



Laity Renewal Foundation

P. O. Box 290670

Kerrville, TX 78029-0670

Three Sermons on

Work and Faith

Sermon Notes

*So that God may be glorified
and the nations come to faith . . .*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge

TheHighCalling.org

Note from the Author of this Issue

Faith and work are often separated in the minds of those who hear us preach Sunday after Sunday. What has faith to do with work beyond desperate prayers to find a job or help a business make it through a stormy season? Can they exist together under the same roof? Having been a pastor, preacher, business owner, and business executive, I can attest to a subtle thought in the minds of business owners and managers that faith might put the brakes on a successful business, cause reflection on ethical questions that will cost the business time and money, and otherwise make a business less competitive.

This three-part sermon series outline enables you, the preacher, to address this important issue for today: Can faith and work coexist and thrive in today's fast-paced business environment? Part of the challenge we face as digital, post-moderns in the 21st century is a clear separation from the land. A hundred years ago, most of us were farmers living intimately with agricultural cycles and rhythms—a kind of life that had easy parallels to Jesus' parables and application to agrarian work. Much of our work today is behind a computer screen, in a mechanized factory, or otherwise further removed from the land. This growing divorce from natural creation can lure us into ways of behaving and managing that are driven by goals and motivations contrary to the Kingdom Jesus embodied. One who daily grapples with crops and tares, who regularly toils under the expansive canopy of the stars and who knows first-hand the connection between labor and life simply is in a better position to feel an utter dependence upon an awesome God than one who travels daily in an automobile from suburban cookie-cutter house to fluorescent-lighted, dropped-down ceiling module office—perhaps never setting foot outside or only for moments.

There is a real need, then, for preachers to help congregants find ways to experience God in the workplace and infuse offices with spiritual meaning lest they become a secular wasteland. The effort represented in this sermon series is to bring together God's Kingdom culture with our work environments in hopes of making our work a vital offering to the Lord. God bless you as you make these sermon outlines come alive for your parishioners, infused with your own life experiences, and with your own theological convictions woven throughout.

Lastly, I encourage the preacher to look for ways to make these sermons applicable to everyone from business owner to hourly wage earner. Management, essentially, is an enterprise we all engage in, whether we manage a billion dollar corporation or simply our own lives and simple labors. I have endeavored to provide you ways to speak across the board so that no one feels left out.

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

Sermon 1: Work as Realm of Prayer

Sermon 2: Work as Prayerful Relationships

Sermon 3: Work as Prayerful Activity

Sermon 2: Work as Prayerful Relationships—Even the Most Difficult Ones!

Mark 5:1-20

So they came to the other side of the lake, to the region of the Gerasenes. Just as Jesus was getting out of the boat, a man with an unclean spirit came from the tombs and met him. He lived among the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For his hands and feet had often been bound with chains and shackles, but he had torn the chains apart and broken the shackles in pieces. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Each night and every day among the tombs and in the mountains, he would cry out and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him. Then he cried out with a loud voice, “Leave me alone, Jesus, Son of the Most High God! I implore you by God—do not torment me!” (For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of that man, you unclean spirit!”) Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” And he said, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” He begged Jesus repeatedly not to send them out of the region. There on the hillside, a great herd of pigs was feeding. And the demonic spirit begged him, “Send us into the pigs. Let us enter them.” Jesus gave them permission. So the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs. Then the herd rushed down the steep slope into the lake, and about two thousand were drowned in the lake.

Now the herdsmen ran off and spread the news in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man sitting there, clothed and in his right mind—the one who had the “Legion”—and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demon-possessed man reported it, and they also told about the pigs. Then they asked Jesus to leave their region. As he was getting into the boat the man who had been demon-possessed asked if he could go with him. But Jesus did not permit him to do so. Instead, he said to him, “Go to your home and to your people and tell them what the Lord has done for you, that he had mercy on you.” So he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him, and all were amazed.

Theological Point: Jesus is demon chaser and liberator—and he is also trouble maker. He is not afraid to journey to the margins of decent society and find the destructors and the self-destructors. And everyone is uncomfortable when he makes the insane asylum no longer necessary. This remarkable passage not only teaches us compassion and hope for the obsessed and depressed, the cutters and crack-crazed, but also the need to provide gracious re-entry for the healed to the realm of the “sane.”

Hermeneutical Connection in relation to work and faith: Families and workplaces often have one or more persons in the home or company who “acts out.” Our tendency is to isolate the errant and expel him or her to relieve the company or family of its immediate stress and tension. We blame a person for the problems of the group: modern day “scapegoating.” This Scripture teaches us a healthy way both to minister to the crazed and care for the group rather than letting them continue in the disease of “sane group vs. crazy person.” The tendency to blame and scapegoat is common to every human group (cf. Rene Girard).

Introduction: In our last sermon in this series, we noticed that “office” and “prayer” are from the same root word in Latin. Our task as Christians is to find ways to make “the office,” or any workplace in or out of the home, a place of prayer and Christian spirituality. Last week, we suggested how Christians can change the culture of the workplace by thinking of it as the Master’s vineyard. Today, we look at how to view our relationships in the workplace prayerfully—even more specific, those relationships in family and work that are most difficult.

The preacher has an excellent opportunity to make a connection with nearly everyone present. Most companies and families have those who act out and the rest of us who feel somehow guilty that expelling the bad employee or “black sheep” did not do away with our problems. All of us have either been the expelled or one of the expellers—and neither position leads to resolution.

