

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Managing Workplace Anxiety

Dr. George Cladis

Executive Pastor,

Liberty Churches, Shrewsbury, MA

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

Is Work Stressing You Out?

Three Sermon Outlines on Work and Faith: Managing Workplace Anxiety

Introduction to the Sermon Series

The Bible is not a stranger to anxiety in the workplace and fear of losing one's livelihood. In some cases, people of their own volition chose to take a risk and follow the Lord, even if it cost them dearly. One can only imagine what it cost Matthew in denarii to leave his lucrative tax collecting business to go after Jesus, the itinerant rabbi. And then there were his fellow disciples changed by tongues of fire dancing on their heads who made career changes from relatively stable vocations such as fishermen to Apostles of a new Way—none of them struck it rich, and it appears all of them lost their lives preaching the resurrected Christ except for one (John, the Beloved Disciple).

In other cases, people lost their jobs or livelihood kicking and screaming. I don't imagine Adam and Eve, in retrospect, thought their arrogant act of disobedience was worth the sting of losing their all-expense paid bungalow in Paradise and having to resort to actually *work* for a living (before, they were living off their Father's inheritance!). Nomadic Hebrew shepherds could no longer produce the usual seasonal grass and flowing brooks for their flocks due to drought and ended up living in an Egyptian ghetto. At first, conditions weren't so bad because their COO (Joseph) was pals with the owner (Pharaoh) until the company was sold to another owner who turned their lives into hopeless desperation. I sometimes wonder about some of those whom Jesus healed—the blind, the lame, and lepers. At first, they must have been elated! But take, for example, the fellow trying to get dipped into the sparkling water at the Pool of Siloam for 38 years; the poor soul had only known the base, but reliable, job of begging. What's he to do now that he has no excuse asking for spare change?

We could mention Roman soldiers who went AWOL because they could no longer confess Caesar as Lord or prostitutes that came to believe their bodies were temples of God; or what about Jonah who tried to run away from his Boss's orders and Jeremiah who loathed he was ever recruited as a prophet of God (Jer. 20:9). I cannot imagine a company today hiring someone the likes of Saul turned Paul and then subjecting him to the conditions he endured for The Cause!

So, how did biblical people live, even thrive, under such conditions?

Faith! Trust in God and accept the unknown future as belonging to the Lord—more on this to come.

The preacher today has a marvelous opportunity to touch a raw nerve of those bedraggled folks who shuffle into pews Sunday after Sunday, searching for a way to make sense out of an unpredictable present and frightful future. Stress in the workplace has gone up like a Roman candle on the Fourth of July. May I connect with you for a moment and say this is God's moment for you to have compassion for the plight of many and an opportunity for you to share Hope in a way that gives a deep and holy sigh of relief to the fearful and renewed confidence for the overwhelmed. Every weekend I look out at the same and pray that God would touch each and every one—as God has touched me—with grace over the past, hope for the present, and confidence in God's future. We are fellows together in this great work.

These three sermon outlines on this subject are an offering for you to use as God guides you. My hope would be that a comment here or there would spark your own development of these thoughts, scrambling down paths I never considered. My illustrations are just that—mine—you can use them as you like, but let them also stir up your own stories that you can tell from your own life and experience. Of course, you can preach these outlines just as they are—or use them as springboards into something radically different.

My hat's off to you. Ministry is tough work, especially when you have your own life to contend with as well! I guess, as Martin Luther prayed, if it were left to us alone, we'd make a mess of it (or a worse one).

Blessings,

George Cladis

Statistics

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health issued a report that cited the following:

- 40% of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful
- 25% view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives
- 75% of employees believe that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago
- 29% of workers felt quite a bit or extremely stressed at work
- 26% of workers said they were “often or very often burned out or stressed by their work”
- Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems

“Attitudes in the American Workplace VI” Gallup Poll sponsored by the Marlin Company found that:

- 80% of workers feel stress on the job; nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage stress; and 42% say their coworkers need such help
- 14% of respondents had felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn’t
- 25% have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress; 10% are concerned about an individual at work they fear could become violent
- 9% are aware of an assault or violent act in their workplace; 18% had experienced some sort of threat or verbal intimidation in the past year

An **Integra Survey** similarly reported that:

- 65% of workers said that workplace stress had caused difficulties, and more than 10% described these as having major effects
- 10% said they work in an atmosphere where physical violence has occurred because of job stress, and in this group, 42% report that yelling and other verbal abuse is common
- 29% had yelled at coworkers because of workplace stress; 14% said they work where machinery or equipment has been damaged because of workplace rage, and 2% admitted that they had actually personally struck someone
- 19% or almost one in five respondents had quit a previous position because of job stress, and nearly one in four have been driven to tears because of workplace stress
- 62% routinely find that they end the day with work-related neck pain; 44% reported stressed-out eyes; 38% complained of hurting hands, and 34% reported difficulty in sleeping because they were too stressed-out
- 12% had called in sick because of job stress
- Over half said they often spend 12-hour days on work-related duties, and an equal number frequently skip lunch because of the stress of job demands

Source for the above and for more information, go to: <http://www.stress.org/job.htm>.

