

# 1 Corinthians 15:55-58

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Date: 04 November 2012

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Last Sunday morning we were considering sound advice against grinding toil. In Psalm 127, you may remember the words of the psalmist, in vain you rise early and stay up late toiling for food to eat. Now on that occasion we did try and make clear that the psalmist was not by any means decrying hard work. But just in case any of us might be tempted to laziness or slothfulness on the back of the message of Psalm 127, I thought we might this evening consider a challenge to hard labor, to working hard but presented very much in a positive context as something that is satisfying and enriching and pleasing to God, to work hard for Him. The words that we are particularly interested in and concerned with and we'll be concentrating our thoughts around are found there in the passage that we read in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. There in the second half, of the final verse of that chapter, always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the

Lord. The words are, I'm sure for many of you, familiar. They are words that are rightly used to encourage believers when things are tough and when seemingly our labor for the Lord is far from fruitful and appears to be in vain. I'm sure many of us as Christians can remember times, and maybe they're very recent times or present times, when we wonder just what's the point? I'm working in this way, I'm serving in this way, I'm seeking to testify to others concerning the good news of the gospel, but there just doesn't seem to be anything happening. There's no result. All I get is discouragement and apathy and misunderstanding. And we can be discouraged. We are prone to discouragement. And of course, these words of Paul rightly can be and should be used to encourage us when we're feeling that way.

And I want to think of these words of Paul this evening from a particular perspective, from the perspective of giving. And what I mean by that is that in verses 57 and 58, we have three references to giving. Two of them are explicit and one is implicit. And there is, as we will see, an awful lot of giving going on or being referred to in these verses. In verse 57, we'll just notice the three references and then think of them. In verse 57, we read, but thanks be to God, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. There's a reference to God giving. God gives. And then immediately following and clearly connected, connected there by that word at the beginning of verse 58, therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. So God gives, and we in response are also encouraged and challenged to give. Give yourselves fully to the work of the

Lord. And then finally, we find God giving again at the end of verse 58, where we read, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. God gives us a promise. The word give isn't there, but what we have here is this indication that God gives us as His people, as His servants, as those who are working for Him, He gives us this promise, a precious promise, an encouraging promise, that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. It may appear in vain. It may appear pointless. It may appear fruitless, but it is not in vain.

So we have these three reference to giving. And let's just think of them. There is a progression. They're connected. One follows naturally from the other. But let's think of them in turn.

[ 4 : 54 ] First of all, then, in verse 57, we have this first reference to God giving. But thanks be to God, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. What is it that God gives? Well, the language is very clear. He gives us the victory. And what is this victory? Victory over what? Well, in the context, in the immediate context of the verse that precedes this verse, it's very clear that the primary reference is to victory over death. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

Far from death having the victory. Far from death having the victory, Paul tells us that we have the victory, that Christ gives us the gift of victory over death, and by implication, by necessary extension, victory over sin. Because as the passage also clearly states, the sting of death is sin. So this victory over death is victory over death is victory also over the wages of death, that is sin. Now this language and all that I've said as I just briefly speak of what God gives here as it's commented on by Paul in verse 57, the language is so familiar that we can become blasé about what it is declaring.

And recognizing that danger that we can become blasé about these truths, it is good for us to consciously and deliberately to pause, and to pause in grateful wonder that we as Christians, as children of God, we enjoy such a victory over death. We enjoy victory over death. This is a gift that we are given.

Death has lost its power over us. Yes, we will experience physical death unless the Lord returns before that day comes for us, but it has lost its sting. It has no power over us. Death is simply the opportunity for us to be welcomed into the nearer presence of our Lord. And that knowledge that we enjoy victory over death ought not to simply be a comfort for us as we look to the future and consider our mortality, but that recognition that we enjoy victory over death also grants us a present security.

What do I mean by that? Well, what I mean by that is that if death itself has lost its sting, if that great enemy has lost its power over us, what have we to fear from lesser enemies who would seek to steal from us our joy and make us downcast? God gives His people victory.

[ 8 : 08 ] How does He give us this victory? Well, Paul also answers that question, but thanks be to God, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. We could put it this way, God the Father gives us victory by the giving of His own Son, and God the Son gives us victory by the giving of Himself.

By the giving of Himself over to death, Jesus conquered death, a victory confirmed by the resurrection, and He shares His victory over death with all those who trust in Him. And so if this evening you are trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then this is a gift that He gives to you, victory, victory over death. The giving of God, the giving of God the Father, the giving of God the Son is, as we can notice, as we can appreciate, a generous, no-holds-barred giving. God gives Himself that we might enjoy and might be given by Him the victory, victory over death and sin.

And what about us in this matter of this first gift that we're considering? He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. What are we to do? Well, we simply receive. We simply receive the gift.

