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Three Sermons on
Work and Faith

God's Call in Our Daily Lives
by Gary Klingsporn

***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

A Note from the Author

During the past decades, there has been alarming evidence of a profound disconnect between faith and daily life among people of faith in North America. Studies and surveys consistently show a dichotomy in people's lives between the church and the world, Sunday and Monday, faith and work, faith and daily life.

Within the past few years, however, increasing efforts have been made to address this disconnect between faith and daily life. A growing body of literature is now focusing on a theology of work, the meaning of calling and vocation, relationships between faith and culture, the church and the world. Internet websites, blogs, and ministries, along with other multimedia initiatives, conferences, and study centers, are expanding the conversation around these issues. These are welcome and needed developments.

Sermon Notes from *TheHighCalling.org* seek to contribute to this conversation. The theme of the sermons is daily life and work as calling and vocation. The sermons could be used as individual offerings or developed as a three-part series under a title such as "God's Call in Our Daily Lives" or "Work as Calling and Vocation."

I have chosen one passage from the Old Testament, one from the Gospels, and one from the New Testament Epistles, in part, to encourage future reflection on these themes from all portions of the Scriptures. The three outlines are:

Sermon 1: God Calls Us (Exodus 3:1-12 / Call of Moses)

Sermon 2: You Are My Beloved (Mark 1:9-11 / Baptism of Jesus)

Sermon 3: Love in Action (1 John 3:16-24 / Let Us Love Others)

Sermon 3: Love in Action

1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Theological Point: Our highest calling is to love others as Christ has loved us. We are to love, not just in words or speech, but in genuine acts that address the needs of other people.

Introduction: A self-centered culture

A. Laying Down Our Lives for Others

B. Love Is Always Active

C. The Knowing and Doing Gap

Conclusion: Someone needs you.

Introduction: Interpreters have often noted that the letter of 1 John is a commentary on the Gospel of John. The letter is a magnificent reflection on the two great themes of John’s Gospel: believing in Jesus and Jesus’ command to love one another. The passage before us states this in a succinct summary in v. 23, “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

The sermon I am suggesting focuses primarily on verses 16-18 and the command to love others. To identify a strong opening image, metaphor, or story, I suggest that one focus on the following rich phrases in vv. 16-18: “he laid down his life for us”; “we ought to lay down our lives for one another”; “let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Ask yourself the following questions: When have I seen someone express love in a sacrificial way? When have I personally experienced the love of others in a transforming way? When have I found it difficult to love others? When have I said I loved someone or that I would do something for them, but failed to act on my words?

Sit with the 1 John passage for a few days. Watch and listen for examples of love or the lack thereof in your congregation, local community, or in world events. The most compelling stories are often right around us. The most powerful stories are our own. Choose one and use it to open the sermon.

Another kind of opening to this sermon might focus on the antithesis to loving others. For example, recently I began a sermon by talking about American culture as a culture of narcissism. I had been in a bookstore and noticed that Christopher Lasch’s book *The Culture of Narcissism*, published in 1979, is still in print and on the shelves after some thirty years. In the sermon, I described Lasch’s hard-hitting critique of contemporary culture and the book’s general thesis—that our culture is characterized by a “narcissistic preoccupation with the self.” We live, Lasch said, in a culture of self-absorption and entitlement, where “it’s all about us.”

I went on in the sermon to suggest that Lasch’s book became a best-seller and remains in print today because his basic thesis has withstood the test of time. The narcissism Lasch described has not disappeared; it has merely taken on new forms. We are in love with ourselves. I gave specific examples from our celebrity

culture and from the self-esteem and self-help movements that appear to be “on steroids.”

I note here another important but easily overlooked aspect of narcissism: negative self-preoccupation. The teen who is a size 3 or 4 but thinks of herself as fat. The mother who laments she can't get rid of the “baby fat.” The old story from the AA tradition about the monk who confesses, “God I'm not much, but I'm all I think about.” Stories and examples of narcissism are not hard to find. The more specific they are with actual quotes, the better.

After illustrating a “culture of narcissism,” I said that this is not a new problem. It's as old as humankind. I told the ancient Greek story of the vain, self-absorbed young man Narcissus, who was consumed by his own self-love and incapable of loving others. He wasted away and died, leaning over a pool looking at his reflection in the water. If one were to take this approach to introducing the sermon, one would then be ready to move to the biblical text. One might say, “In a world and culture of narcissism, one could not hear a more radically different word than the words from 1 John, ‘We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another’ ” (v. 16). One would then be ready to explore the text with the listeners in the remainder of the sermon.

A. Laying Down Our Lives for Others. Jesus teaches us what love is and what God is like. He is our example of self-giving, sacrificial love. But what does it mean to “lay down our lives for others”? That phrase easily evokes images of a once-in-a-lifetime noble and heroic act that most of us can't imagine doing. We think of firefighters or rescuers who enter burning buildings or raging floodwaters and die while attempting to save others. We think of martyred saints like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Oscar Romero who die for their faith or for speaking the truth.

Elaborating this point about how lofty and distant the ideal of heroic, sacrificial acts of love seems, prepares us for what the writer of 1 John says next. The writer quickly lets us know that “laying down our lives for others” is not at all limited to great acts of heroism or dying for a cause. To lay down one's life for another is simply to respond to people in need: “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (v. 17). To lay down one's life for others means opening our hearts to the needs of people around us. This involves practical, concrete acts of love in the ordinary matters of everyday life.

