

Doing the Lord's Work in the Lord's Way, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 16:5–9

Code: 1886

INTRODUCTION

Some Scriptures don't appear to have much spiritual value at first glance. But a thorough study can often uncover valuable insights. Much of 1 Corinthians 16 is that way:

"Now I will come unto you, when I shall pass through Macedonia; for I do pass through Macedonia. And it may be that I will abide, yea, and winter with you, that ye may bring me on my journey wherever I go. For I will not see you now by the way; but I trust to tarry a while with you, if the Lord permit. But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great door, and effectual, is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries. Now if Timothy come, see that he may be with you without fear; for he worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do. Let no man, therefore, despise him, but conduct him forth in peace, that he may come unto me; for I look for him with the brethren. As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren, but his will was not at all to come at this time; but he will come when he shall have a convenient time" (vv. 5-12).

A. The Lord's Work Identified

It sounds like Paul was being indefinite: "I'm going here; I might go there. If Timothy arrives, take care of him. I wanted Apollos to come, but he didn't want to." You might wonder how anyone could benefit from such seemingly insignificant material. The key to the text is the phrase "the work of the Lord." It first appears in verse 58 of chapter 15: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." Verse 10 of chapter 16 says, "If Timothy come, see that he may be with you without fear; for he worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do." That helps reveal what Paul is talking about in the verses in between--the work of the Lord. He was saying, "You ought to be always abounding in the work of the Lord, like Timothy and I are."

B. The Lord's Work Described

1. It is demanding

Those who do the Lord's work ought to be "unmovable, always abounding" in it. We ought to be overdoing it! When someone comes up to you and says, "You're doing too much," perhaps you're properly applying 1 Corinthians 15:58. Doing the work of the Lord is a vital responsibility.

What Is the Lord's Work?

To answer that question, you have to find out what work the Lord did when He was on earth. He basically did two things: He evangelized and He edified. Luke 19:10 says, "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." That's evangelism. Acts 1:2-3 says, "Until the day in which [Jesus] was taken up [into heaven, He was] speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God." That refers to the edification of Christ's disciples. Jesus preached the gospel to people who didn't know Him and taught the people who did. Jesus spent a significant part of His ministry proclaiming the gospel to the masses. After He finished doing that, He often would teach His disciples to increase their faith.

2. It is exhausting

The Bible never describes the work of the Lord as being easy. "Work" and "labor" in verse 58 carry the idea of working to the point of exhaustion. Commentator G. Campbell Morgan said that Paul had

in mind the "kind of toil that has in it the red blood of sacrifice, that kind of toil that wears and weakens by the way" (The Corinthian Letters of Paul [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1946], p. 207). Paul said this about Epaphroditus: "For the work of Christ, he was near unto death" (Phil. 2:30). That young man nearly worked himself to death. He is a good example of someone who was always abounding in the work of the Lord.

3. It is rewarding

"Your labor is not in vain" when you abound in the Lord's work (v. 58). It won't be empty, pointless, useless, or unproductive. Rather it will make a difference and produce fruit.

a) The alternative Many people are very busy around the church, but I'm not sure they're doing the Lord's work of evangelism and edification. In Christianity, there is often busyness without fruitfulness. The lack of fruit may be attributed to laziness or an unwillingness to evangelize and edify others. However, God wants us to work hard in serving Him. b) The analogy The construction of a building has three phases that are analogous to doing the work of the Lord. A building first has to be planned by an architect, then it must be constructed according to the city's building code, and then it has to pass the inspection of an engineer who evaluates the quality of the workmanship. Similarly when you do the work of the Lord, you've got to follow the plan the Spirit of God lays out and adhere to the code of service that God has established in Scripture. The Divine Inspector will tell you if what you've done has any lasting value. We need to do the Lord's work according to His plans to get His seal of approval. That's why 2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed" ([sc]NASB). When the Inspector checks out my work, I don't want to be ashamed. Work hard and meet the standards so He will approve your work. Don't build with "wood, hay, stubble," or other inexpensive or volatile materials; rather build with "gold, silver, [and] precious stones" (1 Cor. 3:12). Then your works of service will last when they are tested at "the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10). At that time the Lord will decide which works were good and which were worthless. There are Christians who will stand that day with the Lord, but their works will be destroyed by Christ's judgment fire. They constituted activity without productivity.