God has done everything for us, and having done everything for us, He gives us that which we simply receive. The gift of victory is a gift to be received. But having received, we also have the opportunity to give, which takes us on to the second reference to giving in these verses. As we move on to verse 58, therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Now, this is a giving in response to. The therefore at the beginning of the verse makes that clear. In the light of this gift that you have received, in the light of this generous giving by God to you of victory, in the light of that, therefore, I urge you, I challenge you, I encourage you to give of yourselves, to give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

This is the giving of a grateful heart. What is being asked of us is something that we simply could not do if we have not first received the gift that is spoken of here. It would be impossible for us, by an effort of will, to give ourselves in the manner that is required, have we not first received this gift of victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. We give because He first gave to us and continues giving to us. But what are we to give? What are we to give? Let's think a little about this matter of what we are to give. And first of all, what is it that we are to give? Well, what we're asked to give, what we're challenged to give is always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

[ 11 : 47 ] We are to give ourselves. There is a symmetry to this demand to give. God gave Himself in the person of Jesus. And we are to give ourselves in the service of Jesus. We're not being told in the first instance to give our money or our time or even our work, but we are to give ourselves. That will involve our money and our time and our work. But at heart, what we are being challenged to do is to give ourselves, to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord. So, we are to give ourselves. And what are we to give ourselves to? Well, we've just mentioned that in quoting the verse. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Now, what is that? It sounds all very pious, the work of the Lord. What is that? What does Paul have in mind when he says, give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord? Is he thinking of church work? Those things that we do in the context of being part of a congregation. Maybe we're a Sunday school teacher, or we help in a Christianity Explored course, or maybe we help in preparing food for the saints, or so many ways that we can be involved in the work of the church. Well, is that what he's talking about? Or maybe it goes a little bit beyond that. Maybe it goes beyond that to those things that we do in our daily lives, but that are very clearly related to our faith. So, when we seek to share the gospel with others, well, that's the work of the Lord, surely.

Well, of course, these things are. But I think it's very clear, not only from this passage, but very especially as we think of all that Paul teaches in this matter, that the work of the Lord is everything we do. Notice that the term, the work of the Lord, is then subsequently described, just a moment later, as your labor in the Lord. Basically, they're synonymous phrases, or they're referring to the same labor, but in different ways. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. And that second phrase especially, I think, broadens out the idea more clearly that everything we do, all our labor, all our work, all our endeavor, is to be in the Lord, and for the Lord, in dependence on Him, in a manner pleasing to Him with a view to His glory. We could listen to what Paul says in this very same letter that confirms what we're stating here. In 1 Corinthians chapter 10, just two or three chapters before, and in the final verse, or in verse 31, towards the end of chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians, what does Paul say to these same Christians in Corinth? He says, so whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. This is Paul's understanding of the Christian life, that everything you do, whatever you do, eat or drink or whatever it is, do it for the glory of God. And so when this same apostle, in this same letter, addresses the Corinthians just a little bit later on and speaks of their work for the Lord, then surely here also he has in mind everything that they do as Christians, everything that they do in the Lord. The Bible knows nothing of full or part-time ministry, full or part-time service. As Christians, we are all called to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Now, there is, of course, a particular application to the work that we do as part of and in the service of Christ's church. Such work is very evidently the work of the

Lord. But really what I'm saying is that though it is very evidently the work of the Lord, it is not exclusively, not even preeminently the work of the Lord. You can't have some kind of hierarchy that, you know, this work that I do is more Christian than this. Everything we do, whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we are to do to the glory of God.

Now, that's something maybe that it's worth just pondering on a little. I think as Christians we can make different mistakes. We make many mistakes, but in this matter we can have mistaken ideas.

You know, there are some Christians who maybe take the view, well, you know, when I'm doing something in the work of the church, I really have to give my best. But when it's at college or at university or at work, well, anything will do. That's not really so important. For some it's the reverse.

[17:01] The problem is reversed. But the point is that if we're Christians, whatever we are, the manner in which we are to work is in the manner described here. And we're going to come on now to think a little bit more about the manner in which we are to work. How are we to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord? Well, Paul here in these verses identifies a number of features that should characterize the giving of ourselves to the work of the Lord. I want to just mention three or three that I can find, I think, very explicitly in the language that Paul uses. Three features in terms of the manner in which we are to give ourselves to the work of the Lord. The first thing that's very clear is that it is to be steadfast. Notice there in verse 58, therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm, let nothing move you. Stand firm, let nothing move you. In the work that you do, you are to stand firm, you are to be steadfast, as it is translated in some versions. Now, the implication of this is very clear, that as we seek to live our lives as Christians, as we seek to serve God, whatever it is that He has placed us, there will be obstacles, there will be opposition, there will be frustrations, there will be misunderstandings, there will be bickering, there will be resentments, there will be so many things that would discourage us in the work that we're doing, that would tempt us to throw in the towel and say, well, what's the point? And Paul says, no, stand firm, stand firm, be steadfast, let nothing move you. As we cling tightly to the one we serve, we can be confident that nothing will move us. So, this is the first feature of our work, it is to be steadfast. And I think there's no doubt that a steadfast Christian, one who is solid, one who is dependable, one who is trustworthy in the manner in which he serves God, in and out with the church. Such a Christian is worth his or her weight in gold.

