

“The Lord’s Work”
1 Corinthians 16:5-24
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Text Comment

- v.5 Remember, Paul was in Ephesus, in present-day Turkey, when he wrote 1 Corinthians and was making plans to visit Corinth before returning to the Holy Land. The longer, but easier way was by foot. One crossed at the Bosphorus, the narrow strait connecting the Black Sea to the Aegean, and then walked down the great Roman road to Corinth through Macedonia, what is now northern Greece. Paul had established churches in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea, all towns in Macedonia, and Paul wanted to visit those Christians too as well as receive their collection for the poor in Jerusalem.
- v.7 We can well imagine that Paul thought it wise to plan to stay for a time and make sure the church was settled in a better spiritual condition before he left again.
- v.8 Pentecost was 50 days after Passover, so later Spring. Paul is apparently writing in the early Spring. The fact that Paul uses the Jewish Feast of Pentecost as a time marker in writing to a largely Gentile church may indicate that already the church was celebrating the feast that, after all, marked the beginning of the progress of the gospel out to the world.
- v.9 As to those in opposition, remember Paul’s ministry in Ephesus ended in part as a result of a ruckus caused by the leaders of the temple souvenir industry who felt Paul was undermining their market with his Christian evangelism.

You remember Shakespeare’s famous line from *Julius Caesar*: “There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.” That is what Paul felt at that moment in Corinth. It was the moment to press forward not to retire.

- v.10 In Acts 19:22 we learn that Paul had already sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia while he remained for further work in Ephesus.
- v.11 This remark indicates again Paul’s concern about the church’s attitude toward himself. Would those who were displeased with Paul take it out on Timothy?
- v.12 The last “now about” in the letter indicates, once more, that this is a matter that had been raised in the Corinthians’ letter to Paul. Perhaps they had asked that Apollos be sent back to them for further ministry. Considering the fact that Apollos had been made a rival to Paul in Corinth, it shows magnanimity on Paul’s part to urge Apollos to return to Corinth and, perhaps, it shows a delicacy of judgment on Apollos’ part to decline to go. Neither Paul nor Apollos wanted to contribute in any way to the party-spirit in the Corinthian church especially when that division was being fostered *in their names*.

- v.13 Vv. 13-18 contain the *peroratio* or the concluding exhortation to a letter that has been arranged in the classic form of the Greco-Roman rhetoric of the period.
- v.16 Stephanas was clearly a leader of the church and, as clearly, had remained loyal to Paul and his teaching. It seems likely that Stephanas had traveled to Ephesus, perhaps on business, and had been the one who brought news of the situation in Corinth and perhaps hand carried the letter the Corinthians had written to Paul.
- v.17 The three men represented the whole church to Paul seeing as he was unable, at the moment, to see the entire church in person.
- v.22 Certainly a striking statement. Love and faith go together, of course, so much that one can be put for the other, but one *must love* the Lord; it is not enough simply to be indifferently agreeable to him and to his message. And one test of that love is your desire to *see* him. John Knox referred to the martyrs of the English Reformation as those “within the realm of England that love the coming of our Lord Jesus.” [In Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 207]

It is easy to think that the final verses of Paul’s letters are of less importance, containing as they do the *personalia* of his correspondence: his plans for further travel, his greetings to individuals, his remarks about his colleagues and the like. Such comments may be important to a NT historian attempting to reconstruct the itinerary of the Apostle Paul or to construct a prosopography, or sociological description, of the NT church, but of what real value are they to us? Well, they are extraordinarily valuable to the NT historian. It is frankly amazing to see what can be learned from so little information. And, to be sure, we will never turn to 1 Corinthians 16 as often as we turn to chapter 13 or 11 or 5 or 3. But these remarks are far from unimportant. Every part of God’s inspired Word is given to us for a reason, and these verses are no exception.

I could, in fact, preach many sermons from these verses we have read, but I was especially struck by something here. I wonder if you noticed it. And the more I think about it, the more valuable these verses seem to me for what they teach about our Christian life and calling.

At the very end of the main section of Paul’s letter, the last verse of chapter 15, Paul wrote:

“Therefore, my brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

“Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.” There is Paul’s concluding exhortation as he brings to a close his great argument in this immortal letter. But then in the following paragraphs he seems to take up that same theme in various ways.

In 16:8-9 Paul explains why he must remain for a while longer in Ephesus. It is because, as the NIV translates Paul’s Greek, “a door for effective *work* has been opened there for me.” Literally and not unusually for Paul, he mixes his metaphors. What he literally says is that “an effective door” has been opened for him, but the NIV got the meaning right. The Greek adjective here

translated “effective” is derived from the word for work and here it means just that: an “effective door” means an opportunity to advance the Lord’s work.

Then, in v. 10, reference is made to Timothy and he is commended to the church in Corinth *because he is carrying on the Lord’s work* just as Paul is.

Then, once more, in v. 16, Paul urges these believers to submit themselves to those who join *in the work* of the Lord and labor at it. Such men also, he says, in v. 18, deserve recognition.