Overview to the Sermon Series

The three sermons in “Is Work Stressing You Out?” are based on research concluding that the greatest fears in the workplace today are represented in these three sermon titles.

Sermon One: **I Don’t Want to Look Stupid**

Sermon Two: **My Boss Is a Tyrant (And I Might Be the Boss!)**

Sermon Three: **I’m Afraid of Losing My Job!**

The first sermon focuses on Christian identity. One of the greatest fears in the workplace is looking stupid, either when speaking to a group or one-on-one encounters with our supervisor. We can feel a greater sense of confidence in the workplace if we view ourselves as children of God who provide a necessary service at work but also represent a Higher Order. This identity lifts up our heads from being burdened with stresses at work to finding the joy and meaning in our jobs.

The second sermon builds on the first using the theological concept of covenant. When we view employment as a covenant between two equal parties—my labor for a paycheck—then we feel more in control of our work situation and keep it in perspective. Employment contracts between equal parties assume (and sometimes are made explicit in writing) that each party will be treated with respect and dignity rather than as slaves. The relationship should not involve emotional or economic bondage.

The third sermon brings it all into focus with teachings from Jesus on worry and anxiety. Throughout the biblical narrative, people of God were encouraged to live in a relationship of faith and trust in the Lord, who is the God who tabernacles with us and makes provision for our needs. The more we are able to trust the future to God, the greater our freedom from worry and anxiety.

It took some time, but with encouragement from the team, and some effort on my part to draw her out, she started to speak up. And the more she spoke up, the more her eyes met ours—she *looked up!* It was amazing to see her demeanor change as she developed the confidence to share her thoughts. “I feel like I have something to share and now I have the confidence to share it,” she said.

Wrap It Up! *Here is a chance for the preacher to drive in the point and really connect with people who are deeply encouraged by this message. Perhaps something like this:* We can change the way we think of ourselves by letting God persuade us deeply that we are indeed sons and daughters of the Lord. The encouraging team to help you do that might not be at work, but it’s right here in this church! This preacher and this congregation want to support you in helping you unpack your identity as a child of God and develop that confidence to look straight into the eyes of others and speak your thoughts with confidence. God may have given you what others need to hear, but they’ll never receive your important word of wisdom if you lack the confidence as a child of God to speak it.

God is the God of those who are straightened up, looking up, and speaking forth with confidence as sons and daughters of the Almighty!

We bow our head only to God.

Sermon Two: My Boss Is a Tyrant (And I Might Be the Boss!)

The Text. Genesis 31:44-54

⁴⁴ Come now, let’s make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.”

⁴⁵ So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶ He said to his relatives, “Gather some stones.” So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷ Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, and Jacob called it Galeed.

⁴⁸ Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” That is why it was called Galeed.⁴⁹ It was also called Mizpah, because he said, “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. ⁵⁰ If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.”

⁵¹ Laban also said to Jacob, “Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. ⁵² This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. ⁵³ May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.”

So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac. ⁵⁴ He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there. (NIV).

Theological Point: There are several types of covenants in the Bible. Covenants ranged from simple contracts for goods and services to the New Covenant between God and humanity in the cross of Jesus. Some covenants are between a superior party and a subordinate party, as between God and God’s people. Our text, however, refers to one between two equal parties—Laban and Jacob—who are settling their differences with a covenant of peace. Covenants were an important part of life throughout the history of Israel, symbolized in objective ways with a sign of the agreement. For example, the heap of stones in this narrative was erected as a visual reminder that an agreement was made between these two parties. Similarly, Jonathan solemnized his covenant with David by giving him tokens of his royal house and military conquests (1 Sam. 18:3). The covenant between Laban and Jacob was also consummated with a meal.

Hermeneutical Connection: Employment is best understood as a contractual (covenantal) exchange with an objective sign of agreement (e.g., a written contract). The contract is essentially: “I give you my labor in exchange for a paycheck.” The contract is made between two equal and free parties and can be freely terminated by any party at any time within the terms of the agreement. Employment contracts between equal parties assume (and sometimes are made explicit in writing) that each party will be treated with respect and dignity rather than as slaves. The relationship should not involve emotional or economic bondage. Rather, it is a clear contractual accord: labor for pay between two equal parties in an environment of respect. Interestingly, many hirings today also involve a meal.

Introduction

The preacher can refer again to the alarming statistics of stress in the workplace. Then, the following is an example of an introduction to the second sermon.

According to recent research, one of the greatest sources of anxiety in the workplace is dealing with your boss. For bosses, one of the greatest sources of anxiety is management of employees. Take a friend to lunch and you're likely to hear about a tyrannical boss. Attend a conference of managers and you will most likely see a list of seminars on how to manage people more effectively. These issues give us sleepless nights and take up a lot of brain power. Worrying about this primary relationship also produces stress that can result in compromised health.

A. How We View Employment

When we become Christians, our minds are transformed. We see things differently than before. Christians have objected for 2,000 years to bowing down to other lords. We have one Lord and one God whom we worship and who is first in our lives. All other relationships are secondary to our relationship to God.

