³³ “And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. ³⁵ They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. ³⁶ This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.”

³⁷ The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. ³⁸ So Pharaoh asked them, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?”

³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”

⁴¹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.” ⁴² Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. ⁴³ He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, “Make way!” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

Theological Point: The Joseph narrative is a Christ-like story of a man thrown into almost certain death, yet God journeyed with him through the pits and dungeons of life to an honored place in the throne room of the most powerful government on earth. From the perspective of work, we can view this narrative as the events of a man who went through both horrible and wonderful work experiences, trusting in God to lead and guide him, and winding up in a place where his gifts made the difference for thousands between life and death.

Hermeneutical Connection in relation to work and faith: The workplace is not always fair. Office jealousy can result in being demoted or terminated. Unjust accusations and blaming can end our careers. We can find ourselves in the pit of depression or barely hanging on to the lowest rung of our job ladder. Whether at the top of our game or the pit of disaster, God is with us, not only as a calming presence, but actually blessing us with the gifts and connections needed to work well and diligently, escaping difficult conditions to a better place. In this sense, God is like a work “colleague,” advising, suggesting, and gifting.

Introduction: The preacher will want to remind the congregation that this is the second in a three-part sermon series on faith and work. 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.

The Christian life is allowing God into more and more of our lives including the workplace. In this sermon, Jesus “advances” from one who we sense is present with us at work to one who now guides and instructs us in matters of faith as they relate to work. In the first sermon, Jesus applies for a job with us symbolizing God’s desire to respect our free will yet also be invited into more of who we are. In this sermon, we open up more of our work life to the Lord who is able to help us succeed, even through colossal failures.

- A. **The meaning of the text.** The preacher may want to describe vividly the Joseph narrative, giving context to the passage read. The broader text is colorful and illustrates some of humanity’s most common—and hideous—traits: sibling rivalry, jealousy, envy, arrogance, betrayal, misuse of power, attempted murder, and unjust

accusations. The text also displays loyalty, grace, forgiveness, redemption, and the act of rewarding one who has performed well. In summarizing this Scripture passage and its context, I suggest the preacher look at the congregation deeply, bringing out the pain of the story, so that the congregants can connect their own pain to that of the narrative's characters. By feeling their trauma, the congregants have the opportunity, led by the Spirit, to also experience hope, redemption, and grace. Further, and more appropriate to our theme, the listeners will have an opportunity later in the sermon to find the spiritual context for workplace troubles and recognize that, even there, God walks, instructs, guides, and gives direction and hope.

Describe, for example, how it must have felt to be a son of Jacob who was asked to submit to a younger brother strutting around in a multi-colored coat symbolizing the father's favor. This younger brother acted with pride and arrogance and made his brothers furious. Draw out the emotions and note how biblical people are so "real" to human experience rather than stick figures or holier-than-thou caricatures. Describe the passion of the moment to hurl Joseph into a pit, the awful decision to sell him into slavery (a horrific and usually deadly fate), and the later cover-up of the crime. Move then to the hopeful moment of being rescued from the worst of Egyptian slave camps to the home of an officer as a trusted servant only then to be unjustly accused of attempted rape by the officer's wife resulting in losing all *again*. Walk through the narrative, making it real and noting the experiences that connect with us: Have you ever acted arrogant and prideful in a way that others wanted your neck? Have you ever burned with anger and acted on that emotion inappropriately? Have you ever been betrayed? Have you ever been unjustly accused, resulting in great losses? Help them make connections.

B. Workplace Trauma. The preacher here might want to read a variety of articles (even books, if time) on the topic of workplace conflict. A simple Google on the topic will produce a plethora of material and statistics describing this growing problem. The workplace is a microcosm of humanity: over time, the best and worst of human life occurs there. Problems in workplace conflict, bullying, trauma, and even hostilities are on the rise as reported by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM). I suggest the preacher paint a portrait of real life in the workplace as described by this research. Note the problems of jealousy, envy, betrayal, bitterness, hostility, sibling rivalry (coworkers in relation to a boss or supervisor), unjust accusations, unfair dynamics, and even feeling enslaved.

Illustration: *The preacher can draw from experience or the above-suggested research to illustrate the difficulties in today's workplace. Churches certainly have their share of these problems, though they may be too close to home to mention! One article published by CNN in association with CareerBuilder.com has the following statistics: human resource managers report spending 24 to 60 percent of their time dealing with employee disputes; nearly 60 percent of HR managers responding to a survey reported violence had occurred in their organization during the past three years; 53 percent of workers said they lost time worrying about a past or future confrontation with a coworker; 28 percent of those surveyed said they lost work time due to confrontational colleagues, and 37 percent reported a hostile altercation that caused them to reduce their commitment to the organization; 22 percent said they put less effort into their work because of bad blood at the office. For the article, go to <http://www.cnn.com/2007/LIVING/worklife/12/31/cb.work.conflict/>.*

C. Workplace Hope. Now the preacher gets to bring this message home! Having read the Scripture describing some of the worst in human behavior and then noting the growing conflicts and hostility in the workplace, the preacher can now offer hope for the problem and challenge congregants to take Christ's message and meaning to the workplace. It is important to remember that, as a preacher, you are doing two things: proclaiming grace to the worker or manager who is acting inappropriately and issuing a challenge for us all to open ourselves up to God to work through us to soothe tense work environments and create trust with coworkers.

The preacher can use the metaphor consistent in all three sermons: the illustration of a Lord who wants more of our lives at work. In the last sermon, Jesus appears as job applicant who asks the congregant, whom we imagine to be the hiring manager, to be invited into his or her workplace. This sermon imagined Jesus as present in the workplace. But today we see the need for a Lord who is more than simply present, but one who guides and informs. We need the Lord to advise us, to work with us and through us to create more meaningful work and workplaces. We might imagine the Lord coming into our office after being employed with us for a few months and saying something like: *It's been wonderful working here with you. I'm glad you invited me in. I've enjoyed seeing where you work and how you relate to your workers. It is good for me to see the struggles you have here and how hard you try to make a living to support yourself, your family, and give your tithe to my ministry. It's*

all quite inspiring. But I would like to suggest we meet regularly to discuss your work and how together we can make a difference here. Your boss is a tyrant, I know, but I also know what he is struggling with at home—did you know his young son has leukemia? He's keeping it a secret, but he's worried sick about it, and it is affecting how he manages. I want to help you look deeper and not be afraid to care about people here, even the most difficult ones. I want to bring out all of your gifts, not only the ones that make you such a good worker, but the gifts of listening and compassion and patience. I know, together, we can make a difference here if you will let me. Let's meet for a few minutes every day and see how we can together bring my peace to this place.

The point is to help the congregant include the Lord more and more in his or her work life in order to bring Kingdom hope and meaning to troubled places.

Conclusion: The preacher may want to conclude the sermon with Jesus in the office of the worker offering to meet regularly to help resolve some of the traumatic workplace issues. Perhaps the ending could be something like: Jesus wants more of you in the workplace. Are you willing to open up more of your life to the Lord at work? Never before has this so badly been needed!

Other preachers might want to end with an illustration such as:

Illustration: James Kouzes and Barry Posner wrote a widely acclaimed book on organizational leadership called *The Leadership Challenge* (Jossey-Bass, 4th Edition, 2008). The authors note the importance of building trust to create a productive workplace. The absence of trust results in suspicion, sabotage, internal conflict, and loss of productivity. Trust building results in the opposite climate: collaboration, helpful information sharing, encouragement, heightened morale, and greater effort. One of the best ways to create the trust environment is for all parties involved to show vulnerability and a listening spirit. These business authors essentially note that by bringing what we value in faith into the workplace—open sharing, helpfulness, a trusting spirit, and a desire to collaborate—we can have a huge impact on the workplace.

Sermon 3: Jesus: Your Lord and Ultimate Manager

Text: Luke 5:

¹ One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, ² he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.

³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.