

Doing the Lord's Work in the Lord's Way, Part 2

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 16:9–12

Code: 1887

INTRODUCTION

Did I Do My Best?

Keith L. Brooks, a contemporary author of Christian books, tells a story in his Illustrations for Preachers and Speakers that is especially appropriate as we consider doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way ([Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1946], pp. 75-76). Northwestern University, located in Evanston, Illinois, once had a volunteer lifesaving crew to rescue people on ships that were in distress on Lake Michigan. One time the Lady Elgin, a passenger ship, foundered offshore. One member of the crew who participated in the rescue attempt was a young student at Garrett Biblical Institute. He was preparing for a lifetime of missionary service. His name was Edward W. Spencer. He saw a woman clinging to some wreckage far out in the breakers. So he dove in the water and swam out to bring her safely to shore. Seeing more victims in the water, Spencer swam out again and again until finally he had rescued seventeen people by himself. Then, collapsing in a delirium of exhaustion, he cried out, "Did I do my best? Did I do my best?" When his brother informed him of how many lives he had saved, Spencer replied, "If only I could have saved one more!" Did he do his best? I'd say he did!

A. The Requirement of Working

The only acceptable way to do the work of the Lord is by doing your best. First Corinthians 15:58 says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." That deserves our very best. Every Christian should ask, "Did I do my best?"

1. 2 Timothy 2:15--"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed" ([sc]NASB).
2. Mark 13:32-33--Referring to His Second Coming the Lord said, "Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels who are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for ye know not when the time is." We don't know when the Lord is going to return. We don't know how much time we have before the resurrection of believers occurs and we are glorified. Then Jesus said, "The Son of man is like a man taking a far journey, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye, therefore; for ye know not when the master of the house cometh" (vv. 34-35). One day soon He will come back and evaluate the quality of His servants' work.
3. Revelation 22:12--"Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be." How you do the work He has committed to you will determine how He will reward you in glory.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:50-58--Paul told the Corinthians that since they didn't know how much time they had before the Lord's return, they ought to be always doing the Lord's work. There's no time to waste!
5. 2 Thessalonians 3:11--Paul said, "We hear that there are some who walk among you disorderly, working not at all but are busybodies." The Greek text incorporates a play on words, literally saying,

"Not busy workers, but busybodies." Some of the people in the Thessalonian church were not working. Rather, they were probably speculating about the return of Christ, failing to accomplish anything meaningful in their daily lives. Evidently some had laid down the tools of their trade and were burdening others. Therefore Paul said, "Them that are such we command and exhort, by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well-doing" (vv. 12-13). Paul didn't want those who were obedient to get discouraged because of those who weren't working. If you are giving everything you got while others aren't yet they're still receiving the same pay and benefits, it's easy to become discouraged. Christians must not be busybodies who only talk, but busy workers who get the work done.

6. 1 Timothy 5:9-10--Paul instructed the church to provide only for those widows who had proven themselves faithful: "Let not a widow be taken into the number under sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works, if she hath brought up children, if she hath lodged strangers, if she hath washed the saint's feet, if she hath relieved the afflicted, if she hath diligently followed every good work."

7. Ephesians 4:11-12--The pastor is to equip "the saints for the work of the ministry." Every Christian has an obligation to do the work of the ministry.

8. Revelation 2:2--Christ said to the church at Ephesus, "I know thy works, and thy labor."

9. 2 Corinthians 5:10--Christians will be rewarded on the basis of the work they have done in the name of Christ. The Lord will determine whether they were good or useless--in the words of 1 Corinthians 3:12, whether they were valuable, like "gold, silver, [and] precious stones"; or relatively worthless, like "wood, hay, [and] stubble."

10. John 9:4--Jesus said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work." Now is the time to do the Lord's work, making sure we are doing our best.

11. Colossians 4:17--"Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it."

12. Ephesians 5:15-16--If you're going to do the Lord's work at maximum output, you're going to have to make best use of the time available to you.

13. 1 Peter 5:8--Peter said, "Be sober." That imperative means we must set our priorities.

B. The Reward of Working

If we have established our priorities, made efficient use of our time, and worked diligently, we'll be in the same company as Jesus, who said, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4). Like Paul may we be able to say, "I finished my course" (2 Tim. 4:7). We'll have a sense of accomplishment in finishing the Lord's work only when we've given it our complete effort. In the future the Lord will reward us in glory. In the present He will probably give us more work to do because we have proven our faithfulness.