At this point, the preacher might note the word “*ought*” in v. 16. The present tense of the word in Greek has durative force which points to a regular, ongoing, even daily, obligation or duty not limited to great heroic deeds of virtue. We are called “to love the people we see,” Kierkegaard said. To lay down our lives for others is to love not just the people we like or the people we choose, but the people who are right around us, and especially those in any kind of need.

This might be a good place to pause and ask one's listeners what it means to lay down our lives for others in the office or workplace, in the neighborhood and community, at school, or at home. An example or story of someone's ordinary, everyday act of love for another person would drive home the point. This also would be a good moment in the sermon to contrast such love for the other person with the self-preoccupation and narcissism prevalent in our culture.

B. Love Is Always Active. The writer of 1 John further describes the call to love others by saying, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (v. 18). Here is an opportunity in the sermon to reflect on the nature of true Christian love as it is grounded in the nature and character of God and in the Incarnation. Such love is not simply an emotion we feel or an idea we talk about. As God in Jesus Christ showed his suffering love for us in the painful act of laying down his life for us on the cross, we also are called to act for others. Love is something we do, not simply something we believe. It's not pious talk, but committed action. Love sees the pain, suffering, or need of a friend, neighbor, or even an enemy, and does something about it. Love is practical and concrete, not abstract or theoretical. Think about examples of love in action to illustrate this point.

C. The Knowing and Doing Gap. The text from 1 John says, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” This is a good opportunity in the sermon to talk about the problem most of us have when we know that we should love others or we want to do something for them, but we fail to act on our intentions.

Recently I found an interesting book called *The Knowing and Doing Gap* (Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton, Harvard Business School Press, 2000). It's an organizational management book that explores a common

problem in businesses and organizations: they know what they need to do to change or improve things, but they fail to act. The authors note that one of the main barriers to turning knowledge into action is the tendency to assume that *talking* about something is equivalent to *actually doing it*. How true I think this is of love in the Christian life. We talk about it all the time, but talk can easily become a substitute for action.

The book I've mentioned above is filled with illustrations of people in the workplace substituting talk for action. One of my favorite examples is the story of a mining executive whose company was acquired by a larger corporation. Under the new management, he spent two weeks every month flying back and forth to company headquarters in Australia. While at the corporate offices, he spent most of his time sitting in a darkened room watching overhead presentations projected on a screen. There were plans, reports, and strategy presentations, but no action. He says, "I kept trying to remind my associates that we weren't in the business of making plans and overheads, but in the business of mining and smelting copper. . . . If we had been in the business of making presentations, we would be doing a lot better than we were." He left the company after one year.

Because the story of the mining executive is from the world of work, it offers a natural application to the life of faith for people in the workplace. We've all experienced the problem of all talk, but no action. Ask your listeners: What would it mean for you to reach out to someone in your workplace with an act of love? What are the needs of people around you at work? How can you address those needs with more than words? How can you bear witness to your faith and help create a more caring and trustworthy world? The same questions can also be asked about one's neighborhood, community, school, and church.

Before we move to the conclusion of this sermon, a word about vv. 19-24 of the text. This portion of the passage is notoriously difficult to translate and to interpret (see the commentaries). I recommend making a general comment on these verses, something along the lines of: We do not have within us the power to love in the ways God calls us. God alone makes this kind of love possible in our lives. We can trust God to give us the gifts we need to love others. And when we fail, the writer of 1 John reassures us that God continues to love us. We can be confident and reassured before God; we can trust the power and presence of God's Spirit at work within us.

Conclusion: Someone needs you. A simple way to end this sermon might be to say: "I don't know what there is for you and me to do this week. All I know is that there is someone who needs you." Then perhaps offer a short list of possibilities to evoke action among your listeners: send an e-mail, write a card, make a call, show up in someone's office door, get together for lunch or coffee, invite someone to your home, listen with your undivided attention . . .

If you opened the sermon with a story or introduction that established a vivid image, metaphor, or idea, circle back to it in the conclusion, especially if you have woven it through the sermon. For example, with my introductory description of a "culture of narcissism" mentioned above, I might close the sermon by saying, "In a culture of narcissism, where it's so easy to become self-absorbed and preoccupied with our own lives, we could not hear a more radically different call in our lives than the words we've heard this morning: 'We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.'"

A sermon on this text can be especially effective if it is given on a day when the congregation is celebrating the sacrament of The Lord's Supper. If the sermon precedes the Eucharist, one could close by saying that Jesus' entire life was a life of self-giving love. Each time we come to the Table and hear the words, "This is my body; this is my blood," we experience anew God's love for us and the grace that enables us to love others. Today, tomorrow, this week, there is someone who needs our love!

Connection to Daily Life and Work: Our calling to love others applies to our relationships at work no less than to our families, friendships, church, and community.

These sermons are by The Rev. Dr. Gary Klingsporn, Teaching Minister and Minister of Spiritual Formation since 1988 at Colonial Church, Edina, Minnesota. He is an Associate Faculty member at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul and General Editor of the multivolume series, *The Library of Distinctive Sermons*. A member of the Advisory Council of The High Calling, an outreach ministry of the Laity Renewal Foundation in Texas, he has contributed many articles to www.TheHighCalling.org website. He received a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Baylor University (1985). Gary and his wife Debra live in Minneapolis with their two miniature Schnauzers, Reinhold and Izzy.