4. It is exciting

Christians have been called to do the Lord's work in the Lord's way, and that ought to thrill us. Do you realize that the Almighty God, the ruler of heaven and earth has said, "Would you be My personal envoys, taking My message to people around the world for as long as you live?" William Barclay has correctly said, "It is not the man who glorifies the work but the work which glorifies the man. There is no dignity like the dignity of a great task" (The Letters to the Corinthians, [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 165).

LESSON

Paul, describing his work and that of Timothy and Apollos, gives us seven practical principles for doing the Lord's work as He wants it done.

I. A VISION FOR THE FUTURE (v. 5)

Anyone who's committed to the Lord's work and is motivated to reach others is going to see many needs that haven't been met as yet. Therefore he will always be planning how to meet them. Such a person has a visionary perspective. He's never satisfied merely with what is being done. He also focuses on what isn't being done and that is why he plans ahead, looking for new worlds to conquer. He's facing the reality of unmet opportunity, waiting for new doors to open up.

A. The Pattern

1. Stated

In 1 Corinthians 16:5 Paul says, "I will come unto you, when I shall pass through Macedonia; for I do pass through Macedonia." Apparently Paul wrote 1 Corinthians at the end of a three-year stay in the city of Ephesus. Timothy delivered the letter. According to 2 Corinthians 1:15-16, Paul had originally planned to follow Timothy to Corinth, go to Macedonia, and then return to Corinth. Although he had a

plan, he changed it, deciding first to head straight to Macedonia, then to Corinth, and finally to Jerusalem.

In 1 Corinthians 4:18-19 Paul says, "Now some of you are puffed up [conceited], as though I would not come to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will." Paul wanted to go to the Corinthian church because it was struggling with internal problems. So he decided to come and stay for the winter. Then they could give him some supplies so he could continue on from there. Paul was planning ahead. He was busy in Ephesus--God was working through him and many people were being saved and growing spiritually. But he also had a vision for what he needed to do in Corinth and Macedonia before returning to Jerusalem.

Anyone who does the Lord's work in the Lord's way must have a sense of vision. He must be able to analyze what isn't being done and strategize to get it done. He can't have blinders on, focusing only on immediate personal tasks. It's been said that Paul was always haunted by the regions beyond. He never saw a ship at anchor that he didn't wish to board so he could spread the good news. He never saw a distant mountain range that he didn't want to cross so he could build up the saints. Paul had a vision for a world yet unreached. He could never be satisfied only with what was going on where he was.

2. Supported

Romans 15 provides a glimpse of Paul's visionary strategizing: "Whenever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you [the church at Rome].... When, therefore, I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain" (vv. 24, 28). Paul had set his sights on Spain because no missionary had ever been there. Spain was in a blaze of glory at that time as part of the Roman Empire. Some of the greatest writers and orators were living in Spain. In fact the philosopher Seneca, who became the tutor of Nero and a prime minister of the Roman Empire, was a very influential man in Spain. No doubt Paul was excited about the impact that the gospel would have on such a place.

Paul was able to give himself fully to a task and yet still have a vision for the future. You can't get bogged down with your present demands to the point you assume there's nothing left to do. One of the challenges of the ministry is the sense that you never finish the work. No matter what you do, there's always something that isn't being done.

