

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
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Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Hard Work

D. J. Reed

SERMON NOTES

***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

I'm embarrassed to admit this, but my lawn has gone several weeks without a good mowing. It hasn't been edged or weed-whacked, and the hedges haven't been pruned. The grass looks long and listless, and a carpet of leaves has been growing.

Now, I'd like to say that the lack of attention is completely because of a busy schedule. But if I were truly honest with myself, I would have to admit that my grass is neglected because the work is hard. I know that a day of working in the yard is a day ending with a back ache, sore hamstrings, and blisters. I know I will be thirsty, hot, sticky, and powdered with dirt blown from my leaf blower. I know that even if I devote hours to this endeavor, in a matter of days, the grass will grow back and the leaves will litter the turf once again. Yard work is hard, and so I procrastinate and delay the inevitable work.

Humans were made to work. We were created to till and care for the earth, to be stewards of the world God has created. Our anatomy and our ingenuity are both indicators of the fact that we are not meant to be a slothful, static people. No, we were made to be dynamic, to be resourceful, and to be co-creators with God.

But humanity has also been called to work. We are to be "fruitful and multiply." We are called to spread out "over the face of the earth." Abraham was called to leave his homeland and travel. Moses was called to free Israel. Jacob worked for his two wives. The prophets were called to speak. Joshua was called to lead, and Jesus called us to go into the world to make disciples. We were made to work, and we have been called to work.

But when work seems meaningless and frustrating, when work taxes and even damages our bodies, when work is hard; then life can become unbearable. We may be called and created to work, but it just doesn't seem as if we're equipped to withstand work. In the end, the daily grind and resistance from our jobs, tasks, and responsibilities wear us down, and, eventually, we all succumb to its pressure. Hard work is hard on humans.

The following sermons have been written with hard work in mind. It's written for those of us who yawn at the end of a difficult day, for those who groan with exhaustion, and those who weep in the car as they head home from another day at the office. It's written for those who see little progress, those who are addicted to progress, and for those who struggle to find hope in the midst of pressure. The first two sermons explore the theme of hard work in Genesis and the third sermon focuses on an account in the Gospel of Luke.

Sermon 1: The Curse of Hard Work (Gen. 3:8-21)

Sermon 2: Rest from Hard Work (Gen. 1:31-2:3)

Sermon 3: The Better Part of Hard Work (Luke 10:38-42)

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fireplace for a while, with no book, no music and no television to accompany you. Doodle on a piece of paper, with no plan. Play a game of catch. Take a nap, and let your body wake you instead of the alarm. Pray. Write in a journal. Write a note of encouragement. Play with your kids. Play with your spouse. Play with no concern for who wins or who loses. Do something that has a slower pace and has no other purpose but to delight and enjoy.

Conclusion: The essence of The Sabbath. *I conclude with a more evocative description of a Good Sabbath. Broaden the scope to allow the listeners some space to reflect and ponder about the way they observe the Sabbath.*

But you see what I'm doing? I'm giving you things to do, when the Sabbath is all about rest! Maybe I should tell you what a Sabbath is like. Maybe I should help you understand its essence. Sabbath is like Sunday dinner at my in-laws' house in Pennsylvania. After a morning worship service, they sit around a table and eat a hearty meal. And after it's finished, the plates are cleared, the adults push back and pat their bellies, they fold their arms across their chests, and they watch the children play on the floor. Sometimes they nap, sometimes they say words, but mostly they just watch. That's a good Sabbath moment. They stop, the farm chores can wait until evening, and the projects can wait till tomorrow. Right now, it's time to rest and enjoy their little children just like God enjoyed his "creation."

Maybe that's what a Sabbath is. Simply stopping, abiding in the presence of God, blessing those you love, relaxing and enjoying. It's simply that. But it's a lot harder than it looks.

Sermon 3 "The Better Part of Work"

Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Theological Point: The account of Mary and Martha complements Christ's teachings of service and loving our neighbor while also reminding us to offer full attention when offering hospitality.

Introduction: Insulting the Dinner Host

- I. **Mary and Martha: a tension in the life of a believer**
- II. **Mary and Martha: a lesson in hospitality**
- III. **Mary's gift of attention**

Conclusion: Allowing our duties to direct us towards God

Introduction: Insulting the Dinner Host. *Jesus' lack of deference to his host is striking. Drawing attention to this can provide fresh insight on a well-known text.*

One of the many challenges of raising a preschooler is the task of training our son to embrace table manners. We gently, and sometimes not so gently, encourage Danny to keep his napkin on his lap, to stop blowing bubbles in his milk, and to eat his broccoli with a fork. And I'm happy to report that we've made some progress. The boy actually asks to be excused, he takes his semi-clean plates into the kitchen and sets them on the counter, and he's pretty good at eating with his mouth closed. But one discipline which has been difficult to establish is the discipline of being courteous to the dinner host. When we go to someone else's house for dinner, we just can't seem to keep him from saying, "That's yucky," or "I don't like tomatoes." Efforts are being made, but taming our son's dinner-table tongue continues to be a challenge. And apparently, saying polite things to the dinner host was a discipline that even Jesus struggled to learn.

