

A Gospel Ministry Which Is Not In Vain, part 5—laboring for the salvation of others

For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

Are you a hard worker? Do you do a good job when you are assigned a task? Do you labor with all of your might? Children, do you do a good job in school? Do you work hard at picking up your toys at home when your parents tell you to?

To work is a good thing. To labor diligently is a noble thing. For God has created us to work. He fashioned us with the ability to labor. He created us in His image and He is a God who works. Jesus said in John 5:17, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” And just as God’s work always has eternal significance, so our work can as well. Therefore it is important for us to have good and godly goals in our labors, i.e. to labor with an eye toward eternity, to make sure our labors in the Lord will really be rewarding in the end.

Thus we should do all our work as unto the Lord, and ultimately for the glory and honor of His name. In all of our labors, in all that we do, we should be concerned preeminently with seeking first the advancement of the kingdom of heaven. This is the calling and the commission of the church. And if she would be faithful to her charge and her ministry in extending that kingdom, and if her labors would not be in vain in the Lord, then she must labor for the salvation of souls. *Thus I would urge upon you with every fiber of my being, labor for the salvation of souls, labor for the salvation of souls.*

As we reflect this morning on the labor involved in the salvation of souls, we will consider first, what it *means* to labor for *our* salvation, and how the apostle Paul was an example of such labor; second, how it is that the apostle Paul labored for the salvation of *others*; third, how it is that *we* can labor for the salvation of others, and fourth, how it is that *Christ* labored for our salvation.

First then, we will look at what it means to labor for our salvation, and how the apostle Paul was an example of such labor.

Dear congregation, do you know what it means to labor for your salvation? Did you know that you must labor for your salvation? Sadly, so many think that they are saved when they do not labor at all for their salvation, they lift not so much as a finger with respect to their everlasting condition. They labor for their daily bread, as well they should, but they think very little of laboring for the spiritual bread of life. Jesus said in John 6:27—“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

But so many think that by saying a simple prayer or that by simply believing that Jesus died on the cross for their sins, that they are eternally secure. And yet there can hardly be conceived a greater deception from the forked tongue of the serpent himself, than this one. For is it not labor to take up your cross and to deny yourself daily and follow Christ? Did Christ envision no labor whatsoever when he said, “narrow is the gate and

difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it?” Did not James say that a faith that does not work, and that does not labor, is dead, and thus no real faith at all?

Now don't misunderstand me, a man is truly justified, i.e. freely forgiven of all his sins and declared righteous in the courtroom of heaven by faith alone, even if it is a simple faith, even if it is a little faith, if it be a true faith. But that does not mean that good works are not necessary for salvation. Listen to the greatest theologian America has ever produced, Jonathan Edwards, on the role that good works play in our salvation:

“Men are not saved on . . . account of any work of theirs, and yet they are not saved without works. If we merely consider on the account of which men are saved, no work at all in men is necessary [for] their salvation. In this respect they are saved wholly without any work of theirs: Titus 3:5, ‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy [Spirit].’ We must indeed be saved on . . . account of works; but not our own. It is on account of the works which Christ [has] done for us. . . . *But, though it [is] not needful that we do anything to merit salvation, which Christ [has] fully merited for all who believe in him; yet God, for wise and holy ends, [has] appointed that we should come to final salvation in no other way, but that of good works done by us.*”

Good works, my fellow believers, are a necessary component of your salvation. Now, if Edwards had said that we come to a final justification instead of a final salvation, then there would be a serious problem. But he didn't say that, and he wouldn't say that, because

he is far too good a theologian to say such things. There is not a word in Scripture about a final justification, though some argue to the contrary. A man is completely justified in time and in history the moment he places his faith in Christ.

However, Edwards understood that in Scripture, salvation is used in both a narrow as well as a broader sense. In its narrow sense, it is used almost synonymously with the work of regeneration or the act of justification, which is how most people use the word today. The apostle Peter uses the word in such a way in Acts 15 when he declares how the Gentiles were “saved” when the Holy Spirit fell upon them and purified their hearts by faith. The apostle Paul also uses it in this narrow sense in Romans 10:10 when he writes, “For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” Also Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.”

But not infrequently, the Scriptures also refer to salvation in a broader or more comprehensive sense, i.e. as encompassing all the aspects of our complete salvation, from our effectual calling to our glorification. For example, the author of Hebrews writes in 9:28—so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time for salvation, without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await him (NAS). In like manner, the apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:5 that believers “are kept by the power of God through faith for [a] salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Our Lord Jesus

also, when speaking of the trials and afflictions that can quench the believers faith declared in Matthew 24:13—But he who endures to the end shall be saved.