Centuries ago a victor at the Olympic games was asked, "Spartan, what will you get by this victory?" The athlete replied, "I will have the honor to fight in the front line in the ranks of my king." That's a good attitude. If you do your work well in a lesser setting, you may be placed in the center of action. In a spiritual context, if you're faithful to the Lord and have proven successful in your work, He will probably promote you to an area of greater responsibility. Along with increased responsibility will come the need for greater effort, and the possibility of greater consequences. That's encouraging because the bigger the challenge is, the bigger the victory will be.

ReviewIn 1 Corinthians 16:5-12 the apostle Paul describes his plans. Having just exhorted the Corinthians to always abound in the Lord's work (15:58), he indirectly describes how he accomplished that himself. Implied in this section are seven principles for doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way.

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

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

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

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

A. Explained

B. Exemplified

LESSON

1. The faithful servant

Our Lord gave the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. In verse 23 a master said to his faithful servant, "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things." Faithfulness at a current level of responsibility gives one the right to be used at a higher level in the future.

There are many people who want to have immediate success in ministry without there being a proving ground--a place where they've perfected their skills and their spiritual gifts. Someone who does the Lord's work in the Lord's way doesn't just plan for the future; he ministers in the present as well.

2. The wise steward

Luke 12:42 records a similar exhortation: "The Lord said, Who, then, is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household?" A steward who was faithful in handling the affairs of the house was given the privilege of ruling it. Before you can expect God to drop you into some great and exciting ministry that has much at stake, you're going to have to prove yourself faithful at the level He has placed you now.

Paul, who had great hopes of visiting the Corinthians, resolved to stay at Ephesus to pursue the opportunity of service there. He was totally committed to His current ministry until God shut the door. He was never discontent about his area of service. He never considered his current ministry as a stepping stone to a better one. He gave his whole life in ministry to the church where God had directed him. When God closed that door and opened another, he gave his whole life to that.

Are You Looking for an Open Door?

Paul reported to the church at Antioch that God "had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). In 2 Corinthians 2:12 he says, "When I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel ... a door was opened unto me of the Lord." Paul asked the Colossians to pray "that God would open ... a door of utterance, to speak the [gospel] of Christ" (4:3). The open door simply signifies an opportunity to preach the gospel. Wherever there was a door of opportunity, Paul was ready to go through it. That's the way we ought to be.

There are some people who get so picky about what door they go through that they miss the opportunities God puts before them. They wait around for something wonderful to happen, but it never does because they've never shown a willingness to go through a door that God left open for them. Seminary students will often specify the exact type of ministry situation they want to work in. Many naively expect to find a perfect church. (If they could find one, the church wouldn't need them!) Meanwhile, there is an open door at a church with all kinds of problems, but they don't pursue it because it doesn't exactly fit their expectations. If the door is open now, you should seriously consider entering it rather than doing nothing.

3. The Philadelphian church

The Lord told the church at Philadelphia that He was the One who "openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.... I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it" (Rev. 3:7-8). That church was very different from the dead church at Laodicea, which the Lord addressed next. Perhaps one of the things that can turn a Philadelphia into a Laodicea is a refusal to

go through open doors. Apathy is the result, which our Lord condemned in these words: "Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of My mouth" (Rev. 3:16).

When God opens the door and directs you to enter it, He will empower you to do what He wants you to accomplish. Don't be content to do nothing, waiting for the perfect situation. Find an open door and go through it. Otherwise, if you haven't proven yourself faithful in entering the doors that the Lord has already opened for you, don't expect Him to open others for which you are unprepared. Don't be so independent and inflexible that you can't enter the door God has opened.

