



Laity Renewal Foundation

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Three Sermons on

Work and Faith

*Sermon
Notes*

*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 to My Fellow Preachers from the Author of this Issue

Management gurus tell us that attitude makes all the difference in the workplace. Having a positive attitude impacts not only your own work, but also that of your colleagues. Thus attitude is essential to your contribution at work and to your hopes of career advancement.

But can you simply snap your fingers and magically create a positive attitude in yourself? Some might say yes, but many people find it more difficult to feel good about their work. So, if we agree that attitude is essential, how can we help ourselves have a positive one if this doesn't come naturally to us?

Moreover, does being a Christian help you have a good attitude at work? If so, how? What does God's Word contribute to this discussion of attitude?

I have developed three sermon outlines that respond to these questions: "Positive Gratitude," "Humble Servanthood," and "Mental Focus." Each of these sermons examines one facet of a positive attitude. Each facet is derived not from pop psychology or the latest trend among business books, but from the Bible, in particular, from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

I have prepared the three sermon outlines with the assumption that preachers will use one of the three as a stand-alone sermon on attitude. If you choose to do a three-part series, you'll want to rearrange things a bit to avoid needless redundancy.

In each of these outlines, I supply a basic sermon structure, exegetical insights, possible applications, and representative illustrations. You are encouraged to make this sermon your own. In particular, some of the illustrations are personal to my life. You can tell them in the third person, if you wish ("I know a man who . . ."). But your sermon will be stronger if my stories remind you of similar incidents in your own life, so that your illustrations are in the first person.

Finally, let me add a note about translations. For these sermons I have chosen to use the NRSV. I've done this because the translation is accurate and because it's the one I have used most in my own preaching. In my study, however, I use a wide variety of translations in addition to the original Greek, including the NIV, ESV, NLT, and the KJV. All of these translations do a fine job rendering the original language. If you preach from something other than the NRSV, you'll need to make a few adjustments from my outlines.

May the Lord bless you as you help your people develop a biblically sound positive attitude!

Dr. Mark D. Roberts
Senior Director and Scholar-in-Residence for Laity Lodge

Sermon 1: Positive Gratitude	Philippians 1:3-6, 4:6-7
Sermon 2: Humble Servanthood	Philippians 2:1-11
Sermon 3: Mental Focus	Philippians 4:8

Sermon 3: Mental Focus

Philippians 4:8

Paul Demonstrated an Attitude of Thankfulness

Throughout his letter to the Philippians, Paul helped his flock have a positive attitude. He modeled this very thing, even though he was imprisoned when he was writing the letter. Paul demonstrated how gratitude helped him rejoice and see even his imprisonment as an opportunity for the gospel (1:3-14). He called the Philippians to imitate the servant attitude of Jesus (2:1-11). He urged them to replace worry with thankful prayer so that they might experience God's peace (4:6-7).

Note: You may also want to pull some content from the beginning of sermon 2 on this same subject.

Focusing on Goodness

As Paul closes his letter, he sums up his counsel to the Philippians in this way:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (4:8-9)

The first imperative in this summary has everything to do with having a positive attitude. Even though things among the Philippians have been hard, even in the midst of division and strife in their congregation, the Philippians are to focus their minds, not on what is wrong, but on what is right.

Verse 8 assumes that there are good things to think about. There are true things, honorable things, just things, pure things, pleasing things, and commendable things. The two conditional phrases "if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise" use a Greek form that assumes a positive answer. One might paraphrase, "if there is any excellence, and, of course, there is, if there is anything worthy of praise, and, of course, there is." Even in bleak circumstances, there are still good things upon which to fix your mind.

The verb in verse 8, "think about," can also be translated as "ponder." Paul is not thinking of a one-time acknowledgment of goodness, but an ongoing process of reflection. This is made especially clear in his use of the present imperative, which, in Greek, has a continuing sense. Paul is not saying, "Think about these good things once and then forget about them," but instead, "Think and *keep on thinking* about what is true, honorable, etc." Eugene Peterson captures this sense in *The Message*, "I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble . . ."

Focusing Even on Secular Goodness

Paul's list of the qualities upon which to focus our minds includes several surprises. For one thing, he does not mention distinctly Christian virtues that we might have expected, such as love, humility, and forgiveness. On the contrary, Paul includes in this list that which both Christians and secular folk can value. This is especially true of "excellence," *arete*, in Greek. *Arete*, meaning "moral excellence" or "virtue," was one of the chief values of secular philosophers in the Greco-Roman world. Yet the word *arete* rarely appears in the New Testament (four instances, only here in Paul).

