



September 2, 2012
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Working for a Livin' ...Lord
1 Corinthians 15:50-58

It's hard to believe that one month from now my family will load up everything we own and drive south... not just for a vacation, but for a whole new adventure in following God's call. Many of you have asked about the week we spent in Fresno earlier this month. Well, it was **hot!** It turned out to be the hottest week of the year down there; on Saturday it was 112, and on Sunday, when I preached, I think it got to 110. Of course, it was about 147 degrees behind the pulpit that morning; you would have been proud of the amount of sweat I produced. People kept on encouraging me to take my blazer off, but my shirt was pretty much translucent by the time the sermon started... so that would not have been good. But really, our time there simply felt ordained. The sanctuary was packed, there was a great sense of excitement and hope for the future, and they even laughed at my jokes. After the service we went into a much cooler room while they deliberated about my call. When they brought us back into the sanctuary, it was one of the most surreal and humbling moments of my life as the clerk of Session announced, "Please welcome our new senior pastor". Then, as Diane, the kids, and I stood in front of our new church—relishing the incredible moment that it was—a scuffle broke out between two of my children. As I separated them, I told the church, "We're just a normal family."

Since we returned from our trip to Fresno on August 12, we have finalized the sale of our home, had an awesome time at Camp Spalding as the family camp speakers, written four comprehensive exams for my PhD program that totaled about sixty pages of writing, welcomed my parents into town for a wonderful visit, worked with Diane and our realtor in Fresno to try to find a place to live, interviewed with the presbytery's ministerial committee to get approved for the new call to Fresno, and prepared a sermon for this morning. Life has been pretty active lately. Do you know what I'm doing tomorrow? Nothing.

My comprehensive exams have been particularly grueling these last two weeks, but the nice thing about them is that they represent a project that can actually be completed. Do you know what I mean? I can look at those four papers and be proud of a finished project. There are many things in life that aren't like that, right? Raising your children isn't like that; it's not like you have one conversation with them about friends and then check it off the list as if never to have that conversation again. Marriage isn't like that; you don't just come to Couples Life

one time and then check it off the list as if you don't have any more work to do. In fact, no relationship is like that; if a relationship is to remain, you're never done working on it. If Diane were here, she'd say that doing the laundry isn't like that... sure, you can check it off the list, but guess what... there'll be more dirty clothes tomorrow. Certainly the Christian life isn't like that either; we're not called to simply give our lives to the Lord and then do nothing.

Do you ever wonder if it's all done in vain? Do you wonder if all that work you're putting in on your marriage, or raising your children to know the Lord, or participating in a LifeGroup, or growing your own relationship with Christ, or witnessing to your neighbor, or praying for Africa, or trying to be a Christian example in your workplace is all in vain? Is it really making a difference? Why go through all this trouble? Why do all the work? Have you ever asked that of yourself? I have.

It's a question that is anticipated in our Scripture text today. It not only contains the answer to that question, but it helps us to understand the reason behind the answer. Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 15:50.

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, 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.

This is the conclusion of an entire chapter spent on resurrection. It starts with a wonderful explanation of the Gospel. This one is worthy of an underline; look back at 1 Corinthians 15:1. *¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.*

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Now jump ahead to verse 12: ¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

See, there were some in Corinth who were arguing that there was no real resurrection of the dead. For Paul, this is a serious false teaching that needs his attention; it doesn't just hold theological implications for the church, and it isn't just about what happens when you die or when Jesus comes back. The core Christian tenet of resurrection has everything to do with how we live, not just how we die. That resurrection is not just a spiritual resurrection. In the same way that the resurrected Jesus was physical – the disciples touched his scars, they watched him eat, and yet he could come and go through locked doors, and disappear instantly from a meal—in the same way that the resurrected Jesus was physical, so will our resurrected bodies be.

Then why does Paul write in verse 50 that *“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”*? N.T. Wright says that “whenever Paul uses the word flesh, there is something wrong with the material in question. Either it is in rebellion against God; or it is perishable, decaying; or both.” So, the present “flesh and blood” won't last forever; God intends, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to do a new thing – to create a new world in which death and sin are forever defeated! It's something that we cannot do to ourselves; it's not a self-help project; it's not a weight loss plan; it is something that only God, in His grace, can do. Paul says that even those who are alive when Jesus returns – when that trumpet sounds – will instantly and mysteriously be changed, resurrected. When that happens, the epic story of God's redemption will be complete. That's the promise of our future; that's why we have hope no matter what the circumstances; that's why we rejoice in all that God has done, is doing, and will complete. That's why we sing, *“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”* Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, does Paul end by looking to the future and rejoicing in it? No. Look again at the last verse (58). *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, 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.* The whole chapter has been about the future resurrection; it's been about the way things will end. But Paul doesn't end the discussion in the future. He ends it in the here and now. Paul's charge to the church is to hold firm to the truth of the Gospel message right now, and to give themselves fully to the work of the Lord right now. But is there a

connection between the way we live now have to do with the way things will be in the future? It has everything to do with it!