During one particular meal, he criticized the host because of the guest list. He told him not to invite friends or family members to his dinner parties, but to invite the poor, the crippled, and the lame. Another time, he criticized the host for not giving him a kiss of greeting, water for his feet or oil for his head. He might as well have said the lamb is overcooked or the greeting he received at the door wasn't cheerful enough. Would you want your four-year-old complaining like that? And in the passage for today, Jesus gives us yet another example of his penchant for offending those who graciously invite him to their table.

I. Mary and Martha: a tension in the life of a believer. *One could argue that this sermon is really two; the first addresses how Mary and Martha reflect the tension in the life of a Christian, and the second provides a lesson in hospitality and friendship. In truth, the Gospels give us enough fodder to construct a whole series of sermons based on Jesus' interaction with the two sisters. This account is typically read in isolation from other teachings of Christ. But when we read this passage as a companion to the Good Samaritan, we gain a more robust understanding of Jesus' words.*

Many of us have heard this story before: Jesus has been invited to the home of two of his closest friends, Mary and Martha. Mary sits at his feet as a pupil or a disciple, listening attentively to the wise words of her rabbi. Martha, however, is “distracted” by her many tasks. We’re not sure what she is doing. Some would say she’s preparing the meal, while others point out that the text isn’t specific enough to draw such a conclusion. While the exact nature of her responsibilities isn’t clear, we are certain about one thing: Martha is focused, and Martha is frustrated. She is focused on a to-do list and the items on this list must be finished before she can listen to Jesus. And she is frustrated with her sister, Mary, who has prioritized studious attention to a rabbi over helping her. Finally, Martha reaches the tipping point. She explodes with a question that echoes the aggravation building up inside of her: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” As the guest in this home, it seems to me that Jesus could at least call for a break and permit Mary to help her flabbergasted sister. Certainly the lesson could wait until later. After all, the host is kind enough to offer hospitality, so it seems to me as if Jesus should be sensitive and oblige his gracious host. But he doesn’t; instead, he gives Martha a retort, a gentle rebuke, rather than an agreement. “Martha, Martha,” he softly chides, “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Now, lessons and sermons that focus on this text have usually sounded something like this: there are “Marys” and there are “Marthas” in this world. Which one are you? If you are a Mary, good job—keep doing what you’re doing. But if you’re a Martha, we certainly appreciate your efforts, and we couldn’t make it without you. But could you just settle down? Settle down and spend some time in prayer, in meditation, and in studying Scripture. And what usually happens is that those who relate to Martha walk away feeling unappreciated and misunderstood, while the studious, demure, pious Christians (i.e., the Marys) walk away feeling affirmed, nodding their heads and hoping the busybodies of the church were listening. This is a passage for the pietistic, a dream for the devoted. But this treatment of the text fails to take into account the story that immediately precedes this one: the story of the Good Samaritan. In this account, Jesus points out that those who choose piety over service—like the teacher of the law and the priest who left the beaten man on the road to die—are not true neighbors. But the one who serves the broken, the brother in need—like the Good Samaritan—is the true neighbor and therefore should be emulated. And if we read these two stories together, we see that followers of Jesus are not exclusively pietistic, and they’re not to be busybodies who don’t have the time to stop and listen to the words of Jesus, either. A follower of Jesus is supposed to be committed to both—committed to active service and committed to learning, to prayer, and to study.

If I were to ask you, “Are cars meant to stop, or are they supposed to go?” You would have to respond by saying, “Both.” Cars have two pedals; one pedal makes the car accelerate, and the other controls the brakes. If cars had only accelerator pedals or if they had only brakes, the purpose of the car would never be realized. Either car would be constantly on the move, which would be disastrous, or cars would be stationary, which would be boring. Simply put, cars are meant to go, to transport us from here to there, but they also must stop for obvious reasons. And that too is what Christians are called to do as well. We are “stop and go” people who stop frequently to pray, study, and worship. This takes us out of the flow of cultural expectations which drive us toward self-centered living. But we are also called to go and serve, to help those who are broken and troubled. We are called to serve faithfully and consistently, despite the competing call to focus on our own needs and to avoid that which is inconvenient, dangerous, or difficult. This is a tension we Christians must always manage: the call to stop and the call to go. If we look at the text this way, reading it with the rest of Jesus’ teachings in mind and as a companion to the story of the Good Samaritan, then we feel a lot better about being a “Martha.” And the “Marys” are brought down a notch.

II. Mary and Martha: a lesson in hospitality. *Again, one could choose to develop an entire sermon on the previous section, but I wanted to explore the final words Jesus said which seemed to raise a new set of questions.*

And yet I still can’t escape the fact that Jesus’ critique seems to be directed toward Martha the servant in that moment rather than Mary the student. Jesus even says that Mary has chosen the “better part” that “will not be taken away from her.” Seems to me that Jesus is saying that even if a follower of Christ is supposed to serve, the better part of discipleship is to follow the spiritual disciplines that Mary demonstrates when she sits at the feet of Jesus.