Paul urges us to see what's good in our world, not only Christian goodness, but even what we might call secular goodness. If, for example, your boss treats a subordinate with respect, you can reflect upon and

celebrate this even though respect isn't a distinctly Christian virtue. Similarly, if a colleague demonstrates an extraordinary ability to remember people's names, a real plus in business, you can follow Paul's advice by paying attention to this. As a Christian at work, you don't have to be super-spiritual, using only God-talk and valuing only distinctively Christian qualities. It's just fine, Paul advises, to see and value goodness in general.

Some Implications of Focusing on the Good

The more we focus our minds on what's good in our workplaces, the more we'll be inclined to feel positive about work. We'll see benefits we hadn't seen before. We'll be thinking so often about what's excellent that we won't have as much time to obsess about what's wrong. We'll even find that our negative feelings about work begin to be replaced by positive ones.

This does not mean that we "look only on the bright side." Paul is not asking us to deny the problems in our workplaces. After all, only six verses before he tells us to think about what's good, Paul acknowledges the unhappy schism between Euodia and Syntyche, influential leaders in the Philippians congregation. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul is exceptionally open about his struggles and pains (for example, 2 Corinthians 1).

So, Paul is not saying, "Think only about what's good." Rather, he's calling us to be sure to include meditation upon goodness in our overall appraisal of life and work. He's quite aware of our human tendency to fill our minds with worry, criticism, and negativity. His response isn't to recommend denial and pretending. Rather, he urges us to spend ample time reflecting on what's good around us and in us.

Focusing on the Good Impacts Our Relationships at Work

When we focus our minds on what's good, this impacts, not only ourselves, but also our colleagues. Attitude, whether positive or negative, is infectious.

Illustration: You might replace the following illustration with an experience from your own life.

Many years ago I had a colleague at work who excelled in negativity. Even when things were going well, he could always find something wrong. And he'd be sure to share it with the rest of the staff. His negative attitude was like cancer, eating away at the morale of our staff. Once he got going, we found it easy to join in. Soon we were all caught in a web of complaint and discouragement.

On the contrary, I have a colleague in my current place of work who follows Paul's counsel and focuses on the positive. She isn't naïve or unwilling to deal with difficult issues. But she has a way of stepping back and seeing what's good, even in the midst of trials. With her words, she helps us to see things differently. Her positive attitude is as contagious as the negative attitude of my former colleague.

As you begin to make a practice of seeing what's good around you at work, you'll start seeing your colleagues, superiors, and subordinates in a new light. You may even realize how something that bugs you about a coworker has collateral benefits. His spontaneity can get in the way of planning, but can also make the office much more fun. Or you might realize that the "bean counter" who bugs you about your expense reports actually helps you to fulfill your job requirements in a way that helps you get a raise.

Plus, when you see the goodness in your fellow laborers, you'll find it increasingly natural to tell them what you see. Genuine praise can transform work relationships. Most people are hungry for recognition, and will gobble it up if you offer it honestly. This is especially true if you see things that are not obvious, the sort of

things you'll discover if you focus your mind on the positive. Regular praise can lead to a transformation, not only of one work relationship, but also of a whole office.

Conclusion: Remembering the Greatest Good at Work

As we learn to reflect upon what's good in our work, even valuing secular goodness, we will come back to the greatest goodness of all when it comes to work. Here it is: Our work isn't simply a context for financial gain and personal advancement. It's a place where we exercise our created purpose: to be good stewards of God's world. We can glorify God in our daily work, even if that work isn't obviously "spiritual." How can we do this? Through our commitment to excellence, or through treating our colleagues with Christ-like compassion, or by helping our company treat its employees justly, or by letting the light of Christ shine through our positive attitude, or in thousands of other ways.

When we face frustration at work, we don't have to deny it just because we're Christians. Indeed, as people of truth, we should not deny frustration. But we can believe with confidence that God is working in all things for good, even in the things that drive us crazy (Rom. 8:28). Though we may not be able to see God's purposes at the time, knowing that God is at work in our workplaces gives us hope. This perspective helps us see the goodness we might miss. And it strengthens us to have a contagious positive attitude that can help transform our workplace.

Mark D. Roberts, as Senior Director and Scholar-in-Residence for Laity Lodge, is an advisor and frequent contributor to *TheHighCalling.org* where he writes the daily devotion. A Presbyterian pastor, Mark earned his Ph.D. in New Testament from Harvard University. He has written six books, including *No Holds Barred: Wrestling with God in Prayer* (WaterBrook, 2005). He blogs daily at www.markdroberts.com.