4. The apostle Paul

a) The place of opportunity According to 1 Corinthians 16:8-9, God had opened the door at Ephesus in a wonderful way. Ephesus was the major city in Asia Minor, a large province of the Roman Empire that now makes up the modern nation of Turkey. Ephesus was the second major city east of Rome. (The first was Corinth.) Although it was three miles from the sea, it was located on the navigable Cayster River, making it a center of commerce. It boasted one of the Seven Wonders of the World: the temple of Diana, which, among other things, served as an international bank. It was the meeting place for the leaders of the confederacy of Ionian states. The city was also a haven for criminals. Cultic and superstitious practices proliferated there. The geographic setting and the climate of Ephesus was beautiful. The commerce of the city helped it to flourish. It may have been John's model for the economic system of the end times (Rev. 18:12-13). b) The pursuit of opportunity (1) Recognized It is no wonder that Paul said of such an incredible city: "A wide door for effective [Gk., energ[ma]es, "energetic, productive"] service has opened to me" (1 Cor. 16:9, [sc]NASB). Although the city was crawling with sorcerers, magicians, prostitutes, and false teachers of every sort, Paul considered the city to be a wide-open opportunity for the gospel. However, we might conclude that it wouldn't be a good place to go. But the door was opened by God, and Paul recognized that. (2) Reviewed The door in Ephesus hadn't always been open. Paul had planned to go to Ephesus for a long time. Acts 16 records that Paul and his companions were determined to go south into Asia Minor, but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to do so (v. 7). So they went west into Macedonia. Later Paul headed east and went to Ephesus for one day, hoping to return at a later time (Acts 18:18-21). Eventually God opened a door for him to do so, after first preparing the city through the ministry of Apollos, who preached the Word of God mightily (v. 28). Apparently Ephesus needed to be warmed up for Paul, whose approach might have been too strong. Yet Paul might not have been ready for the opposition he was going to face in Ephesus, so the Lord allowed him to be beaten and jailed in Philippi to toughen him up. When the preparation was complete and the time was right, God brought Paul to Ephesus. Paul apparently reasoned that since God went through so much trouble to get him there, he would stay until his work was done.

C. Exhorted

Don't ignore an open door. Where God has opened a door, someone has to go through it. I'm concerned about people who claim they're going to get in the ministry but aren't doing anything now. They are only dreamers with no proving ground to test and establish their future methods of ministry. One who does the Lord's work in the Lord's way has plans for the future, but he also has a great sense of present commitment. He pours his life into the present because that may be all he has. Acts 13:1-2 illustrates the importance of being involved in the present. The church at Antioch had five pastors. Verse 2 says that "as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work unto which I have called them." Because they had proven themselves faithful in their present ministries, the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to the ministry He had planned for them once they had been proven.

V. AN ACCEPTANCE OF OPPOSITION AS A CHALLENGE (vv. 8-9)

If you find a place that doesn't have any problems, then you're not needed there. Accept opposition as a challenge. Paul said, "I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great door, and effectual, is

opened unto me, and there are many adversaries." That might appear to us to be a good reason not to stay--but not to Paul! G. Campbell Morgan once said that if you have no opposition in the place you are serving, you're serving in the wrong place (The Corinthian Letters of Paul [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1946], p. 213).

A. Exemplified by the Apostle Paul

1. His reason

In effect Paul was saying, "I have to stay in Ephesus because I can't leave the troops alone; there's too much opposition here!" The city of Ephesus was rough. The temple of Diana was the center of organized idolatry characterized by sexual perversion involving priestesses who were prostitutes. In addition, there were certain Jewish exorcists who claimed to cast out demons (Acts 19:13-17). There was prejudice, superstition, racism, sexual vice, religious animosity, paganism, idolatry--virtually everything that exists in any city in the world today existed there. Most people would look for a tamer place, but Paul accepted it as a challenge!

He went into Ephesus and began to teach the Word of God every day for over two years (Acts 19:8-10). It is likely that those who were saved there were the ones who founded the other churches of Asia Minor mentioned in Revelation 2-3. Those who had practiced magical arts now burned their books (Acts 19:19), and so many people stopped buying idols of the goddess Diana that the craftsmen who made them angrily stirred up a demonstration (vv. 23-41). The gospel made quite an impact on Ephesus.

Choosing the Church with a Challenge

Paul saw opposition as a tremendous challenge. When you look for a ministry, seek one that isn't everything it ought to be and see if God can use you to His glory to change it. The people you will minister to are those who need you the most. Find a city where the gospel is not preached, a church where the Word of God is not taught or doesn't have a biblical leadership structure, and instruct them in the truth. Be where God can use you. When there are many adversaries, that's when the troops need you the most.