In other words, chapter 16 is, in its own way, a working out of the thought of Paul’s concluding exhortation in 15:58 about always giving oneself fully to the work of the Lord.

Now, what is the work of the Lord? Well it is many things. Obviously, connecting chapter 16 to 15:58 as the repetition of this “work” terminology does, contributing to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem is the work of the Lord. That is the subject that immediately follows the exhortation to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord: participate in the offering for the poor in Jerusalem. In v. 15 we learn that the service of the saints is the work of the Lord. Paul’s evangelism in Ephesus is the work of the Lord. Timothy’s travel among the churches of Macedonia and encouraging them is the work of the Lord. The work of the Lord, then, is everything that may be done and must be done to advance the interests of Jesus Christ in the hearts and lives of human beings, to evangelize the lost, to disciple and establish the new believer, to care for and encourage the saints, to build up, reform and revive the church. It is whatever contributes to the building of God’s temple in this world and to the fashioning together of human beings as living stones, creating a sanctuary in which God is praised and his glory is proclaimed.

Paul views himself as a general, surveying the field of battle, placing his troops here and there to meet the enemy or to exploit an opportunity, sending lieutenants on various missions with various orders – Timothy goes to Macedonia, Titus later to Corinth, later Crescens to Galatia and Tychicus to Ephesus – every movement, every tactic designed to press the battle against the enemy, to strengthen the church’s own lines, to fortify a weak spot here or there.

It is striking, by the way, how very similar, in this respect, were the days of the Reformation and are all days of gospel advance in Christian history. There again was this sense in the mind, especially of the church’s leadership, of total involvement in the vast work of the Lord.

Calvin’s Geneva, for example, was nothing so much as a Supreme Headquarters. Calvin and his lieutenants, as Paul before him, surveyed, as best they could with the intelligence available to them, the entire field of Europe and the world and directed the battle along the entire front. At those places where enemy attack had weakened their lines they would send reinforcements in the form of pastors newly graduated from the Academy, or they would send out a book to help those in the battle know how to resist a particular attack or to counter an enemy strategy. And missionaries were sent out – as far as Brazil, to capture new territory. It is fascinating to look through the volumes of Calvin’s letters and see how “the work of the Lord” dominated his mind and his activity. Letters went out to other theologians seeking to promote unity in the Reformation Church, a united front against the common enemy. Other letters were sent to

various ministers encouraging them in their work and giving advice on how to press the work forward. Still other letters went to national figures – to dukes and to kings – urging them on in the work of protecting and promoting the Reformation of the church. Still other letters went to those about to be martyred for the faith, about to die in battle as it were, to console and steel them in their hour of trial. And, like Paul, Calvin wrote to churches, to congregations, fitting them for greater things in the work of the Lord.

It was for the work of the Lord that Paul and Calvin spent their lives and now, here, we are being told that we are to do the same; that we are to view our lives in the same way. But precisely how? None of us is an Apostle Paul or a John Calvin? So what does Paul mean for us to do when he says “always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord”?

Well, we can say at least three things from his remarks here.

I. First, we must ourselves be workers, actively and personally engaged in the Lord's work.

Now, as we said, the work of the Lord is a large idea here and elsewhere in the Bible. It includes many things: from your kindnesses to other believers, to your financial support of Christian ministry, to your efforts to win others to faith in Christ. Each of those things can be broken down into many specific activities: prayer takes pride of place in evangelism. (I read, this past week, a saying of Hudson Taylor, the pioneer missionary to China, that we must learn to move a person by prayer only; that is, learn to pray as if everything depended upon your prayer and nothing else and you will find how powerful prayer is to the changing of hearts!) But, besides prayer, there is hospitality and other good works and there is witness. The service of the saints which Paul mentions in v. 15 can be, as we well know, a thousand things, from emotional encouragement, to praise and appreciation, to speaking correcting truth in love, to financial help, to prayer, to physical assistance. And of course we can both pray and give to support the ministry of other Christians here and around the world and help, no doubt, in other practical ways, from building a house with our own hands in Mexico, to sending money for the roof of a church in Manipur, to sending books to stock church libraries in Bangalore.

But Paul's point is not to delineate all the possible ways we might devote ourselves to the work of the Lord. His point is to press home to every Christian conscience the absolute necessity of that involvement and that commitment.

We all know, don't we, how easy it is to lose sight of these high and holy purposes for our lives. How easy it is to slip into the habit of simply maintaining ourselves, going about our lives day by day with little sense of larger and higher purposes and of great commitments. Our lives so easily shrink into themselves. It is true even for me, as a minister, that I can in the round of my duties forget the great purposes for which they have been assigned and I have been summoned to them. The ministry becomes so easily a job. And churches are susceptible to the same temptation that besets individual Christians. They slip, unbeknownst to themselves, into neutral. They may be quite happy, quite content, but they are no longer actively, energetically, intentionally giving themselves fully to the work of the Lord, no longer pushing hard to extend the boundaries of the kingdom of God in every direction.

We are to be workers ourselves, always and fully workers.