Here's a clue. Did you notice whose work it is? *"Give yourselves fully to the work of the ... Lord"*. Is the Lord still at work? Or is the Lord's work just a Bible thing? The Lord is still at work! So, what is the Lord doing? The Lord is doing the work of redemption; the Lord is bringing everything under the Lordship of Christ; the Lord is bringing life from death; the Lord is smashing injustice; the Lord is bringing freedom; the Lord is drawing you toward Him.

You can be a part of that work; by God's grace He calls you into it. Paul says that you should give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Are you? In light of the incredible gospel message, in light of your promised resurrection, in light of Christ's immanent return, be about God's business rather than just your own.

And the wonderful thing is that our labor in the Lord is never in vain. Did you notice that? Whose labor is it? It's "your labor", but it's "in the Lord." When you labor in the Lord—when you participate in the work of God's Kingdom—your work is never in vain. It's because God, by His Spirit, is working. And in His grace, He uses our efforts for His ends. Paul is saying to the Corinthian church, "Church, don't get sidetracked by some false message. Focus your efforts on doing the Lord's work. Never give up. Even when it feels like things in your family are as bad as they can get, or the work to bring justice in your city seems futile – even when your prayers seem to go unanswered, or your neighbor continues to be closed to the message of Christ – even when you're being persecuted for your Christian stand, or following Jesus costs you everything—Corinthian church, never let up. Keep giving yourself completely to the business of God, and know, know deep within you, that nothing that you do for the Master is a waste of time or effort."

There probably are some things that you do in your life that are a waste of time and effort. Have you ever tried to rid your lawn of moss? I've spent the last ten years trying to get moss out of my lawn, and I just need to tell you... I'm done! But here is a more important question: **how are you participating in the work of the Lord?**

Believe me church, I know that many of you are giving yourselves to God's work. I have been so encouraged by you this last decade. One of my greatest joys has been to see some of you get captured by the great adventure of being of part of what God is doing. Whether it was seeing a fire start in your heart while on a trip to Mexico, or a passion develop for growing in Christ together through LifeGroups, or the growth of a deep conviction to show Christ's love to women at Purdy prison, or a sudden broken heart for those kids who are hungry, or a deep gladness that welled up as you served someone in need, I have loved being a witness of that in you. Some of you were just minding your own business; you thought you could go unnoticed here. But someone said a prayer, or made an invitation, or shared a

story, and the Holy Spirit just broke something open in your insides and you had to respond. Beloved, God is at work in you. Keep giving yourself to His work, because your labor is not in vain.

But friends, some of you are still just minding your own business. Here you are; and I know that the Lord is so glad that you are here. But the Bible says to give yourselves fully to the Lord's work. How are you participating in the Lord's work? Have you given yourselves fully to that? Or are you giving yourself fully to the stuff that just going to fade away – to the stuff that won't even matter once Christ returns? Joining in the Lord's work doesn't necessarily require an epiphany. In fact, it might just require reading your bulletin.

We've decided to postpone the start of Sunday school for elementary kids because we don't yet have all the adults that we need to lead that ministry well. We, meaning our whole church, need several of us to sign up today. Will it be inconvenient to your Sunday morning schedule? Yes. Will there be times when it feels like it's not making a difference? Yes. But listen again, *"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."*

There's an invitation on our website right now for you to be a leader in our Extreme middle school ministry, and I happen to know that we particularly need some more men. You might be thinking, "Ah come on, you mean throwing dodge balls, eating junk food, and loving on kids no matter what?" Yes! Hello! That's exactly what I mean. Your labor in the Lord is never in vain.

Those are just two examples of how you can give yourselves to the work of the Lord right now. The options are many. **How are you participating in the Lord's work?** Have you given yourselves fully to that? Remember, we don't work to earn our salvation, but we do work to live our salvation. There is nothing better than being a part of what God is doing, and there is nothing more important.

Before I came to Chapel Hill I was in seminary, and before I was in seminary I was on Young Life staff in Oakhurst, California. It's about an hour north of Fresno, up in the mountains, at the south gate of Yosemite National Park. In many ways, much of what I hoped would happen there never came about. There were many times when I was so discouraged I just wanted to give up. I spent four years there leading the ministry and trying to share Christ with kids who were far from God. One of those kids was Matt. I spent a lot of time with Matt, building relationship and trust, and sharing the love of Christ with him. And finally, finally, one night while sitting on the floor of the living room in our rental house where we were having Club, Matt gave his life to the Lord. I've kept in contact with Matt over the years, but honestly... not so well for these past ten years. But on August 12, when I was preaching for First Pres Fresno, guess who drove in from out of town with his bride and young children to First Pres Fresno so that he could encourage me and minister to me. It was Matt. And there were others there like

that, from different seasons of my life—even from Chapel Hill—who were there to minister to me. It was simply a wonderful reminder for me from the Lord that God is at work and even when it feels like nothing is happening that God is using me.

Beloved, even when you feel like giving up. **Don't give up!** Instead, 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.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. In today's scripture, 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, Paul makes a very big deal about resurrection. Why do you think it is so important? What are the implications of our resurrection in Christ?

2. Verse 58 says to "give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord"; what is the work of the Lord? How do we give ourselves to it? In what ways are you doing that in this coming season?

3. Why is it important to stand firm and remember that your labor in the Lord is not in vain? What's at stake here?

4. What word does God have for you in this scripture and sermon?