2. His reflection

Paul looked back on the battle in Ephesus in 2 Corinthians 1: "We should like you, our brothers, to know something of the trouble we went through in Asia. At that time we were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear, in fact we told ourselves that this was the end. Yet we believe now that we had this sense of impending disaster so that we might learn to trust, not in ourselves, but in God who can raise the dead" (vv. 8-9, Phillips). When you get into a desperate situation like that, don't rely on yourself; turn to God. That's when His power begins to flow and the enemies begin to drop one by one!

In 2 Corinthians 4:10 Paul says, "Every day we experience something of the death of Jesus, so that we may also show the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours" (Phillips). They faced death every day and experienced Christ's power. That's the excitement and the adventure of the ministry--charging into battle and confronting opposition in the power of Christ. That's when God gives us the victory. Take up the challenge and find a difficult place to minister!

B. Exemplified by John Paton

John Paton accepted an immense challenge. While he was a student at a Bible college in London, God called him to go to the cannibal-infested New Hebrides islands in the South Pacific. Some of us might have said, "Lord, You've got the wrong guy! Are You sure my gifts are fit for that? And besides, I graduated--I can make it in the ministry. No sense in my being someone's lunch after all the effort I've put in. I know a Bible-college dropout who will never make it in the ministry. Send him there; they'll eat him and who will know? He'll go down in history as having died a hero!"

But John Paton didn't argue with God. A ship dropped him and his wife off and they rowed ashore to

an island inhabited by cannibals whose language they did not speak. From the moment they set up a little hut on the beach, the Lord miraculously preserved them. Later, when the chief of the tribe in that area was converted to Christ, he asked John who the army was that surrounded his hut every night. God's holy angels had stood guard. After a short time, his wife gave birth to a baby and both she and the baby died in childbirth. He was forced to sleep on the graves to keep the cannibals from digging up the bodies and eating them. In spite of the great challenge, he decided to stay. The adversaries were many, but that's where God wanted him. (His exciting story is told by James Paton, his brother, in John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust], 1965 reprint.) How do you face such opposition by yourself? Only by totally depending on God. Accept the challenge, and watch God's power bring about victories you never dreamed possible.

VI. A TEAM SPIRIT (vv. 10-11)

Paul was a team-oriented leader. He didn't try to be a lone superstar. He depended on other people. In 1 Corinthians 16:10 he says, "If Timothy come, see that he may be with you without fear." According to 1 Corinthians 4:17 Paul was sending Timothy to Corinth, perhaps with this letter. He warned the proud and self-willed Corinthians not to intimidate Timothy, saying, "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" (16:10-11). Paul asked the Corinthians to respect his emissary, whom he hoped would bring back a good report. Even though Timothy was Paul's son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2), Paul considered him an equal. He was quick to stand up for his fellow-worker. Even though Paul was a leader among leaders, he recognized that he was simply a co-worker in God's service. He had a great sense of teamwork.

A. A Lack of a Personal Agenda

Paul had no personal agenda. When he was a prisoner, and a new generation of preachers was coming along that the churches were beginning to follow, he didn't try to regain his prior place of preeminence. Evidently some of them claimed that Paul was a prisoner because he botched his ministry. Paul noted that some "preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds Notwithstanding ... Christ is preached; and in that I do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Phil. 1:16, 18). Paul couldn't have been more thrilled to support others who were doing the Lord's work. If they didn't do it in the Lord's way, he told them; but anyone who did was on his team.

B. A Recognition of Fellow Christians

In Romans 16:3-15 Paul mentions twenty-four individuals and two individual households. Among them were seven women who also helped him in the work of the Lord. You can never minister for God in isolation. You've got to realize that you're but one member of God's team.

When we see Paul doing the Lord's work, we always see him teamed with Silas, Barnabas, Luke, Aristarchus, Mark, or Timothy. One who does the Lord's work in the Lord's way realizes that he's just part of the fellowship and that it's his job to encourage and edify others. That's why Paul requested that the Corinthians be respectful of Timothy. Epaphroditus "was near unto death" (Phil. 2:30) and Paul was grateful that he didn't die because he needed his fellow worker. When Paul was old, he requested Timothy to bring Mark, saying, "He is profitable to me for the ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11). Paul had a sense of teamwork.

In 2 Timothy 4:5 he says to Timothy, "Watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry." That was a dramatic moment in Timothy's life. Up to that time, Timothy had served Paul. But now it was time for Paul to send him off to do his own work. The proving ground for Timothy was how he had served Paul.

