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Three Sermons on
Work and Faith

**Believe, Belong, Become:
*Forming Vital Connections!***

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*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

Believe, Belong, Become: *Forming Vital Connections!*

Introduction to the Sermon Series: Across America, the nature and environment of work is radically changing. Gone are the days of a stable nine to five job at the local manufacturing plant or community bank where you stayed your entire career retiring with a company pension. The workplace today is competitive, vibrant, fast-paced, and ever morphing to meet the demands of a dynamic global economy. Stress and anxiety about work has risen precipitously creating a feeling amongst millions of being ungrounded and insecure. How can faith in Jesus as Lord contribute to creating a meaningful yet productive workplace?

This three part sermon series *Believe, Belong, Become: Forming Vital Connections!* is designed to help you, the preacher, create sermons that both encourage and challenge your parishioners to view faith in Jesus as not only essential for their own occupational survival but also critical to bringing the Lord into secular settings that can benefit greatly from the Gospel.

The series is based upon Jesus image of the True Vine in John 15.

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

Sermon 1—Believe! Connect to the Life Giving Vine

Sermon 2—Belong! Connect to the Branches of the Vine

Sermon 3—Become! Connect to the Workplace by Seeding Faith

Sermon 1: Believe! Connect to the Life Giving Vine

Text: John 15:1-17

- 1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.
- 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.
- 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.
- 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.
- 5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.
- 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.
- 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.
- 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.
- 9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
- 10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.
- 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
- 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.
- 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.
- 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.
- 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

- 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.
- 17 This is my command: Love each other.

Theological Point: One of the primary themes in our Scripture reading is *connection*—for the sake of our first sermon, *connection to Jesus*. The Greek verb *meinein* is used throughout this pericope forming a theological category: *remaining* or *abiding* in the Lord. What does it mean to remain in the Lord and what is the result of this state? This question forms one of the key themes for our sermon series. This passage suggests that Jesus calls his disciples to *remain in him* or *abide in him*. Our true strength, health and wellbeing come from this *connection* or *abiding* in Christ, the True Vine.

Hermeneutical Connection: Faith cannot be exported to the work place unless it is first *believed* by the Believer. We become fruit producing when first we are connected to the True Vine and draw sustenance from Him.

Introduction: The preacher may want to introduce the sermon series here or before the reading of Scripture. These three sermons on work and faith hinge on each other: first, the Believer's connection to Jesus, the True Vine; second, the Believer's connection to the church or other branches as a source of encouragement and support; third, the Believer's connection to work as a place for *seeding* or bearing fruit. All of the sermons include references to the workplace which forms a common hermeneutical theme.

Illustration: [It is always best for preachers to use illustrations from their own lives and experience. Throughout the sermon series however, I will offer illustrations of my own which you are welcome to use.] Years ago I led a Bible study for entrepreneurs. One of the participants often related the biblical texts we read to his personal life. During one of the sessions another participant listened to him comment on the Jesus teaching *Love one another* as it related to his family. The fellow group member asked him, "I see how we all struggle with this passage in our family lives, but I'm at a loss to apply it to my work life. I'm on the verge of firing an employee I can't motivate—how do I live out this teaching at work?" The other laughed nervously and said, "I don't think I could ever live this at work!"

Are faith and work like oil and water? Do they really mix? [Here the preacher can address the very real tension between what goes on in worship and the realities of the work place].

A. The Intimacy of the Lord

Describe the intimacy of the scene in this text. Jesus is giving his followers comfort and encouragement to sustain them through the trying events of the next few days (rejection, betrayal, beating, crucifixion). Faith is not simply a philosophical system, a rational dogma or the result of childhood instruction; rather, faith here is described as a *connection* to the True Vine—it is an *abiding in* and *remaining in* Jesus, the Lord. Faith is about an intimate connection to the Lord.

