

IS IT WORTH WANTING?

"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" (I Corinthians 15:58).

In the course of a conversation a retired businessman said, "I have gotten most of the things I wanted to get from life. I worked hard for them." And somewhat wistfully he added, "I have also discovered that many of them were not worth having." That is a thought-starter isn't it? What a tragedy it is for one to come to his later years and realize that for much of his life he has been on the wrong road, pursuing the wrong objectives, and seeking the wrong goals. Alas, that is the experience of many.

Surely our days on earth are not supposed to end that way. Life should end with a shout of triumph, rather than with a whisper of disappointment. Life should not end on the note which is sounded in Ecclesiastes, but on the note of the last verse of the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians.

So this is very important business that I am talking about, and the younger we are when we face up to it the better.

What one wants determines in significant fashion what he is going to be. Great achievements are the result of great aspirations.

If we are going to grow, we must work in the area of those things that will make us grow. We must move beyond the little answers to the big questions, recognizing all the while that what life becomes for us will be determined very largely by what we have been looking for.

Are you certain that what you want is really worth looking for and striving to achieve?

To answer that question we must have a standard of values. And for the person who aspires and seeks Christ made very clear what is expected. He gave us the standard by which to judge ourselves. Is it worth wanting? Take a real look at Christ and see. In the Sermon on the Mount He asked, "Is not the life more than meat, and the body more than raiment?"

Those who conform to the will of Christ are not those whose primary goal in life is to look out for their own personal interests, or whose primary purpose is to make a name for themselves or to acquire a fortune. Rather they are the ones who believe, and live according to the belief, that he who would be greatest must be servant. Is what you want from life worth wanting? How does it measure against the standard which Christ has set?

What do you want most in life? For the maintenance of physical life there are four absolute necessities -- oxygen, water, food, and sleep. Without air one cannot live. Shut it off, and almost immediately begins the torture of suffocation. One may survive longer without water. One may survive still longer without food, but what a terrifying sight starvation is. One may survive still longer without sleep. But these four necessities are strangely and strongly related.

If life is to be more and better than bare existence, there are other necessities besides oxygen, water, food, and sleep. If life is to be well-rounded, fruitful, and happy, we must have more than bread to live by. "Man shall not live by bread alone."

What do you want in life? Do you want a roof over your head, food for your body, and a bed for rest? Having these only, you would be poor indeed, if you lacked human love, a chance to serve, a goal toward which to strive, and God in Whom to place your trust.

Friends are a real necessity in life. Who would want to live long without them? Unconsciously we lean upon them; they are a vital part of our innermost being. Every person needs a great ambition. Woe be unto the man who never hears a high call, and in whose ears never sounds a mighty shout of challenge. Woe be unto such a man, for his character has in it a fatal defect, something vital has been left out. All of the physical necessities, however abundantly supplied, are not enough.

Every person needs to be connected to that which is bigger and grander than the world. He needs to be properly related to God.

Our Lord gave a prominent place to Christian service when He taught those whom He had saved. He calls people and wins them to Himself by His saving grace, not only that their souls may be saved for time and eternity, but that their lives may be saved and lived in dedicated service for Him. Where there is real heart surrender on the part of the child of God, there is no limit to the service that may be rendered for Christ. It was to Christian service that Paul called Christians in Corinth when he wrote: "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."

Here Paul relates his exhortation to what has gone before, and says, "Therefore," because this thing is true, and for this reason, I exhort you to do thus and so. There ought always to be a reason for what we do.

This text directs our attention to three things of great importance.

I. Consistent Steadfastness.

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable." One is almost tempted to ask if these words -- "steadfast" and "unmovable" have any application to present-day conditions. There isn't much steadfastness and stability left in our world. The world in which we have our being is constantly on the move. We are treated to a series of dissolving views and transforming scenes. The thoughts, convictions, and practices of our fathers are thrown off like worn-out clothes, and hardly anything remains unchanged except the solid globe, the everlasting hills, the rolling oceans, the firmament of sun and stars, God, and His precious Word. You cannot point to any department or sphere of life in which there is stability of thought, unity of mind, and steadfastness of convictions. Ebb-and-flow Christians are as common as sea-shells. To them life is the unprogressive change of advance and recede: today quite earnest, and tomorrow very indifferent.

What a tonic, and an inspiration, to meet with steadfast people, those whose characters are inherently strong and unchangeable! You can always depend on a "steadfast" person. He is always the same. Alas, there are so many changeable people. There is a word that is very frequently used to describe certain people, and that is "unpredictable." You may have them with you today, but God alone knows where on earth they will be tomorrow. They are standing for one thing today, and tomorrow they may be found standing for the very opposite. They do not have any steadfastness.

One of the outstanding needs today in God's work is men and women who will remain steadfast and consistent in their service for Christ. Sometimes you meet people and they are very enthusiastic for Christ, then another time when you meet them you are chilled by their cold indifference.