B. The Preparation

1. Exemplified

It is important to prepare for the opportunities God gives you. Many people realize there's much to do in the future. But often they do nothing to get ready.

a) In the life of Nehemiah Nehemiah didn't approach King Artaxerxes and say, "I would like a ministry. Could you please find something for me to do with my people?" Rather he said, "My people have a problem: they need their city and its wall rebuilt. I want to do it and have already figured out how it can be done. I'm just waiting for your permission." The king then allowed Nehemiah to accomplish his plans. If you're going to have a vision for the future, you need to strategize in the present to make the future a reality whenever God presents the opportunity. The reason some people never enter a particular ministry they are waiting for is they have not planned for it, or proven themselves worthy of doing it. We have to be working to prove ourselves useful in the present so that we're ready when the opportunity is presented. b) In the life of William Carey William Carey, the great pioneer of modern missions, made and repaired shoes in England. While he worked at his trade, he wept and prayed over a map of the world that he kept before him in his shop. After years of studying and strategizing, he was sent by God to work in India. He opened up that nation to the gospel for every missionary whose gone there since. God used a man with a vision for the future who was faithful in the present and had proven himself capable.

2. Exhorted

Some in seminary are merely going through the motions of getting a degree. Because they're not

involved in an effective, dynamic ministry in the present, they're not proving themselves faithful for a future ministry. People like that are not strategizing for the future. When they graduate, they won't have anything to do because they haven't prepared themselves. They have failed to evaluate the church's need and set a strategy.

When God wants someone to perform a ministry, He chooses the person who is ready to do it-- someone who has a plan and has proven himself faithful. While I was preaching across the country for Talbot Theological Seminary, I was planning how I would pastor a church when God gave me the opportunity. By the time the Lord opened the door for me to pastor Grace church, I had a good idea of how I would begin my ministry. I was framing my philosophy of ministry during my years on the preaching circuit. Once the door opened, I was ready.

What are you planning to do? Where's your vision? There's a whole world without God. What's your strategy to reach someone for Christ? To develop your spiritual gifts? To use your ministry to its fullest potential? If you aimlessly float from day to day, saying, "I'm just waiting for God to give me something to do," you'll never be given anything. However, if you're doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way, you will have a vision for the future.

II. A SENSE OF FLEXIBILITY (vv. 6-7)

The future may not come together like you thought it would, so you've got to be flexible. Some people think they know exactly what God wants them to do, and until something happens that exactly fits their list of expectations, they won't do anything. That's poor reasoning in following God's will. When you convince yourself that you can determine your future, you've just eliminated an important element of Christian service. Doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way demands a sense of flexibility.

A. Exemplified in the Life of Paul

In 1 Corinthians 16:6-7 Paul says, "It may be that I will abide, yea, and winter with you, that ye may bring me on my journey wherever I go. For I will not see you now by the way; but I trust to tarry a while with you, if the Lord permit." Paul had the unsettled attitude of an adventurer. He had wonderful plans, but he remained flexible and acknowledged that God had the right to change them midstream.

1. 2 Corinthians 1:15-17--The Corinthians accused Paul of being fickle. Paul responded, "I was minded to come unto you before ... and to pass by you into Macedonia, and to come again out of Macedonia unto you, and of you to be brought on my way to Judea. When I, therefore, was thus minded, did I use lightness? Or the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yea, yea, and nay, nay?" Paul did the best he could under the circumstances. That's all any of us can do.

That's the adventure of the ministry. Sometimes I may say, "We ought to do this, and we're going to do that." Then, three months later, I might say, "We've decided that we're not going to do that after all because it doesn't seem to be the Lord's will." That's in line with Paul, who qualified his plans by saying, "If the Lord permit" (1 Cor. 16:7).

2. Acts 16:6-10--Paul had learned a great lesson early in his ministry. He had been to Phrygia and Galatia and was planning to go through the major cities of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Laodicea, Pergamum, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia. I'm sure he had his strategy all mapped out. However, look what happened: "When they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, [they] were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia" (v. 6). Paul and his companions decided, "If we can't go south, we must go north. Let's go to Bithynia." But verse 7 says that "the Spirit allowed them not." Their only option was to go west.

For three hundred miles they kept walking west. They didn't know where they were going, but they knew that was the only place to go. They knew an open door was ahead somewhere.

When they came to Troas, "a vision appeared to Paul in the night: there stood a man of Macedonia, beseeching him, and saying, Come over into Macedonia and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had

called us to preach the gospel unto them" (vv. 9-10). What flexibility! They had their plans, and even though they were scuttled, they kept on moving. If you've ever tried to steer a car that's standing still, you know it's very difficult. But once it gets rolling, it's much easier to maneuver.

