

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

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Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Managing Workplace Anxiety

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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.

Sermon Three: I'm Afraid of Losing my Job!

The Text. Luke 12:24–34.

²⁴Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! ²⁵Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? ²⁶Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

²⁷“Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ²⁸If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. ³⁰For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (NIV)

Theological Point: God is the Author of Life. The Lord made us, breathed life into us, and promises to provide what is necessary to sustain it. Worry and anxiety, particularly about the future, is a killer of life and evidence of faithlessness. This kind of fear is *anti-life*, and that which is anti-life is anti-God. While human sin and the fall of creation sometimes threatens and destroys life, nonetheless, God is at work in the world as life-giver and sustainer. Worry and anxiety are not the proper weapons against the fear of the unknown; faith and trust in God reduce and abolish fear. Worry assumes the future does not belong to God.

Hermeneutical Connection: Worrying about the future is one of our greatest health and emotional problems in America today. The recent economic downturn added to an increasing uncertainty about the future. Biblical people were not strangers to this kind of fear. Much of Scripture is written in response to these fears, calling upon God's people to trust, have faith and move into God's future with assurances of God's provision. This kind of faith and trust reduces anxiety and increases joy!

Introduction

The preacher can once again mention statistics to refer to the series of sermons and why this topic is so important. Then, to introduce this sermon, you could say something like: We all watched with distress a few years ago as the jobless rate climbed to levels we haven't seen in decades. People lost their jobs in record numbers, increasing the fears of those who had jobs that they could be next! But whether or not we are in a recessionary period, millions of people live with a constant worry that their jobs may come to an end.

A. The Problem of Anxiety

Jesus said over and over in Scripture: do not fear...do not be anxious...do not worry. And yet, anxiety in America has gone through the roof! Job loss, income reductions, and an uncertain future have resulted in turning more of us into nervous wrecks! Statistics indicate that about half of Americans suffer from anxiety to the point that it is a health issue, and millions suffer from panic attacks.

Here, the preacher will want to describe anxiety in the way the people in the pew experience it. This is an opportunity to identify with them in their worry. Even though the majority of your congregation might not suffer from panic attacks, most suffer some of the symptoms. Here is a description of panic attacks:

“I'm smothering and I can't breathe.”

“It came upon me by surprise. I began to feel wave after wave of fear and my stomach gave out on me. I could hear my heart pounding so loudly I thought it would come out of my chest. Pains were shooting down my legs. I became so afraid I couldn't catch my breath. What was happening to me? Was I having a heart attack? Was I dying?” Read more at: <http://www.anxietynetwork.com/pdfacts.html>

The sorry news of a sinking economy and rising debt—both personal and national—can be debilitating. Dr. Charles Elliott describes this kind of anxiety and ways of coping from a psychotherapeutic perspective (how much more do we have to say as preachers about God’s provision!). Here is an excerpt:

The point is that our politicians have managed to fuel mounting anxiety among the populace, and even more so for people who already have one or more of the various anxiety disorders. Perhaps you’ve had some of the following types of thoughts:

- “I can barely pay my bills now, what will happen if interest rates go up?”
- “What will I do if the financial turmoil we’re in causes an even deeper recession and I lose my job?”
- “I’m scared to death I’ll lose my entire retirement plan.”
- “I feel paralyzed with fear of losing everything.”
- “How could my parents live without their Medicare or Social Security check? I can’t afford to help them.”

Read More at <http://blogs.psychcentral.com/anxiety/2011/07/dithering-over-debt/>.

The word “worry” actually comes from an old German word, *wyrgan*; it means to choke or strangle. It’s talking about mental strangulation through fear and anxiety and stress and worry.

Preacher: you may see people shifting around as you draw out the symptoms and describe the fact that so many people suffer from various levels of anxiety (including you!). Share your own personal story of anxiety here. Here is one of mine:

In 2005, I went through an extraordinary personal crisis. My daughter was critically ill and nearly died of her disease twice. Other problems weighed deeply upon me, and I began to act in a self-destructive manner threatening my marriage and career. Filled with overwhelming anxiety, I began to tremble and shake. I stretched out on my bed hoping to make the shakes go away but instead it got worse, and I became unresponsive. My wife tried to bring me out of it, but nothing worked and she wound up calling 911. The EMTs were able finally to bring me out of what was probably a form of panic attack. I had never had one before and not one since, but I remember vividly the sensation of being drowned in worry.

B. Anxiety and Worry in the Bible

Preacher: the following is from my opening letter to you. Something like this could be included here in your sermon: 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?

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

C. In God We Trust

At first, the preacher might want to recognize that biblical people were like us. Something like: Those who followed Moses in the wilderness grumbled, saying they preferred the guarantee of slave's quarters and meager rations to the uncertainty of wilderness wandering (Exod. 16:1-3).

They were afraid too!

But God responded with bread from heaven (manna), wild quail, and water from the Rock. Notice it was just enough to carry on the next leg of the journey. Nonetheless, God provided.

Over and over and over again in Scripture, we are encouraged not to worry, live in fear, or be anxious. The Bible is essentially about a God who tabernacles with us—who pitches a tent with us and travels where we go and assures us that we are God's people and the Lord will watch over us.

Here I encourage the preacher to get bold with proclamations of God's favor and grace and of divine providence and care. Lest we paint too rosy a picture, we recognize sin is still in the world threatening life, yet we are to live as the Redeemed in the joy of Lord, trusting God for all we need.

Illustration: Now here is something I do not entirely understand: I have traveled the world and been with Christians in Africa and Eastern Europe who have very little compared to what we have. And yet, they have more joy than we do. Time after time I ask them: why are you so full of joy? And I get back varieties of the same basic answer: "God is with us and provides." These people, in the best of times, have less certainty of their future than most of us will ever know—and yet they are full of joy. It is the joy of knowing a God who is with them and provides for what they need.

Wrap It Up! *Now you as the preacher can really narrow in. Something like:* I know many of you have walked through that door weighed down by all the heavy frets and cares of life. Some of you aren't sleeping well and finding it hard even to laugh or be at peace. Now, as you leave here, leave your worries and cares at this altar (table), leave them for Christ to worry about, and go as people free and full of joy, knowing that God promises to be with you through your deepest valleys. *Preacher: you could even wrap this up with Psalm 23.*