II. Second, Paul says, we are to be active, interested supporters in the work of the Lord being done by others.

That is what Paul is here asking the Corinthians to do: support his work and Timothy's work, and to share in the work of many churches that are raising this offering for the poor in Jerusalem. He wants them to take part in the work of others, to share it.

It was this spirit of participation in the work of so many others that so impressed me about the church Florence and I attended in Aberdeen, Scotland for those three years in the mid-1970s. What was unusual about it, in my experience, was precisely the measure of their knowledge of and interest in and support of the ministries of so many gospel workers all over the world. They kept track of the progress of many works, the successes, the setbacks, the new opportunities or challenges, the pressing needs and every Saturday night they prayed, knowledgeably, articulately, and earnestly for the advancement of the kingdom of God through scores of these works around Scotland and to the ends of the earth. Their Saturday night prayer meeting was, in my mind, very like a command post: intelligence being gathered from everywhere on the battlefield, and orders going out to heaven regarding the prosecution of the battle here and there.

When I came to Tacoma in 1978 with that prayer meeting fresh in my mind, I wanted nothing so much as to see a similar thing created here. And, it has been. We have a long way to go, to be sure, but we are glad for the active participation in the work of the Lord that is nourished in our Wednesday prayer and found throughout the congregation. But, you know and I know how much more we must share in this great work if we would heed Paul's admonition to give ourselves "fully to the work of the Lord." We know so many for whom we should be regularly in prayer. There are so many good works and faithful men and women who need our money and other forms of our support. We can be so much more interested in particular works than we are.

The Roman dramatist Terence, expressed the Stoic doctrine of a universal manhood – the idea that each individual is a vital part of the whole race – in a famous epigram: "I am a man; I consider nothing human alien to me." Well, can you say something better and nobler than that? "I am a Christian; I consider nothing Christian, nothing having to do with the gospel and its fortunes in the world, alien to me. All of it is interesting and important to me, because I am a participant and supporter of that work myself, I carry it on my heart, I mourn its setbacks, I rejoice in its success, I long for its progress and triumph."

III. Third, Paul says, we should participate in the work of the Lord by recognizing and esteeming those who are laboring at it in some particularly important and effective way.

Such people, Paul says in v. 18, deserve recognition. That is precisely what he asks of them in regard to Timothy, should he come among them. Whatever may have been your differences with me, Paul seems to be saying, Timothy is a man who is doing effective work in the kingdom of God and, therefore, he deserves your respect and your support. So do Stehpanus and his two partners.

One thing that was also striking about the church in Scotland was how many of its number had gone out from the congregation to do the work of the Lord in other places. I'm sure that a primary reason for this was that, in that church, those who gave themselves fully to the work of the Lord – either as laymen or as ministers, or missionaries, or other gospel workers – were admired and loved for it in that congregation. Their children grew up in a society that recognized and esteemed those who gave themselves fully to the work of the Lord. Nothing is more likely to make a youngster feel that he should do the same.

We should be, if we would heed Paul's admonition here, a community that celebrates the heroes of Christian work from the past and present. These are the real heroes of the world, not the pale imitation heroes young people idolize today: celebrities and rock stars and sports figures. We should be a community that honors the work of the Lord in the selection of our church leaders. Such men should be first and foremost among us and our leaders must remember that above other things they must be men who have and demonstrate a vital interest in the work of the Lord. And so it will be in our esteem of other Christians who do not belong to our denomination. We will celebrate and esteem chiefly those who excel in the work of the Lord.

Now it is time for some self-examination, brothers and sisters. How do we fare when we compare ourselves to the standard Paul has set for us here at the end of his great letter? How actively are we *doing the work* of the Lord? Witness, charity, discipleship, brotherhood? What and how much are we doing? And with what interest and activity are we *supporting the work that other believers are doing*? Prayer, financial support, personal interest and engagement? And, finally, how evident is it to others and to our children *that we esteem, admire, and love* all who give themselves fully to the work of the Lord? Put these tough questions to yourself. And answer them in your heart before the Lord.

There is a passage in Omar Bradley's wartime memoirs in which he describes a conversation he had one day with the famous General George Patton. They were in Sicily standing on a hillside surveying the advance of Patton's great army across the terrain. Tanks, heavy guns, trucks, jeeps, soldiers as far as the eye could see. Patton turned to Bradley and said, "Brad, there is nothing in all of human endeavor that compares to war – look at that – where else would you ever see something so vast, so grand in scale, as an entire army moving over the face of the ground." Patton loved it for its scope – he even once accused himself of loving war – because of its vastness and because of the opportunity it provided for great endeavor and achievements of historic proportion.

But, brothers and sisters, Patton's war pales in comparison to the great conflict and struggle in which we are involved as soldiers and servants of Jesus Christ. Patton's war decided only earthly and temporary things. Our war decides the fate of human beings forever. Nothing in all the world is so vast in its scale, so heroic in its proportion, so welcoming of historic achievement. If only we could now peek for a moment into the heavenly situation room and see how, on the Lord's own maps, the battle lines are drawn, and hear what orders he is always sending out for the prosecution of the battle here and there.

The work! To the work! For the cause! The living God or the lake of fire! To the work!