B. Exemplified in the Life of David Livingstone

Did you know that David Livingstone, the world-renowned explorer and missionary to Africa, had originally set his heart on going to China? He was disappointed he didn't get there until he realized that God's will was for him to go elsewhere. Livingstone ended up doing for Africa what Carey did for India: he opened it up to the missionaries who would follow.

III. A COMMITMENT TO THOROUGHNESS (vv. 6-7)

The work of the Lord must not be done superficially. In verse 6 Paul says, "It may be that I will abide, yea, and winter with you." Paul apparently did spend the winter with the Corinthians. He probably wrote his first letter to them in the spring from Ephesus, where he stayed until June. Then he went on to be with the Corinthians and spent the three winter months there. In verse 7 Paul says, "I trust to tarry a while with you." Paul had a commitment to thoroughness in the ministry. When he saw the need of the Corinthians, he realized the only thing he could do was commit himself long-term.

A. Exhorted

That commitment to thoroughness reflects the commission our Lord gave in Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciple of all the nations ... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" ([sc]NASB). You can't teach someone to follow everything God has commanded without investing your life in that person. Discipling can't be done superficially. It takes time.

Paul had no intention of making a quick stop in Corinth. He knew the needs were great, as evidenced by the contents 1 Corinthians. He had spent eighteen months there the first time, and now wanted to spend at least another winter there. He spent three years ministering in Ephesus. He went to Galatia on his first, second, and third missionary journeys because he wanted to accomplish a thorough work there.

B. Experienced

I'm in the pastorate because that's where I believe I can do the most thorough work. When I traveled on the preaching circuit for two-and-a-half years before coming to Grace, I spoke thirty-five to forty times a month. I'd present a church with biblical truth from one to four days, and then leave town and go on to another church. That frustrated me because my messages were usually in the context of evangelistic meetings and were limited to topics like prophecy, the Holy Spirit, and worldliness. I felt like I wasn't doing anything that had any depth. Then Grace church came into my life. The Lord fulfilled the desire of my heart to do something that wasn't superficial.

C. Exemplified

1. By Paul

a) Colossians 1:27-28--God made "known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory; whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Paul wanted to teach everything to everyone all the time so they could become mature in the faith. That's a commitment to thoroughness! b) 1 Thessalonians 3:10--Paul was with the Thessalonians for only three Sabbaths. Although circumstances made it necessary for him to leave soon, he had a great desire to minister to them in a thorough way. He told them of his eagerness to see them again--he and his companions were praying "night and day" that they "might perfect that which [was] lacking in [their] faith." Since Paul could stay in Thessalonica for only a few weeks, he spent day and night agonizing in prayer that God might allow him to go back and build up the Thessalonian saints to maturity. c) Ephesians 4:11-13--The Lord has given the church evangelists and pastors to bring it to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (v. 13). His goal is to build the saints to maturity. Paul recognized that, for he told the Ephesians, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the

counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). He thoroughly instructed the believers. He wanted them to understand everything that would help them mature.

2. By Jesus

In praying to the Father in John 17, Jesus reported He had done the work that the Father had given Him to do (vv. 4, 8). Jesus had faithfully given the Father's Word to the disciples. He was thorough--His training of the Twelve took Him three years.

As we prepare to serve Christ as His ambassadors, we must do so with a commitment to excellence. We ought to be doing it to the limit of our capacity. Then our labor will not be in vain.

IV. A COMMITMENT TO PRESENT SERVICE (vv. 8-9)

There are plenty of dreamers who are planning what they will do, but far less doers who are doing what they should do. Young men in seminary often have great expectations about the ministry they want to be part of. But what are they doing now? The present is the proving ground for the future. I'll never forget talking to a seminary student who was going to be graduating in a month. He said, "I finished four years of seminary and have a great deal of information in my head. I'm going to be pastoring a church, but I don't have any idea of what's required of me!" If you think that was bad for him, imagine the poor folks he was going to be ministering to! A seminarian can't expect to be dropped out of heaven as a man with all the answers. He has to be a proven commodity.