In another instance, the apostle Paul turns his attention specifically towards the salvation of women in 1 Timothy 2:13-15 when he writes, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing *if* they continue in faith, love, holiness, with self-control.”

Now, some have tried to understand this passage as referring to a physical temporal salvation from death at the time of giving birth. But such a conjecture does not make any sense, seeing that there have been many godly women in history who have died while in labor.

No, what the apostle is saying in this passage is that though women have also been affected by the fall and are also born in sin just like men, and though the judgment that fell upon them as a result of the Fall in the garden was pain in child birth, yet women can also be saved though faith in Christ, though they must suffer the pains of labor, provided they continue in the way of salvation, i.e. if they continue in faith, love, holiness, with self-control. In other words, they can look forward to a completed and final salvation provided they continue in good works.

Thus, as one can see from these passages of Scripture there is a very real sense in which we are still awaiting a fully completed or final salvation. A salvation you and I have

not yet attained, and for which we must labor. And that is why the Scriptures are not lacking in warnings to the company of the faithful to persevere in good works. “For the just shall live by faith,” says the writer to the Hebrews, “*but* if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.”

What happened in the days of Noah, and the commission that was given to him, was in many ways a type for us of that salvation for which we must labor. Though God did not save Noah on account of the fact that he built the ark, i.e. because he built the ark, yet Noah could not have been saved from the waters of the flood had he not labored and built the ark according to God’s command. Noah was assured that God had saved him and would save him from the waters of the flood, and yet he labored for his salvation.

And how many have failed to enter into that eternal rest, of which Noah was only a type, and will yet fail to enter it, because they do not labor for their salvation? They do not labor to know whether they have truly been a recipient of saving grace. They fail to be diligent to add to their faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love, as the apostle Peter writes in 2 Peter 1; for if they would do such things and would abound in them, they would never stumble, and thus would make their calling and election sure.

But many do not labor, they do not labor in prayer to fight and overcome their sin, and so see progress in their sanctification. Yes, they may pray for a time and leave their sin

for a season, but then they go back to it again as a dog returns to its own vomit and as a pig to its wallowing in the mire. For every step they take forward to heaven they take two steps backward toward hell again.

The apostle Paul himself labored diligently for his salvation. Toward the end of 1 Corinthians 9 he confesses that he himself fights for it, i.e. not simply for a greater reward, but for salvation itself. “Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified [you could also translate that as *rejected*].” He uses the same word in Titus 1:16 of those who profess faith in Christ but who show no evidence of laboring for their salvation, “They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, *and disqualified*.”

Therefore, my dear believers, as Paul has well said, work out your [own] salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that you labor for an eternal “inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.” Remain faithful and diligent so that you may obtain as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your soul (1 Peter 1:9). As Jonathan Edwards has written, “Although we should live to a great age, our race and warfare will not be finished till death shall come . . . Past attainments and past success will not excuse us from what remains for the future, nor will they make future constant labor and care unnecessary to our salvation.”

Secondly, let us notice from our passage how the apostle Paul labored for the salvation of others. How the apostle Paul labored for the salvation of others.

Again, our verse states, “For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.”

This phrase, “labor and toil,” is really all encompassing, with regard to the life and ministry that the apostle Paul led for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. It was filled with labor and toil, with trouble and hardship, with difficulty and physical exertion; which are all various ways that these two words could be translated. The same two words are used in 2 Corinthians 11 where Paul gives a more detailed list of the things that he suffered for the sake of the gospel: here are a few of the things he mentions—in stripes above measure, in imprisonments, from the Jews he received 39 lashes five times, three times he was beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, a night and a day in the deep, in frequent journeys, in perils of robbers, in perils in the wilderness, in perils among false brethren, in weariness and toil [there’s our two words], in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and in nakedness.

Now, obviously many of these trials and hardships did not take place while in the city of Thessalonica itself. However, seeing that the apostle makes much of his labor and toil, both here in our passage and in his second letter to them, it is clear that his time among the Thessalonians was also very fatiguing as well.

Now in the middle of our verse, the apostle seems to be narrowing in specifically on the work itself that he did while in Thessalonica. In our NKJ Bible's, the verse states, "For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for *laboring* night and day. But in the Greek text the second word for labor is different. It is a word that is typically translated as work. And while this word for work has a broad range of meaning in Scripture, here the apostle most likely means the kind of work for which a person may be compensated. The apostle uses the same word in a similar context in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-11 when he writes to the same congregation the following, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies."