Illustration. Jimmy Carter described a fishing outing with his father in a televised interview. He said they went to a local fishing spot and fished all day, catching several. In the afternoon, his father said it was time to go home but Jimmy wanted to stay and fish some more. His father agreed, telling him to bring the catch of fish, all hooked to a single line, when he returned home later. After fishing a while longer, Jimmy then started for home with the line of their catch attached to his belt loop. Like many boys, he did not walk the path, but waded through the flowing creek, poking at things and throwing rocks. On his way home, though, the line broke in the water and he lost the catch of the day. He arrived to his front porch and sat on the steps afraid to go in and tell his normally austere father he lost the fish. As evening set, his father stepped outside to look for Jimmy and saw him on the steps. He asked him where the fish were. Jimmy told him he lost them. His father sat down next to him, put his arm on his shoulder and said, "It's okay Jimmy. We'll catch some more another time." Carter told the interviewer, "In that moment, I knew for the first time that my father loved me."

To believe is more than agreeing to a system of beliefs; it is a vital *connection*, an *abiding in*, the living Lord who loves us deeply.

B. More than Emotional

While some view faith as something intellectual or ritual, others experience it as purely emotional. Certainly, this *connection* to Jesus is intimate and emotional. It seizes us at a very deep level and pulls us in. Even when we might try to fight it, we find ourselves compelled to go deeper in this connection of love initiated by Jesus. But this connection takes the mind of faith and the heart of belief and begins to inform how we actually live our lives—it takes over our volition. Faith in Jesus is not merely how we think about the world nor only what we feel about God—it also directs how we live our lives!

Illustration: Christian X (Christian Carl Frederik Albert Alexander Vilhelm) was King of Denmark from 1912 to 1947. There are several stories of his resistance to Nazi Germany which occupied Denmark in World War II. The German commander told the King he was not allowed to fly the Danish flag at his castle at Amalienborg. If he refused to abide by this rule, the Germans would take it down. The King replied that if that occurred, a Danish soldier would raise it again. The Germans replied that they would shoot that soldier. The King said, “that Danish soldier will be me!” The Danish flag flew throughout the war at the King’s castle. Christian X did more than tell of his outrage of the Nazi regime, he lived it.

C. Believe the Message!

We cannot begin to talk about living our faith in the workplace—or in society in general—if we do not first recognize that faith is more than thoughtful and extends beyond our emotions to the place where we make choices about how we will live. *Abiding in Jesus* means that the life of Jesus flows into us and *we become like him* in how we think, feel and live our lives. We become an extension of Christ given to the world. Indeed, Jesus as the True Vine is more than the trunk; He is the whole vine itself, including the branches. We, then, reach out to the world with the life of Christ.

Illustration. Years ago I was speaking at a church on the occasion of the release of my book *Leading the Team-Based Church*. I fielded questions after my book review including one from a member of a local Presbyterian church. He lamented that the church was in decline because the majority of its members were so involved in other activities—soccer, fitness, sailing, travel—that they had no time and few resources to share with the congregation. He asked me, “How can a church today compete with the busyness of people?” I replied, “Believe your message!”

Here’s another illustration:

Frederick Buechner tells about an incident that happened while teaching at Harvard Divinity School. One of his students dropped by to say that few of the things he had to teach about preaching were of any practical use to people like her who did not believe in God. Recalls Buechner, “I asked what it was she did believe in, and with the air of something like wistfulness she said that whatever it was, it was hard to put into words. It struck me that to attend a divinity school when you did not believe in divinity involved a peculiarly depressing form of bankruptcy.”

(<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/marchweb-only/3-3-51.0.html?start=2>).

Belief is more than a good idea, a noble thought, a stirring pastime or a rote ritual. Belief is stepping out on the ice when you believe it will hold you. It is a risk—an act of faith—that you take because you *believe* that God is real in your life and wants you to live God’s life in the world!

Conclusion. *Preacher: narrow in on your congregation. After a good pause....*

Is your faith lived only in the comfort of the confines of your home? Is it represented simply by a cross on the mantle or a dusty Bible on the shelf? Or is now the time to ask the Lord to take hold of the very center of who you are—where you make decisions about how you will live your life?