This quality of steadfastness is indispensable to usefulness in any walk of life. The person who is inconstant, variable, and lacking dependability will soon find himself out of the running. Knowing that the steadfastness of Christians would be tried, Paul urges them to remain unmovable. Paul challenged the Corinthians to refuse to be subject to external influences, or to be driven or carried out by every wind of doctrine. Have you ever been in the desert in Arizona? If so, you have seen a bit of stuff similar to heather. It has a little life in it. It is superficially rooted in the sand. It draws a little nourishment on which it lives. Then a strong breeze comes up, picks it up, and rolls it along over the desert sands. The breeze dies down, and it stops rolling. Then it puts out its roots, and stays there until the next breeze comes along. Then it goes traveling on. There are some people like that, always on the move, always transplanting themselves. They are movable, always running after some new thing, like the Athenians, who "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing." Christians should not respond to every effort made from without to take them off here and there and everywhere. Rather than be like the worthless stuff that the wind blows across the desert, one should be like the oak which is steadfast when the summer breeze is playing in its branches, and unmovable when the winter storm howls and the tempest roars.

II. Continuing Service.

"Always abounding in the work of the Lord." The work in which we are engaged is "the work of the Lord." We are working for the Lord Who loved us and gave Himself for us. Our work is that which He has entrusted to us. Since God has given you a work to do for Him, you should press forward faithfully in it. What are you doing for the Lord Jesus Christ? Each of us should abound in the work of the Lord, that is, do all that is possible for Him. Try to do an extra bit for Him. We are not saved by our works, but by grace alone. But, over and above the gift of grace, we are to be rewarded for our works. Some start to work, then suddenly get tired, and quit. After that you can't get anything out of them.

It is not a question of how little we can do for the Lord and get by with it, but how much we can work for Him. Working for Christ is not to be a hobby, or a pleasant and interesting occupation for our spare time, but it is an exacting and arduous engagement. We must work in harmony with the Lord, and in obedience to His will. We must labor in unbroken fellowship with Him, and in dependence on Him for the strength that is needed. We should ever be dissatisfied with less than our best. There is always so much chaff trying to find its way into the wheat -- trying to make us settle for lesser values.

A man should live in the light of that which by God's grace he can become and do. He must ever keep his ears open to God's commands. He must see himself as a servant of God, even as did Stradivarius in George Elliot's poem:

"When any master holds
'Twixt chin and hand a violin of mine,
He will be glad that Stradivari lived
Made violins, and made them of the best ...
The masters only know whose work is good;
They will choose mine, and while God gives them skill,
I give them instruments to play upon,
God choosing me to help Him."

III. Certain Success.

"Forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." Paul did not have any doubts about this. His assurance was absolute. Those who labor with and for Christ will not go unrewarded. God has guaranteed success to those who work with and for Him. When you bear a testimony for Him it is not wasted time and energy. When you personally witness to someone it will not be in vain. Did you teach the Word of God this morning in your class? Then your labor is not in vain. How do I know? Because God says so. He accepts our service, and will see to it that it will bring forth fruit in His own good time. It is not in vain because it is in the Lord. Many a man has erected some great commercial structure of which he is quite proud: he has done something in the realm of the temporal which has brought him credit among his fellows. But the day will come when all of that will vanish, and the only thing that will be left to him, that will give him abiding satisfaction is the labor that he has rendered for the Lord. That will not be in vain. The influence of your work for Him will live on after you have departed this life.

"I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth -- I knew not where.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth -- I knew not where.

Long, long afterward in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend."

As surely as you are faithful in working with and for the Lord, He will give you success and appropriate rewards. Success may not come at once. It may not come in the way that you expect. It is even possible that you will never see the result of your labor while you are here on earth, but true labor for the Lord will never be in vain.

If we relate everything to God as we should, it will take the littleness and drudgery out of what we do. It will ennoble life in a wonderful way.

You have probably heard the story of the sculptor who began to carve the figure of a small cherub high up in the great cathedral. He gave all of his skill to it, and he gave so much time to it that his fellow workmen began to laugh at him. "Why spend so much time on something that will not be seen?" one workman said; and another laughed and remarked, "Why, only the sparrows will see it, hidden in that little niche." Then the sculptor answered, "Only the sparrows -- and God." It seems to me that here is one of the most profound conceptions of good workmanship that could possibly come to us. You and I live obscure lives and give our time to such little things, but if God knows, what matters all the striving for human praise and popularity? "The sparrows and God." If the sparrows and God see your life and mine, we ought to be satisfied. What more exacting scrutiny could it have? Certainly it ought to put inspiration into our work. But let us do our best for the Lord, with this in mind: that if it is planned for God's sight, and done for His approval, the opinions of men do not matter. It is God's approval and blessing that counts.