Steadfastness, then, is one of the features that should characterize the work that we render to God. But another feature that we can notice here in the language of Paul is that our work is to be permanent and consistent. And I take that from the word always, there in verse 58, always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. And the word always there can be considered in two complementary senses, in the sense of permanently, always, at all time, be engaged, be about the work of the Lord. But I think particularly here, it has the idea of consistently. Always give yourselves fully.

You're always going to be working, but always do so in this manner, that there would be a consistency as well as a permanence in your work for God. So, steadfast, permanent, and consistent, and I'm thinking of that as one characteristic. And then a third thing that we notice, and that is wholehearted.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Or as the English Standard Version translates this little phrase, always abounding in the work of the Lord. And it's a very appealing way of getting across the idea, always abounding in the work of the Lord. We are to serve God with energy and enthusiasm and looking to give our best and our all. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

Is it not the case that there is little more unattractive than grudging and mediocre service? How discouraging that is when maybe there is work to be done and there may be those willing to be involved up to a point, but it's so grudging. It's such an effort to get people involved. And yes, okay, we'll get involved, but you can just sense that there's no enthusiasm. There's no real desire to do it.

[ 21 : 32 ] It's all very grudging, dutiful, and that's very discouraging. It just doesn't give you any real sense of, well, let's really do this. It's very unattractive. And of course, it does generally result in service that is mediocre. And what Paul is stating here, and it's such, in a sense, such an obvious truth, but what he is stating and commending to the Christians in Corinth is that the Lord is worthy of their best, and he's worthy of our best. And as we were just noticing, we've noticed a couple of times already, and we repeat it in the hope that it will become engraved in our minds, that everything we do constitutes the work of the Lord. And so there can be no justification for giving our best in one sphere of endeavor in the church, and then giving the minimum elsewhere, or vice versa. No, everything that we do is to be done in this manner. And as we think of some of these features of the work that we are to render to God, what strikes me is, who does this look like? Who works in this way? Who do we know whose service for God has these characteristics? Steadfast, permanent, and consistent, wholehearted?

Well, surely the one who most approximates to this description of service to God is God's own Son, Jesus. That's the manner in which he served God, and that is the manner in which we are invited to serve God also. So there's this second element of giving. The first one that we notice is God giving, but thanks be to God, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. But then the second reference to giving that follows on.

We in response, therefore, my dear brothers, always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. And then that brings us finally and briefly to the third reference to giving in the second half of verse 58, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Now, the word give is not present, but there is a reference to a gift from God, and that gift is this promise that our work is not in vain.

For you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Well, what does that mean? What does it mean to say that our labor in the Lord is not in vain? Well, I think it certainly means a couple of things, or I'll mention a couple of things that it seems to me are implied or meant by this promise, this declaration that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. The first thing that it certainly means is that the Lord knows the work that we do for Him. Others may know little or nothing of what we do. Others who may be aware of what we do may give what we do very little importance. But the Lord sees and is pleased with our steadfast and wholehearted service, however seemingly fruitless it may be. Others may look on and say, well, you know, he's not doing much or she's not achieving much. But if our service is steadfast, if it is in a measure steadfast, if it is in a measure wholehearted, I don't know if you can be wholehearted in a measure, but if you know what I mean, if there is that sincere and genuine desire to serve in this manner with all the limitations that we have, the Lord sees that and the Lord honors that and the Lord is pleased with that. So certainly this promise, this declaration that our labor is not in vain refers to or implies this fact that the Lord knows what we do. But I think we can also say that it speaks of or points to a very important truth that our labor in the Lord is not in vain because even though it might appear fruitless, it is spiritually beneficial for us to be engaged in faithful and steadfast service of God. Regardless of the outcome, if we are seeking to be faithful and steadfast in the service of God, that will encourage and that will contribute to our growth in Christian service, to our growth in faith and grace. We will grow as Christians in the measure that we serve in the manner described. So our labor is not in vain, even though it appears that very little is coming of it. It is not in vain. We ourselves are spiritually profited or benefited by such service.

But I think we can also say that this affirmation, this promise that our labor in the Lord is not in vain, that in this there is surely also implicit that the Lord will honor our work and our witness for Him with His blessing and a measure of fruit and success, if you wish. Now it may be that for some of us, in some areas of our service, that blessing, that fruit will only be seen in eternity. Only eternity will give full evidence of how true this promise proves to be. It may be that there are times, and even as the years go by and as we look back, we'll still say, well, I really don't know what the point of that was. Nothing seemed to have come of that. It was such an abject failure, that endeavor in which I was involved. And yet, even if we're not given an understanding of what it was that, or in what way that served, we can be confident that there is and there will be a measure of blessing. And God will have used it in His own way, in ways that we maybe don't understand. And I say eternity will reveal, but perhaps in some cases even eternity won't reveal for us. So, in these different complementary ways, we can understand this promise, this expression, your labor in the Lord is not in vain. The Lord knows, and the Lord honors, and the Lord is pleased. We ourselves profit from faithful service, and the Lord does, maybe not in the time or in the measure that we would wish. He does grant a blessing and fruit for our labors. So, God gives us the victory. We are to give ourselves fully to His work, and He in turn gives us the promise that our labor is not in vain. Well, let us pray.