Culpepper wrote (*Luke*, New Interpreter's Bible), "The story of the Gerasene demoniac should now be interpreted so that it speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle with depression, fear, anxiety, or compulsive behavior. They will understand what would lead a person to say that his name is 'mob' (GNB). With such a response, the man had acknowledged that he no longer had any individual identity. He had lost his name. He had lost his individuality. All that was left was a boiling struggle of conflicting forces. It was as though a Roman legion was at war within him" [p. 188].

Malinda Elizabeth Berry remarks, "The restoration of the man from Gerasenes also points to the community's failure and the community's need for healing. This is the gift of *lo cotidiano*. When we take everyday choices seriously and pay attention to what our choices mean, we are more open to the Spirit, because we are guarding against indifference, avoidance, and injustice" (*Sojourners*, <http://www.sajo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0706&article=070649>).

[The preacher may be feeling some anxiety about one aspect I am suggesting: that the company bears some responsibility when an employee is fired; that there is joint responsibility in the failure of the work relationship. Bear with me as we travel through this sermon: I believe you will see this text presents a realistic and practical way to live our faith at work—especially when an employee is "terminated."]

A. The meaning of the text. The preacher may want to describe the scene. Jesus traveled with his disciples from the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile side. The travel was difficult—in fact, every journey across the sea between the Jewish and Gentile banks is impossible without the intervention of Jesus. Some suggest this is a prefiguring of the evangelistic work of the early church: Jesus enables the covenant community to go beyond historic boundaries and prejudices to create a universal church. Upon Jesus' entry in the Gentile territory of the Gerasenes, he is met by a man possessed by a legion of demons. By exorcizing the demons from the man, some scholars suggest that Jesus is symbolically cleansing Gentile lands of evil spirits—a "making way" for the Gospel to be proclaimed in such places (similar to the "cleansing" of previously unclean animals in Acts 10). The fact that the demons went into pigs underscores the Gentile nature of the land.

Illustration: The preacher here might want to use an illustration depicting a courageous trespass of boundaries for the sake of love or compassion: Mother Teresa ministering to the untouchables of India, Rosa Parks refusing to go to the back of the bus—or better yet, an illustration from your own community or life experiences.

B. Healing for all. Jesus makes it possible for us to transcend our historic boundaries and see life differently. Liberation from demons means people are set free from spiritual disease and destruction. This passage invites us to think of new ways to regard those that are sent to the margins of community; those we force out of our homes and businesses. The story also causes the reader to wonder if the community that banished the man needed healing also. Their reaction to Jesus' miracle was fear: as if life for the community had a peace and certainty knowing that the one who embodied their craziness lived apart from them. The man at the edge was the scapegoat for their fear and anxiety. Healing him makes them face their complicity in his disease.

Illustration: People in our lives can become the repository of our fears creating unhealthy, even demonic situations. The Preacher may want to consider an illustration of a people or person embracing what they fear. Here is an example: Adventurer and author David Miln Smith spent a night alone on Gibraltar Island in St. Michael's Cave in 1972—a test of courage! In his book *Hug The Monster* (Andrews and McMeel, 1996), he described hearing strange sounds all around him as he lay in the pitch-black, deserted cave. He even came to believe he was not alone. A sudden panic overtook him; he was certain he was losing his mind. Then, at what he described as his psychological breaking point, Smith thought to himself: "Whatever the monster looks like, I will hug it." That simple thought seemed to lance his anxiety. Having embraced his fear, he soon fell into a deep sleep until morning .

C. Listen to the Troubled. When a person “acts out” in a company or family, the reaction of the group is often to shun the individual: perhaps even banish the person or, if a company, “terminate” him or her. However, Jesus empowers us to approach the troubled soul and listen. “Acting out” in compulsive or self-destructive behavior can be a reaction to systemic issues in family or corporations. One of the group who takes time to listen and explore the reasons for the acting out may find that the problem can be resolved in a way that brings healing both to the person and the group. Even if, at the end of a process of understanding, the employee needs to leave the company, wise management will engineer such a move to the benefit of both the departing employee—who is blessed to a new beginning elsewhere—and the company whose morale is uplifted when they feel like the problems surrounding a departing employee are explored. Simply terminating an employee without such an exploration can result in unresolved conflicts and a corporate pathology that will continue to produce problems if left unchecked.

Illustration: The Preacher may want to find in his or her experience an illustration that describes how a tense moment was calmed by a level-headed person working to understand what went wrong. It is easy to put all the blame on one person while the rest feel exonerated, but that is rarely the truth of the matter and only creates more problems in the long run.

Here is an example of such an illustration: Business executive George Cladis was asked by his business owner to terminate an employee believed to be responsible for a variety of ailments in the company. Instead of simply firing the employee, Cladis spent time examining the problem. Realizing that the worker’s job could not be saved, he helped the employee sort through his options, and evaluate his skill set. Then, in a relatively short amount of time, the worker was hired by another company that suited him better. Cladis then turned his attention to the company at large and worked to change internal problems that he felt contributed to the employee’s poor performance. The humane treatment of the departing worker coupled with systemic corporate changes resulted in heightened company morale that Cladis insists created higher productivity and a better working environment. The corporate memory was not scarred by a bad firing. Rather, the general feeling was that an employee who was liked yet not suited for his role was treated well and moved to a better situation for everyone involved.

Conclusion: Work and family relationships are a sensitive network that a Christian should approach prayerfully. This is especially true when we’re tempted to blame all our problems on someone else. Jesus brings healing to both the wayward individual and the fearful crowd who benefitted psychologically from his exile. If we consider work as a form of prayer, then how we regard one another in the workplace makes a difference. In fact, business is about relationships; how we manage those relationships can make the difference for our success both as business people and Christians. Managing those relationships prayerfully can make good business sense!