Much of our stress in employment comes from feeling like economic and emotional slaves to our boss. Sometimes our fear of losing the paycheck tempts us to act in ways contrary to our faith. It is as if we become slaves and lose our freedom. Some bosses also use emotional manipulation—either consciously or unconsciously—to put their employees in a position of servitude.

Preacher: here is an added resource for you on this topic: <http://www.thehighcalling.org/culture/you-gotta-serve-somebody>. We are set free from slavery.

Referring to our last sermon, we enter into employment contracts as sons and daughters of God. We serve God first. We enter into covenants as free people who serve only God as Lord. And as employers, we stop at the line of making our employees emotional or economic slaves, requiring them to fulfill their contractual obligations with honest feedback and straightforward dealings, rather than unreasonable threats.

Illustration” The final section of Exodus 1 is about two courageous Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. The mighty and exalted King of Egypt, one of the most powerful men on earth at the time, told them to kill the newborns of Hebrew women if they were male. However, they did not carry out their boss' order because their allegiance was to a higher power: the Lord God. Exodus 1:17 says, “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.” We enter into employment covenants as free children of God who offer our services in exchange for pay, but not our souls, our values, or our primary allegiances. *Preacher: really help the congregation “feel” the text from Exodus 1. What was it like to encounter the most powerful man on earth and yet not do as he ordered and instead follow the will of God? Imagine the courage! Their identity was in God first and not the will of Pharaoh.*

B. Be Creative in the Workplace

Sometimes workplace drama requires clever responses. Pray for ways for God to help you relieve the pressure cooker in creative ways. Remember that bosses and employees are human beings. They have all the same problems you do just trying to live their lives. Try to understand their motivations and approaches to work and make a connection with them. Attempt to become allies to accomplish the *mission of the company* rather than emotionally connected in unhealthy ways. Realize that sometimes kindness and understanding can lance a festering boil and bring peace and understanding.

Preacher: if you want to be specific about the above paragraph, look here for helpful resources from <http://www.thehighcalling.org/culture/enchantment-enchanted-boss>.

Sometimes being creative means looking at our relationship with our boss in different ways, e.g., <http://newsletter.thehighcalling.org/Library/ViewLibrary.asp?LibraryID=4505>.

Also: <http://www.thehighcalling.org/attitude/pardon-me-whos-chained-whom>.

Taking time to consciously *manage up* can help stop a relationship from spiraling down. Here are some tips at <http://blog.penelopetrunk.com/2006/11/03/7-ways-to-manage-up/>.

C. Sometimes, It Just Isn't the Right Fit

Sometimes, no matter what you do, it's the wrong fit! You've worked hard to fit into the office, make a contribution, manage up, and make a great contribution—but the relationship just isn't working. Even worse, you feel like everyone knows that but you! *Maybe it's time to consider your options and begin looking for another job while you still have one!*

Illustration: Matthew was a hated tax collector who became wealthy through extortion and threats. When Jesus approached him and called him to follow, he jumped up from his tax collection table and went off with the Lord without looking back. It was time to leave a terrible profession for something better!

There are times to plan a well-executed exit from your job to something better. After a lot of prayer and thoughtful consideration, it may be time to consider your work options. If you are a boss or supervisor and you've exhausted all your attempts to help an employee who is just not working out and is miserable at work, you might be in a position to relieve their pain and that of the workplace.

Here is a true story of moving someone on in love.

Illustration: I worked for a company years ago that had a CEO who could deliver blistering criticisms that went beyond work performance to challenging a person's core. He was especially critical of an engineer whom he publicly ridiculed and verbally abused. The engineer became emotionally crippled, bent-over with self-abuse, believing the CEO's assessment. Every day was a dirge for him. As an executive with human resources responsibilities and deeply caring for this engineer, I started to take him to lunch to debrief these dressing-down sessions he was receiving from the CEO. Believing the engineer would be better suited in another company, after negotiating his departure with the CEO, I worked with him creatively to envision what a more suitable workplace would look like—and then we worked together to pursue it. Those lunches lifted his spirit and attitude. His smile returned because he realized he had great value for another kind of company. Within three months, he was able to relocate to a better position in another company, partly because of his improved frame of mind.

He was looking up!

Preacher: more resources for you on this topic: <http://www.thehighcalling.org/work/how-cope-toxic-boss> and <http://www.thehighcalling.org/attitude/saying-no-your-boss>

Wrap It Up! *Preacher: here is your opportunity to offer words of encouragement to those suffering from relational issues in the workplace. Something like:* We can reduce stress at work by reminding ourselves that we are children of God first and foremost. Our primary relationship is to our Lord. As free people, we enter into contracts of work for pay, but we are unwilling to submit ourselves to ruthless Pharaohs. Nonetheless, we use wisdom and charity to work to improve our work environments rather than simply condemn them. We look for ways to influence them in positive ways. Instead of our first reaction to defend or fight, consider understanding and kindness. However, there may also be times when we are called away to do something else.

Preacher: as you pray to end this sermon, I suggest you sum up the difficulties real people experience in the workplace with bosses and employees...and call upon the help of the Spirit to be with each person in their individual struggles.