Maybe Jesus’ critique wasn’t targeted at Martha’s work, and maybe it wasn’t directed toward Martha’s role as a servant, either. Maybe Jesus was pointing out the way that Martha went about her work.

Twice the text says that Martha is “distracted ... by her many tasks.” That word distracted in the Greek literally means to be taken away from. And later, Jesus says Martha is also “worried ... about many things.” Again, the Greek gives the readers an added dimension, because what is being communicated is that Martha is literally troubled, that she is mentally anxious.

The problem, therefore, seems to be the state of mind. Mary is in a state of peace and is also attentive to her company. But Martha is literally in another place, swamped by anxiety. And because of her state of mind, Martha, in her zeal to serve, fails to offer the primary value of hospitality: the gift of attention.

Recently a counselor passed on to my wife and me an important rule of thumb when interacting with our children: “Toes follow nose.” In other words, when we speak to our kids, we should not only look at them; we should also shift our bodies (our toes) which in turn directs our entire posture toward them. This tells the child, “I’m listening. I am here for you.” This is an important lesson not only for parents of young children, but for anyone who also interacts with a friend, family member, or coworker. In other words, this is an important maxim for everyone to remember. Full attention conveys respect, care, understanding, and significance. And one way that we do this is by turning our face toward that person. But a complete shift of our body takes attention to a new level. By allowing our “toes to follow our nose,” we essentially say, “I’m all yours. My mind and body are focused on you and what you have to say.” This is the heartbeat of hospitality: full attention.

III. Mary’s gift of attention. *This is a natural segue into the discussion of technology’s affect on society, but one could just as easily discuss the timeless human problem of prioritizing tasks over “the other.” With my closing illustration, I connect the idea of “full attention” to “hard work.”*

That phrase, “full attention,” is a difficult discipline to establish, isn’t it? As I write this sermon, my toolbar at the bottom of my screen reveals that I have three other documents open, several other software programs humming along, and a couple of Web pages waiting to be browsed. All of these are begging for my attention and tugging at my focus. Technology has promised to make our lives easier, our communication clearer, and our information and entertainment more accessible. And smart phones, laptops, desktop computers, and mp3 players have done just that. But one of the many side effects of embracing these gadgets is that a strong digital tether is formed. A tether so strong and demanding that we are often pulled away from life itself to meet the needs, demands, and distractions fostered by this technology.

Last year, a teenager escaped injury after she fell down an uncovered manhole on Staten Island, New York. The manhole was clearly marked and avoided by others, but this teen failed to notice it because she was texting on her phone. Dan Rasmus, a director of business insights at Microsoft, has called this, “digital autism,” a state of being more engrossed in the distractions of the digital world than the reality of the physical world. And Kenneth Gergen, a senior research professor at Swarthmore College, says that our love affair with our phones leads us to value “absent presence” above physical presence. We ignore those who are physically present and give greater attention to those on the other end of the invisible digital thread—those who are physically absent.

But this can work the other way as well. We see this with Martha; Jesus is physically present for the meal, but he almost “disappears” from the present moment because Martha is overwhelmed by the distractions. In her well-meaning efforts to honor Jesus with her service, Martha, unwittingly ignores Jesus to the point of practical invisibility.

This is why Jesus celebrates Mary’s behavior over Martha’s. Mary has chosen the “better part” because attention is superior to a sumptuous feast or beautifully decorated table. Jesus says this will not be taken from her. In other words, food will be eaten and digested, but the friendship and the presence of a friend ... this will stay around for a long time.

Perhaps those of us struggling to give attention to others might take a lesson from author Shane Hips. Shane was meeting a friend for lunch when his friend’s phone rang. He picked up the phone, and Shane told him, “If you have to take that call, go ahead. I understand.” But his friend responded, “That person didn’t take the time to meet with me. But you did.” He promptly rejected the call and sent it to voicemail, and Shane felt honored to have received such attention.

Conclusion: Allowing our duties to direct us towards God. We are all called to work. Humans were created to be caretakers, to be industrious and to be servants. But the “better part” of work, the “better part” of life is not the goals we achieve or the tasks we complete. The better part is discovered when our pace is aligned with our activity; when we decrease our anxiety and allow our duties to focus on flesh and blood, on friends, and guests.

Sonny Bryan, the founder of a popular barbecue restaurant chain in Dallas, was a hard-working man of tremendous faith. Among his many responsibilities around the restaurant, Sonny was also the bathroom cleaner. His son often wondered about this, thinking maybe his dad wanted to set an example as a servant leader or that he had high standards for cleanliness. Finally, he asked his father about this, and his father responded, “Oh, I use that time to pray for you, your mother, and your brother. No one bothers you when you’re cleaning the bathroom, you know.”

Sonny Bryan discovered what Martha struggled to grasp; he had discovered how to let his duties direct him toward others and also toward Christ. He had learned how to keep work from being burdened by distractions and instead had learned about the “better part” of work: the gift of hospitality, of praying for others, serving others, and paying attention to others. This is the “better part” of work that Mary chose. May we embrace this better part of work as well. Amen.