Furthermore, in our verse the apostle writes, "for laboring (i.e. working) night and day, that we might not be a *burden* to any of you." And what he means by that is a financial burden. One Greek dictionary defines the word, in this context, as meaning, "to be a fiscal burden on" someone. Etymologically speaking, the word is a compound of two words, "weight," and "upon." Thus, the apostle did not want, literally, put such a financial "weight upon" the Thessalonian congregation. Therefore he took no money from them for their services, but provided for his own necessities.

Paul repeats himself with regard to this matter in 2 Thessalonians 3:8 where he writes, "nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you."

We know from 2 Corinthians 8:2 that the churches in Macedonia, which included Thessalonica, suffered from deep poverty. And we also know from Philippians 4:16 that the church in Philippi sent monetary gifts more than once to Paul and his companions while they labored among the Thessalonians. But it was apparently still not enough, seeing they needed to work night and day to make enough money to supply for their needs.

We know according to Acts 18:3, that the apostle Paul was a tentmaker or leatherworker: A trade which he would have learned while in Tarsus in Silicia, and one which he frequently utilized on his journeys. Thus, the apostle was really doing two jobs while in Thessalonica, which explains why he says he had to work night and day. The phrase night and day probably suggests, not that he never slept, but that he typically began laboring before dawn and worked until after dark.

But notice from this passage that the apostle did whatever it took to advance the kingdom of God, to labor for the salvation of souls. He did not want anything to come in the way of reaching the lost with the gospel and of building up the saints through his ministry, even though it was his right to ask for payment, and to lay such financial burdens upon them. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9, “Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? . . . If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? . . . Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.”

Paul saw to it that nothing would become a hindrance to the furtherance of the gospel. He did not say, “Because you cannot pay me what is my due, I will no longer preach to you.” He did not short-cut the time he spent laboring among them, or ministering to them. In fact, he wanted to stay a lot longer with them than he was able.

And this I think is critical for all of us to realize, it is fundamental to the message of the gospel itself. The key to laboring for the kingdom of Christ and the salvation of others is to forget about yourself in the way the apostle Paul did. To forget about what should be coming to you. What is your due. What you should receive.

A close examination of Paul’s letters will reveal that the apostle took very little thought for his well-being or livelihood. He was too consumed with the thought of the salvation of others. With the well-being and the promotion of godliness in others. He gladly labored on behalf of others in order to see them saved, as he writes in 2 Corinthians 12:14-15—Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours but you [i.e. not what I can get from you, but what I can give to you] And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls.

Thirdly, let us consider how it is that we can labor for the salvation of others. How we can labor for the salvation of others.

Be it known to you dear congregation, that the Great Commission does extend to all of us. The divine commission from Christ to go into all the world and share the good news with every creature, though mediated through His apostles and ministers, is a mandate, the

burden of which, we should all feel. Not only must we labor for our own salvation, but we must also labor for the salvation of others.

And though Paul was an apostle, and single, and thus could labor for the salvation of others unlike the average believer, or even the average minister, yet all of us can and should in many ways labor for the salvation of others. In all that we say and do, we should be asking ourselves the question, “Is this advancing the kingdom of God?” “Am I laboring in such a way so as to promote the salvation and godliness of others?”

And I trust that you all do this in many ways already without thinking about it. Though you do not labor and toil as did the apostle Paul, and feel the weakness and fatigue of his many labors. Yet if you are a believer, you cannot help but labor to some degree for the salvation of others. Here is a list of at least four ways that you are laboring and may improve your labors for the salvation of others.

1. In your day to day life, and in your employment, as you are a faithful witness for Christ, you are laboring for the salvation of others.

If, in all that you do, you do it for the glory of God, with the joy of the Lord in your heart; if you do what you are called to do ethically and uprightly, and are being a good witness to others, then you are laboring in such a way as will not hinder the salvation of others, but rather promote it. Perhaps you have even had someone come up to you that you didn't even know very well, and ask you, “Are you a Christian?,” because of the way you carry yourself. Because of your joyful countenance. Because of your godly work ethic.

Because you do not join in when people are gossiping about others. Because they don't hear filthy language come out of your mouth. Because others see that you are gladly willing to serve, that you are doing your job more for what you can give to others, rather than for what you can get from them. Such a godly work ethic itself can provide a door of opportunity to witness to others. And when you approach others with the message of the gospel, they may be more willing to listen because they see a life lived out that is consistent with your profession of faith.

