

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Steadfast Work Not in Vain

But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:57–58, KJV 1900)

The Bible doctrine of the resurrection is not a vacuous philosophical idea, a version of "Pie in the sky bye and bye." It serves as the bedrock foundation upon which a believer can build an entire life devoted to faith and to unselfish godliness. Given all that we have in Christ, culminating in our resurrection and eternity in glory with the Lord, the mature believer has no reason to complain or to attract attention to self. "What about me? What about my...?" Such self-focus should never occupy a believer whose faith is firmly anchored in Jesus and the resurrection. The faith of the mature believer is not centered in self, but in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, our only truly rational mindset for life must focus on Him and not on ourselves. So people don't agree with you or with your wishes. What does that matter, given what you have in Christ? Do they honor the Lord Jesus in what they do? If so, praise the Lord. Yes, this mindset runs contrary to our carnal disposition that craves attention and getting our way, what we want out of any situation in which we are involved. When Jesus outlined the first hurdle that a believer must overcome to be a true disciple, a student and follower of Him, He highlighted this attitude. "...deny himself" means exactly what we think it means. (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) We can't indulge self, force others to regard us or fear the high price we shall make them pay for not indulging us, and claim a credible pretense of being a true disciple of Jesus. The two mindsets are mutually exclusive. Hold to one and the other must go. This distinguishes a "Believer" from a "Disciple." The difference is vast.

This "Self-denial" thing gets in our faces constantly. The anemic believer will dismiss it and rationalize any number of attitudes and behaviors that eagerly promote self. My idea is better than yours. My interpretation of Scripture is better than yours. I've been in the faith longer than you, so you should defer to me. The list could go on for volumes, but the theme is the same; it is about me. In essence, this immature attitude pits one believer against other believers. The Biblical description of the mature and faithful believer, the self-denying believer, avoids any appearance of competition between believers. Instead of one believer competing against another believer, Scripture directs that one believer deny self and strive to help

other believers. "Disciples of Jesus" should stand united in the common faith against our common enemy. The believer who focuses on self sadly evidences that he has not grown to understand or to embrace this bedrock trait of the mature disciple.

Many years ago, I was working with a very immature believer who was all too eager to listen to anyone and everyone who presented their beliefs in an entertaining manner, but he refused to truly "Listen" to the gospel. On a given Sunday after service, this man engaged me in discussion on his latest idea, a patently salvation by works legalistic idea. I tried to reason with him without engaging him in an ungodly debate (Romans 1:29; "debate" appears as one behavior that characterizes the behavior and attitude of those who have utterly turned away from God. The word identifies verbal wrangling. Paul forbids such conduct in the minister of the gospel; 2 Timothy 2:24. All believers do well to follow that example). On that particular day, we had a visitor, an older man whose life was nicely seasoned with wise faith. He overheard our discussion. As I got in our car to leave, this wise and gracious man walked up to the car, leaned over by my open window, and spoke words that I've never forgotten, "God bless our little children. We need them every one." The Biblical purpose of the gospel is indeed to grow believers into greater maturity in their faith, into. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

What is it that motivates one believer to push through the wall of resistance, beginning with his/her own self-centeredness, and grow into a truly steadfast and faithful believer who serves others freely and joyfully, while another believer remains in the "It is all about me" state of spiritual childhood? Scripture gives us a number of answers, but the central explanation appears in our study passage. How strongly do they believe in the reality of the Second Coming and our bodily resurrection? How can any believer grow to that unselfish state apart from a strong and abiding belief in Jesus and the resurrection? And the answer is; they can't.

...be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. Scripture emphatically requires soundness in our faith, in what we believe. Paul in no way diminishes this soundness here. He just devoted a long chapter to correct doctrinal error in the Corinthians and to affirm the truth of God regarding the resurrection.

