

6 Problems of Preaching on Faith and Work: Building Bridges to Connect Faith and Work



by Scott M. Gibson

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Introduction

Every week, preachers stand before men and women who approach life through the lens of their occupations—either they are searching for employment, actively engaged in their work, or are retired from a career in the marketplace. Week after week they hear sermons preached. Yet, for many preachers and listeners the pulpit seems to be a great distance from the factory, the retail store, corporate desk, and even the unemployment office.

If preachers are to connect the truth of the Scriptures to the men and women seated before them, what are the obstacles? What can the preacher do to take any hindrance out of the way so that listeners can more helpfully hear the sermon and apply it to their lives? What can listeners do to understand how to make connections between the Bible and their work world? What are the problems preachers and listeners have about work and connecting the two?

As preachers we want to be part of fashioning the lives of Christians in the marketplace as they demonstrate to others what it means to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus Christ. As listeners we want God's truth to influence every fiber of our lives. With this in mind, I've observed at least six problems that preachers and listeners have about work. After defining each problem, I've identified one action step that preachers can take to bridge the world between the preacher and listeners about work.

Problem #1: Preachers and listeners struggle to connect their worlds.

Some preachers don't know Monday morning's world. Haddon Robinson would often comment, "Sunday morning's world is a long way from Monday morning's world." He's right. Preachers tend to live in their own churchy world and think in terms of their own territory. Rarely do preachers take into account the land of their listeners. This makes for sermons that don't connect with the listeners. Sermons like this get lost in translation. Preachers need a passport that enlightens their understanding of their listeners' world.

Yet, some listeners don't know how to connect Sunday morning's world with Monday morning's world. Because of the mistranslation or lack of passport status of the preacher, listeners dismiss the preacher as someone who really doesn't connect with his or her work world. Even before the sermon begins the listener has already begun to disengage. "He can't relate to me," a schoolteacher complains. "She has no idea what I go through at the plant," dismisses another.

Action Step: Remember that your worlds are limited—that it's easy to separate Sunday morning's world from Monday morning's world. Make it a matter of prayer to ask the Lord to give you a perspective beyond your own personal planet. Confess that you don't know your listeners' world—or the preacher's world—as you would like and ask the Lord to give you perspective.

Problem #2: Preachers and listeners don't understand each other.

Some preachers may exegete the biblical text well, but they often neglect exegeting the congregation. Here they fail to build the bridges of understanding from the biblical text to the people in the pew—and in the cubicle.

Congregational exegesis, the analysis of your listeners' lives, will help any preacher come to appreciate the men and women who work long hours, who have families, who have other commitments as they struggle to live out their lives as followers of Christ. One preacher exclaimed, "Once I understood my people, the better I was able to make connections with them personally and biblically."

Similarly, some listeners may understand the intricacies of their work well but they fail to realize that it is such an exclusive part of their lives that they are not able to see how their faith makes a difference where they work. Too often we so compartmentalize our lives that we think our work doesn't matter to God. We don't quite understand what the preacher has to say and can't see where it fits into what we do for a living.

Not understanding each other—preacher and listener—makes sense. In addition, both preacher and listener sometimes need to face important realities when it pertains to the worlds from which both come.

Action Step: Preachers should add good, solid congregational exegesis to their preparation. If you serve a smaller church, determine to know what each person does for a living and imagine when you're preparing how what you have to say will make an impact on where they work. If you're in a larger church strive to understand the general industries and vocations in which your listeners work. Listeners, resolve to integrate your discipleship into the nooks and crannies of your life—particularly, the way you conduct yourself at your place of employment.

Problem #3: Preachers and listeners have lived different lives.

I don't intend to be callous, but I do intend to be straightforward with this third problem: Many preachers have not worked fulltime in an office, factory, or school where a lot of their listeners live their lives. Most of the pastoral students whom I've taught over the years have gone to elementary school, high school, college, seminary, and then into pastoral ministry. What's missing? An immersion into fulltime work. Sure, summer construction jobs and part time yard work during one's education can be helpful in becoming familiar with the world of our listeners, but few preachers appreciate the incredible, all consuming life of daily employment.

My background is in printing. I went to vocational high school and went to university where I became a certified teacher in printing. I logged thousands of hours running a printing press working alongside of men and women who were printers for life. What I experienced in the print shop hardly measures up to what the men and women in the congregations I served did as they labored behind a desk, managed construction projects, or directed a department during their working lives.

Listeners dismiss what the preacher has to say because the preacher hasn't lived where they live. On the listener's side there can be a certain wisdom—or even arrogance at times—that complains that since the preacher hasn't done any “real work” then she really doesn't know what she's talking about!