God has called some to lead and others to serve. Sometimes those who serve will do so during their entire ministry. Other times they'll serve for a period of apprenticeship and then the Lord will call them out to lead on their own. But that sense of teamwork must be retained. Maybe we're called to support someone else or to lead on our own. Whatever it is, Jesus said to "love one another. By this

shall all men know that ye are my disciples" (John 13:34-35). When the world sees the team working together as a team, they witness the validity of our faith.

VII. A SENSITIVITY TO THE SPIRIT'S LEADING IN OTHERS (v. 12)

We should be sensitive to the Spirit's leading in others, as Paul was in the ministry of Apollos: "As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren" (1 Cor. 16:12). Paul wanted Apollos to go along with Timothy to Corinth, apparently to straighten out the divisions that had centered on Paul and Apollos in the church (1 Cor. 1:11-12). Although Paul was the greatest leader among the Gentile churches, he didn't force his authority on Apollos. Verse 12 says, "His will was not at all to come at this time; but he will come when he shall have a convenient time."

You can't force people to do the Lord's work as you interpret it. You've got to wait until the Spirit of God works in their hearts. Paul had authority, great ideas, and effective strategies; but he also had patience for God's Spirit to work in the hearts of the others on the team. He trusted their judgment. It's so important to have a sense of teamwork and realize that God's Spirit works in every Christian, not just the leader. An effective leader has to be sensitive to what God is saying to other members on the team. Don't dominate the team. Rather, patiently let the Spirit of God generate ministries among the rest.

ConclusionHow does one do the Lord's work in the Lord's way? By having a vision for the future, flexibility, thoroughness, a commitment to the present, an acceptance of opposition, a team spirit, and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's leading in the lives of others.

An English clergyman of the last century was asked how he accounted for the great success that the Methodist revival was having in England. He replied, "The answer is simple. They are all at it and they are always at it." I admire the dedication of those early Methodists. May we, too, be "always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Focusing on the Facts

1. What will determine how Christians will be rewarded in heaven (2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12)?
2. Explain why Paul had to exhort those who were not working in the Thessalonian church (2 Thess. 3:11-13).
3. What is the pastor's job (Eph. 4:11-12)? What is every Christian's obligation?
4. How can we have a sense of accomplishment with regard to the Lord's work?
5. When might the Lord promote us to an area of greater responsibility? What will accompany that?
6. How were the faithful servant and wise steward rewarded (Matt. 25:23; Luke 12:42)?
7. Explain how Paul's attitude towards ministry motivated him to stay at Ephesus rather than go to Corinth as he had planned.
8. When God opens a door, what can we expect Him to do?
9. How did God apparently prepare Paul and Ephesus for his ministry there?
10. When were Saul and Barnabas called into another ministry by God (Acts 13:1-2)?
11. What effect did the gospel have on Ephesus and the surrounding area?
12. What had Paul learned from the opposition he encountered at Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:8-9)?
13. Although Timothy was Paul's son in the faith, how else did Paul view him?
14. How did Paul demonstrate his lack of a personal agenda when another generation of preachers was arising while he was in prison (Phil. 1:16, 18)?
15. Describe some ways that Paul demonstrated a team spirit.
16. How was Paul sensitive to the Spirit's leading of Apollos? Explain how we can be sensitive to the Spirit's leading of others.

Pondering the Principles

1. Are you looking for an open door to serve others? Are you hoping only for a ministry opportunity in an upper-middle-class suburb with a wonderful climate? Or, would you be willing to work in a city like Ephesus with all its problems? Make sure your motive for serving the Lord is honorable. What are you currently doing to prepare for the open door you are looking for? Prove faithful in entering the doors He opens for you, realizing that as He guides you through prayer, godly counsel, and circumstances, He will also empower you to do what He wants you to accomplish (1 Thess. 5:24).
2. Do you work well with fellow Christians? Do you prefer to do everything by yourself or do you share your responsibilities with others? Delegation is a vital part of effective discipleship. When you are ministering to others, include some fellow Christians on your team. Allow them to have first-hand experience. Then, when they are fully trained, be willing to let them begin their own ministries. If you are not gifted as a leader, but see yourself serving in a behind-the-scenes capacity, realize that you are still an important part of the team. Whether you lead or serve, make sure that you minister "heartily, as to the Lord." Memorize Colossians 3:23-24.

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