In contrast to this, how dreadful it is when there are those who say that they are Christians and are not diligent in their work. They do not do their work as unto the Lord. They sluff off their responsibilities. They are habitually late. They have no respect nor regard for the authority which God has established in the workplace. Such are not laboring for the salvation of others, but rather their damnation. They are putting a stumbling block in the way of others. For they claim to know Christ and to follow Him, while at the same time it is evident that they do not live for Christ. Such a horrible witness will hinder and in fact has hindered many from coming to know the Savior. And the name of Christ is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of such as these.

2. By faithfully fulfilling your God-given role in the family, you are laboring for the salvation of others. [And this would apply especially to spouses and parents.]

Those of you who are fathers and mothers, when you labor to provide, and protect, and nourish, and serve, and train up your little ones, you are laboring for their salvation. As

you work to provide for their needs, as you love and serve one another. As you teach and discipline your children, you are laboring for their salvation. Therefore, see to it, that you labor with all your might, knowing that it is for the salvation of your children that you labor. When you lead family worship, when you invest your time into your children, you are laboring for their salvation.

Many men labor in the workplace, and they labor only to provide for their families physically and materially. But they do not labor for them spiritually. For example, some men work so many hours at their job that they do not have time for their children. When they labor so much as to rarely see them, they are not laboring for their salvation. What does it matter if you labor to provide your children with bread, when you fail to feed them with the bread of life.

Those of you who are married, when you labor so as to serve one another and to provide for one another and to meet each others needs, then you are laboring for one another's salvation. When you are an example to one another, and hold one another accountable, and seek to edify one another through the Word of God, you are laboring for one another's salvation. And even if you are married to an unbeliever, you can labor for the salvation of your spouse by your godly conduct around them. As the apostle Paul has written in 1 Corinthians 7:16, "For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?"

3. When you pray diligently for others, you are laboring for their salvation.

Anyone who does not think effectual and fervent praying is laborious has not yet learned how to pray. Monica labored in prayer for many years for the salvation of her son St. Augustine before he finally came to Christ. And what a harvest of fruitfulness came about as a result of her labors. The apostle Paul writes in Colossians 4:12, “Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.” My fellow believers, always remember that even when you are old and weak, and cannot move so much as one of your muscles, yet to your dying day you can always labor for the kingdom of God. You can labor in prayer for the salvation of others.

4. When you give the money you have earned for the advancement of the kingdom of God, you are laboring for the salvation of others.

When you give to the church, and to the work of missions, and to the work of various other ministries, you are giving your earnings for the sake of the advancement of the kingdom of God, and thus you are a partner with them, and are laboring alongside of them, for the salvation of others. Therefore, labor in such a way that you can give as much as you can to the advancement of the kingdom of Christ.

Fourthly, and finally, and most importantly, let us take notice of how Christ labored for our salvation. How it is that Christ labored for our salvation.

When God placed Adam in the garden to tend it and keep it, his work was relatively speaking, easy. It was not burdensome or laborious work. He did not have to toil until the

sweat dripped from his face, before the ground would yield its increase. And his avoidance of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was also not laborious, for he was created morally upright and was inclined to all good. Had not the serpent beguiled Eve in the first place, he might have actually secured the eternal salvation of the entire human race.

But after Adam's fall into sin in the garden, all of that changed. From that moment on, all of man's labors were under the curse. And in order for Christ, the last Adam, to redeem us from the curse, he had to labor for our salvation under the curse. No one has ever labored for the salvation of others like Christ did.

Though the first Adam was forced to till the ground in the midst of thorns and thistles, yet the last Adam was forced to wear a crown of thorns upon His brow. And though the first Adam had to till the ground, and labor, until the sweat poured down his face, yet the last Adam had to labor so intensely for our salvation that He sweat, as it were, great drops of blood. Christ bore the burden of our salvation, because it was a weight that we could not hold. And whereas our labors are a fruit of our salvation, an evidence of the work of grace in the heart, Christ's labors actually accomplished and secured our salvation. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, "He [i.e. the Heavenly Father] shall see the *labor* of His [Son's] soul and be satisfied."

My dear congregation, Christ labored for your salvation. Will you labor for Him? Will you labor for the salvation of souls? Without doubt, one of the main reasons that God has placed us here, and has planted this tiny congregation in the city of Harrisonburg, is the

salvation of others. And if all of us, as a church body, will indeed labor for the advancement of Christ's kingdom and for the salvation of others, then I am fully persuaded that our gospel ministry, here at Grace and Truth, will not be in vain.