Yet as listeners, we are called to appreciate the roles that God has given to those who serve as preachers. And preachers can acknowledge the important place listeners' vocations have in their lives and the life of the church. Both are important.

The acknowledgment of the roles of both preacher and listener are significant because we can make presumptions about each others' worlds.

Action Step: Preachers don't know everything about everything—neither do listeners. Both preachers and listeners can determine to appreciate the different lives that they live. Studs Terkel's book *Working* will help both preachers and listeners understand each other. Preachers and listeners can talk with each other about their work. And listeners can do better at engaging with the preacher knowing that he or she is intentional at reaching out and learning from listeners.

Problem #4: Preachers and listeners assume too much about each other's world.

Preachers think they know more than they actually know about work and their listeners experience at work. Because someone was employed at Dunkin' Donuts or helped an uncle shingle roofs over a summer, preachers may think they know all they need to know about work. What we may not have done is actually study the Scriptures to see what God says about the praiseworthiness of work and what it means as way to honor the Lord and express one's discipleship. Preachers have a lot to think about when it comes to work.

Listeners may presume they know more than they actually know about how their faith has an impact on their work. There may be a great gulf fixed between what a listener does at work and how the Scriptures inform him or her in the way he or she is to think or act regarding one's job as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Listeners are not to assume that the Bible doesn't have anything to say to them about their occupation—it does!

Action Step: Get to know the world of your listeners by visiting their places of employment. The men's breakfast group at my first church toured the workplaces of some of our members. It brought everyone together. Learning about each others' world helped them to follow Christ at work—and it helped me as a preacher to connect through illustrations that I gained from these visits.

Problem #5: Preachers and listeners have different priorities.

What may be confusing both preachers and listeners about work may have to do with the problem of priority. That is, some preachers prioritize their role over other vocations. They can't think beyond their sacred office as pastor, not recognizing that God's call transcends one's occupation, summoning both preacher and listener to give everything to him in discipleship.

Some listeners put work first. The pragmatic reality that we face in life is to make sure we have money to pay our bills, to feed our families, to move forward in life. But what we do isn't who we are. As a young pastor I greeted the members of the congregation at the door of the church building. We exchanged hellos as people went into their homes. Every week Mr. Reichart greeted me with, “Hello preacher!” He teased me about my “job.” I typically shot back, “Hello carpet layer!” for that's what he did as an occupation. But

isn't it the case that we are more than our jobs? We are all called to be disciples of Jesus Christ—everywhere—in the church and outside of it.

Action Step: Both preachers and listeners can determine to see each other beyond their jobs—that we are much more than what we do. Pray that God would give you a different perspective on how we value each other.

Problem #6: Preachers and listeners don't understand the faith-work connection.

But at the heart of all we're discussing is that preachers and listeners have difficulty connecting work and disciple building. That is, what we do day-to-day is of ultimate concern to God and what he wants to accomplish in us—maturity in Christ, the shaping of Christ in our character. He wants to nurture and grow disciples.

Preachers fail to realize that in the everyday experiences of life one's faith is tested—and grown. Preachers want to see all of what they do as a means of discipleship—sermons, pastoral care, Bible studies, visitation, even meetings. Preachers are to see the sermon as one tool of discipleship that helps men and women understand the implications of their faith in their place of work. Preachers want to ensure that as listeners carry out their occupations in the community, nonbelievers are able to see Christ in who they are, in what they do, and in how they live. Remember Paul's warning to Timothy that a mature believer "must have a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Tim. 3:7).

In a similar way, listeners don't understand the ultimate connection of work to discipleship. As workers, they are the ones who are to have a good reputation with outsiders because they demonstrate the markers of maturity in their lives to those who don't know Christ—and to encourage those who do know Christ to move forward in their faith.

Action Step: Preachers and listeners are to remember that as followers of Christ their entire lives—mind, body, emotions, skills, gifting, and more—come under the title of discipleship. Pray that you would no longer partition your life into hermetically sealed sections. Ask the Lord to help you to so live for Christ that others—our family, our neighbors, and those with whom we work—will see that we are disciples of Christ. In our work we demonstrate our faith.

Conclusion

Paul commanded the Thessalonian Christians in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 to stay away from someone who is idle because this person doesn't live according to the teaching they received from Paul. They were to follow Paul's example of working for his food, a scriptural principle, otherwise they might become busybodies and end up not doing good. To work is to do good and this is part of what it means to be a faithful, maturing, godly man or woman of Christian character and faith.

Preachers and listeners grow more fully as disciples when we understand that our work is ultimately connected to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.