I constantly receive letters from churches and organizations wanting us to recommend people for ministry. They almost always request someone who has proven to be effective. I can't say I blame them. In fact, God is the same way. I don't believe a novice should be given a strategic place of ministry. Anyone without experience who is planning for the future must commit himself to prepare in the present. Sometimes it's hard to keep a balance between the two, but diligence and faithfulness in the present is necessary for a smooth transition into areas of greater responsibility in the future. Paul understood the tension that existed between his visionary plans and his present ministry. He told the Corinthians about his plans to pass through Macedonia and visit them. But before that he had to finish up what he was doing in Ephesus: "I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great door, and effectual, is opened unto me" (vv. 8-9). He had a ministry he couldn't leave. His great plans for other churches had to be deferred until Pentecost.

Conclusion If you are going to do the Lord's work in the Lord's way, you'll need to have a vision for the future, a sense of flexibility, a commitment to thoroughness, and a commitment to your present ministry. When the time comes for God to send you to another area, you will have been prepared and approved. Whatever our gifts and callings are, let us always be abounding in the work of the Lord so that our work is not in vain but to His glory.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What two things constitute the work of the Lord? Explain how Jesus accomplished both?
2. What characteristic of the Lord's work did Epaphroditus demonstrate?
3. Explain how Christians can be busy without being fruitful.
4. How is doing the Lord's work like the process of constructing a building?
5. When will the value of every Christian's work be tested? Will some Christians have their works destroyed? Explain.
6. What will the Christian with a vision for the future be focusing on?
7. What were Paul's plans for visiting the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 16:5)?
8. While Paul was in Corinth, where was he planning to go (Rom. 15:24, 28)?
9. How did Nehemiah and William Carey prepare for doors that the Lord later opened?
10. What is one reason some people never enter the ministry they are waiting for?
11. When God wants someone to do a perform a ministry, whom would He most likely choose?
12. Although Paul had established plans, what did he know God had the right to do?

13. Explain how Paul and his companions had their plans changed while trying to minister in Asia Minor.
14. Explain how the Great Commission demands a commitment to thoroughness (Matt. 28:19-20).
15. Why did Paul spend day and night agonizing in prayer over the Thessalonians?
16. Why did Paul "declare ... all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27)?
17. Explain how Jesus had finished the work that the Father had given Him to do (John 17:4, 8).
18. What must you be doing if you want God to use you in the future? Why?
19. What is necessary for a smooth transition into areas of greater responsibility?

Pondering the Principles

1. How are you involved in the Lord's work of evangelism and edification? Are you sharing the gospel and your testimony with your relatives, friends, and neighbors? Are you discipling another Christian, teaching a class, or participating in some other ministry that is enabling Christians to grow? Consider what a great privilege it is to serve God Almighty.
2. What are your plans for ministering to others in the next month? the next year? in five years? in ten years? You may not be on the church staff, but you should still have a vision for the future. Do you recognize any needs you are prepared to meet now? Are there any needs the Lord is bringing to your attention that you would have to prepare yourself to meet? Prayerfully strategize how you will accomplish those goals, even if it seems like they are beyond your ability right now.
3. Are your plans flexible? Do you acknowledge that God has the right to change them midstream? Meditate on James 4:13-17. Do you qualify your plans with, "If the Lord wills" (v. 15, [sc]NASB)? Planning without consulting the Lord is a prideful act of self-sufficiency. According to verse 17 what is the opposite extreme of not doing anything at all? Memorize Proverbs 3:5-6.
4. Like many, you may find it easy to start out well but find it difficult to follow a task through to completion. We live in a society that expects instant results and is characterized by shallow, short-term commitments. Are you willing to commit yourself fully to whatever the Lord has directed you to do--no matter how long it takes? Follow the example of Paul, who pursued the Lord's work with such thoroughness that at the end of his life he could say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2 Tim. 4:7-8, [sc]NASB).

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