However, he directs us to a more personal earmark of steadfastness in our faith than even our sound beliefs, "...always abounding in the work of the Lord." What is the "work of the Lord"? It involves every aspect of our Christian life and walk. Yes, it requires that we maintain a high, godly moral consistency in our personal conduct. However, it no less also requires that we maintain a high and consistent "Grace demeanor" toward our brothers and sisters in the faith. "...when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." (Luke 22:32) It is utterly impossible for a believer to please the Lord while disregarding or thinking lowly of other believers, or treating another believer in a disrespectful manner.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul made another link between our belief in the resurrection and our personal conduct, "...evil communications corrupt good manners." (1 Corinthians 15:33) I observe a sad disregard for "good manners" among believers that directly mirrors this point. While Scripture teaches that faithful believers should live the godly life, immune from the influences of this broken, corrupt world, all too often they mirror the world instead of living so as to condemn it. I often listen to "Talk radio" to learn about current thinking on any number of issues. Increasingly, the participants in these talk shows habitually interrupt and talk over each other. No surprise, if believers fall prey to the vices of the world, you will observe them imitating this habit of interrupting and talking over other believers. Sadly, I confess to having fallen into this sinful habit, but I have also started working diligently to break that habit. Not long ago, I made a point of mentioning this disrespectful habit in a family gathering. It had become so commonplace that family members didn't even think about it. We recently had another family get-together, and I was thankful to notice a positive change in communications. I no longer will listen to any talk show on radio if participants interrupt and talk over each other. Pause and listen to one of these shows. As soon as participants start interrupting and talking over each other, total confusion rules. No one hears anything that anyone is saying. The habit itself says in action, "Whatever you want to say is not important to me. You know nothing; I know everything. Just be quiet and listen to me." I recently sent a formal complaint to one of these talk shows, telling them that I would no longer tune into their show till they eliminated that habit. Paul directs the Colossians, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." (Colossians 4:6) How can such rude speech manifest grace? It cannot possibly do so. And we have no way of knowing how to answer someone unless we show the courtesy to listen to what they say before we start to answer them.

I am convinced that a stronger belief in the resurrection would transform us, speech and every other form of our personal conduct. If we hope to "...abound in the work of the Lord," we must begin

with abounding in our belief in His resurrection and life, and we must manifest our belief in action.

...forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord. These words qualify both what we do and how or why we do it. If we labor for ourselves, we are not laboring "in the Lord," are we? If we promote self and what self wants, the Lord is not involved in our labor, and that labor is wholly in vain. I fear that many believers have fallen naively for the deceiver's siren enticement; beguiled into thinking that they can labor for themselves, but also labor for themselves in the Lord, rationalizing self-promoting labor. This idea is impossible. It grows out of Satan's bag of deceitful tricks. For us to labor "in the Lord" requires that we deny self, not somehow merge labor for self with labor in the Lord.

...your labour is not in vain in the Lord. "...your labour" deals with what you do, how you choose to conduct your life. If we choose to labor in the Lord for the service of others and to His honor, we labor "...in the Lord." Any labor in Him is worthwhile labor. It doesn't earn stars for a heavenly crown on our head, nor does it in any way buy a higher place in heaven for us, but it serves an invaluable purpose right now. Years ago I read an instructive story. In the story, an old man and a faithful believer who had spent his life in godly service to others and to the Lord was working intently to build a bridge across an unusually difficult "River," a major spiritual difficulty. He was old and tired, but he worked intently. Another believer approached him and reminded him that he was old and tired, that he had already worked his way across that spiritual difficulty, so why was he working so hard to build a bridge that he had no personal need to use? The old man needed no time to ponder his answer, "Yes, I have crossed this difficult passage, but other younger and less experienced believers who come after me will face that same problem. I'm building this bridge to make their transition over the difficulty easier." How many difficult trials or errant doctrinal ideas have you and I encountered through our journey? Though we haven't worked our way through all of them, we have overcome some of them. If we can mark the path that we traveled to overcome the problem, making it less of a problem for those who come after us, are we not thereby honoring the Lord by this service to them?

Whatever we do "in the Lord" is never in vain. Why? Because of the truth of Jesus and the resurrection, Paul urges us to be steadfast and unmovable in our faith, and to faithfully maintain our work in Him. Keep believing, keep holding steadfastly to this truth, and keep working for Him.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor