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Three Sermons on
Work and Faith

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 1: Love-Abounders

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13 (NIV)

“So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”

Theological Point

If the Christian awaits an ultimate encounter with Christ and a “mighty cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12), how should we live? One answer to that question is that we should live in deep, loving community. The apostle Paul models this for us in his relationship with the Thessalonian community.

Introduction

How would you live if you knew you wouldn’t be around much longer?

Illustration: Kelly Pruitt, a renowned Western artist, died in February 2009 at the age of 85. Less than a year before he died, he started digging his own grave. He told a longtime friend, “I got it about half dug, and I laid down in it and tried it on for size. It was pretty comfortable.”

Christians have a horizon that goes beyond the grave, and our preparation for the future extends beyond mere grave digging. In this sermon, we will focus on living a life of abounding love, as we anticipate the communion of saints with Christ in the life to come. And the model for loving relationships we’ll focus on is found in 1 Thessalonians 3.

Love Abounds Through Generous Sacrifice (3:1-5)

As Eugene Peterson suggests, the Thessalonians got into Paul’s heart. He was no longer simply a man carrying out orders, but he became part of their fellowship. As Paul puts it, he shares not only the gospel with this church, but he also shares his life with them as well (1 Thess. 2:8). The gospel does that to you. And as we read through Chapter 3, we see how Paul’s life is wrapped up with the lives of that church. He’s thrilled when Timothy brings a report of their faith and love. He’s pleased that the church wants to see him, and he cannot wait to see them.

One of the most difficult challenges Paul faced was the pain of isolation. At the time this letter was written, Paul was in Athens, his loyal companions Silas and Timothy were in Berea, and his treasured Thessalonian friends were struggling. Troublemakers (who seemed to follow behind Paul and infect the churches he planted) were troubling the Thessalonian church.

And Paul, thinking about the condition of his friends back in Thessalonica, was in agony. He “could not stand” to think of his friends facing both the growing pains common to young Christians *and* stiff persecution.

So Paul made a choice. He chose to be left alone in Athens so that he could send his trusted coworker, Timothy, back to Thessalonica. He chose to do without the services of his coworker in order to “strengthen and encourage” those persecuted believers (3:3). An abounding love is inevitably a sacrificial love.

Illustration: Abigail Adams, the second First Lady in US history, endured the pain of her husband John’s many absences. They coped with the pain by writing frequent letters to one another. In her letters, she addressed her husband as her “dearest friend.” Once, in the year 1775, she learned that John would need to stay away an extra month. She wrote, with no small amount of frustration, “I was pleasing myself with the thought that you would soon be upon your return. It is in vain to repine. I hope the public will reap what I sacrifice (emphasis added).”

The preacher might reflect on the types of personal sacrifices Christians sometimes make to bless others.

Love Abounds Through Cheerleading (3:6-10)

Paul tells us twice in this chapter (3:2, 5) that he couldn’t stand not knowing how the Thessalonians were standing up to the Tempter’s attacks on their faith. That’s why Paul was so thrilled when Timothy arrived and shared “good news” about their “faith and love” (v. 6). Timothy assured Paul that the intensity of longing he felt for the Thessalonians was felt just as strongly in Thessalonica. Paul writes how “encouraged” he is about their faith (v. 7) and goes so far as to say: “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord” (v. 8).

How encouraging it must have been for this church to have Paul cheering them on from afar! Paul has clearly tied his joy and fulfillment to the development and growth of this young church.

Illustration: In the December 2009 edition of *Texas Monthly*, 30-year-old Houston firefighter Adam Ohler talks about the importance of developing deep friendships with fellow firefighters when they’re not battling a fire. “The station operates like a family. You hang out, play practical jokes on each other, end up forming lifelong friendships. And when you get a call, you rely on that camaraderie.”

Paul and the Thessalonian Christians knew well the “fire” of persecution. But the camaraderie they shared, this deep sense of loving community, fortified them to respond to the call of faithful obedience to Christ Jesus.

One of the most profound gifts an employee can receive is a supervisor cheering us on, rejoicing in our progress and growth and perseverance. The cheers from the sideline can be for us a kind of fuel that spurs us on through our deepest crises and work challenges. The preacher might think of a personal story of the power of a mentor’s support.

Love Abounds Through Hopeful Prayer (3:11-13)

When the Master returns, he will want to see us abounding in love toward one another. Paul demonstrates such love through the personal sacrifice of sending Timothy, as well as through the cheering on the progress of that rookie church. But the longer Christians walk the earth, the sooner we come to the discovery that one of the deepest ways we show our love for one another is through hopeful prayer.

Paul, after all, is close to 200 miles away from his dear protégés. He cannot preach in their presence, break bread with them, or embrace them. But he can pray for them.

The poet William Wordsworth once described poetry, in part, as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” This seems an apt description for Paul’s prayers. Paul’s overflowing love for the Thessalonians causes him to pray, not only that the Lord would “clear the way” for Paul to be reunited with them (v. 11), but also that their love for one another would “increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else” (v. 12). Such abounding love is a leading indicator of the holiness that Paul prays for his friends, in the light of “*the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*”

Many workplaces naturally place restrictions on how transparent Christians can be about their faith. But the option of prayer is always open to us. Often, prayer is the only recourse we have to pray for those who struggle with seemingly intractable problems.

Conclusion

The Apostle’s Creed affirms a belief in the “communion of the saints.” While Protestants may mean something different than Catholics when reciting that phrase, the clear teaching of Scripture is that the Church on earth can look forward to a future reunion with the Church in heaven (Heb. 12:22-24).

And whether we go to see the Lord or the Lord comes to see us, our relationships are dramatically affected by this eschatological truth.

So how should we live in light of the Lord’s coming? We should live as if it’s the night before an amazing family reunion. We should live as if every day is a step closer to being with Jesus and our family members who are on the far shore. Even now, on this side of the grave, we can experience amazing relationships with one another as the gospel not only transforms us, but also knits our hearts together.

Connection to Faith and Daily Life

The preacher might ask the congregation to think about coworkers who are dear to them. While the “product” of our jobs is important, most of us would say that our working relationships may be more important to us. Listeners are invited to consider those working relationships as we walk through this passage and to consider what it might mean for our love to abound for our coworkers.