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Encouragement to Persevere: An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 15:58

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THERE ARE MANY things that can discourage a Christian worker. Low financial support, struggling family members, and conflicts between team members have disheartened many. Others become dispirited by a seeming lack of effectiveness or few visible results. Then, sometimes personal crises such as emotional, health, or spiritual issues lead God's servants to give up.

The apostle Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles, was one who experienced these pressures. He was short on his funding at times.¹ He had conflict with team members such as John Mark and Barnabas in Acts 15:37-40. He was driven out of cities, placed in prison, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, and faced other challenges

(cf. 2 Cor. 11:16-33).² Then, there were times where he writes of how he despaired of life (2 Cor. 1:8-11) and felt great anguish from his 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Cor. 12:1-10).³ Clearly, he was a person who faced pressures that would have caused most to quit.

At the end of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15:58 which reads,

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.⁴

1 2 Cor. 11:8-9; Philp. 4:17-18.

2 See also Acts 13:51; 14:19-20; 16:16-24; 27:39-44.

3 For further detail on Paul's distress in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, see M. J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 164-182. For a detailed survey of the potential options for Paul's thorn in the flesh see M. E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), pp. 809-818.

4 All citations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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This verse has been of great encouragement to Christians from the times of the church fathers.⁵ In our modern times, it has been adapted for singing in worship to encourage believers. A further exploration of this verse further magnifies how hopeful this verse actually is.

I Be characterized by steadfastness and immovability

The first part of 1 Corinthians 15:58 provides two characteristics that Paul would like the Corinthians to have—being steadfast and immovable. The verse provides us with two predicate adjectives *herdraios* and *ametakinētos*. As predicate adjectives they supply the qualities that Paul is encouraging in believers. It is worth considering the meaning of these two qualities for a moment. The word steadfast means: being unwavering, resolute, or unswerving. The word immovable also implies similar things: being firmly fixed, permanent, and resolute, almost in a stubborn way. Together, these provide the sense of ‘hold the line, don’t give in’.

In our day these are not the types of qualities that many encourage. Parents do not usually encourage children to be immovable, unwavering, inflexible, or stubborn. In general, children are encouraged to be just the opposite, namely, compliant and submissive. Teachers and coaches, likewise, do not

generally encourage these things either. Yet, this is what Paul encourages the Corinthians to be in what are some of his final commands in this letter.

What makes this text even more striking is that Paul commands the Corinthians to be steadfast and immovable! With the exception of the severe problems with the Galatians,⁶ the Corinthian congregation probably had the most problems of any church mentioned in the New Testament. These problems included the following: the desire to divide, fascination with secular wisdom, an incestuous relationship, an inability to discipline, and civil litigation within the church. Then, the Corinthians were confused about many things such as: strong and weak brothers, women’s roles, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection. To top it off, they were even resistant to Paul’s role amongst them.

Paul has taken fifteen chapters to address these problems and correct them, using some very strong wording (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:8-16; 5:1-13). To conclude by encouraging the Corinthians who have so many problems and challenges to be steadfast and immovable seems very out of place. One could make sense of encouraging the Philippians, a congregation that supported him in many ways, to be steadfast. It could also be sensible to encourage the Thessalonians who became faithful to the gospel after just a short period of

⁵ See G. Bray, *1-2 Corinthians* (Ancient Christian Commentary Series 7; Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), p. 184.

⁶ While the problems are less numerous, Galatians is the only letter where Paul skips the customary thanksgiving section and warns his hearer that they are leaving the gospel (Gal. 1:6-10).

time to be immovable. To encourage the Corinthians who had so many problems and so much confusion, to be steadfast and immovable, seems to contradict much of the letter. It seems that the Corinthians would be one of the last groups of Christians in the New Testament who ought to be encouraged in this way.

The immediate context of 1 Corinthians, however, comes to the rescue, helping to place Paul's command to be steadfast and immovable in proper perspective. Paul gives this command, following his explanation of the future. In 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 Paul writes,

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

As the passage continues, Paul pronounces that death will also be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54-57). It is in the light of these certainties that Paul can thus encourage the Corinthians to be steadfast and immovable.

It is likely that a broader context for this verse is in mind, too, as commentators have noticed.⁷ From the begin-

ning of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the gospel that he preached. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 he says,

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

The tone of these verses, also, encourages the Corinthians to remain steadfast and immovable. (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-2). Thus, seen in proper context, these commandments to be steadfast and immovable do make sense. That is, the impression Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 15:58 read in context is that the proper steadfastness, the proper immovability, and yes, perhaps even the proper stubbornness and obstinacy is worth excelling in. Since this commandment is found following his explanation of the gospel, the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ and future believers, it implies that perseverance in the right matters will ultimately win out over even the greatest of problems.

The power of appropriate perseverance is amazing. Paul is not alone in noting its power. For example, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe also believed in its importance. Goethe was a poet, novelist, dramatist, scientist, theorist, painter, and for ten years minister of state for the duchy of Weimar. He was one of the key figures of German literature in the late 18th and 19th centuries for works such as the classical drama *Faust*. His ideas became a primary source of inspiration in music, drama, poetry, and philosophy. About

⁷ Cf. A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK/Carlisle: Eerdmanns/Paternoster, 2000), p. 1305; G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 808; D. Watson, 'Paul's Rhetorical Strategy in 1 Cor 15' in S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht (eds.), *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (JSNTSS 90; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 231-49.

perseverance Goethe has this to say,

There are but two roads that lead to an important goal and to the doing of great things: strength and perseverance. Strength is the lot of but a few privileged men; but austere perseverance, harsh and continuous, may be employed by the smallest of us and rarely fails of its purpose, for its silent power grows irresistibly greater with time.⁸

Goethe's ideas here seem very similar to Paul's—steadfastness and immovability in the right things indeed allow one to overcome.

Perseverance even in the midst of apparent failure can be very powerful. Thomas Alva Edison was an American inventor and businessman who greatly influenced life in the twentieth century. Indeed, he is considered one of the most prolific inventors in all of history, holding 1,097 US patents as well as patents in the UK, France, and Germany. His inventions include improvements upon printing telegraph apparatus, relay magnets, chemical telegraphy, phonographs, dynamo-magnetic electric machines, and the telephone.

Of course, he will most be remembered for the invention of the first commercially practical, electric light bulb. This was a device that he worked on for many years. In the midst of his work to produce a practical light bulb, Edison's attempts failed to come to fruition many times. Yet, despite the setbacks Thomas Edison had this to say, 'We haven't failed. We now know a thou-

sand things that won't work, so we're that much closer to finding what will.' His perseverance, immovability, and stubbornness in right things saw him through these difficulties. Indeed, he believed in steadfastness so much that he left us with this very noteworthy quote. 'Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.' True genius comes from the characteristics of steadfastness and immovability.

Indeed, steadfastness and immovability in the right things is very worthwhile. If this is the case for inventions and brilliant literature, then how much more is it true for those serving in the ministry. With the certainty of Christ's death and resurrection as well as the certainty of the future resurrection, it is worth being characterized by steadfastness and immovability. Persevering in the right way and the right things does result in blessing (cf. 1 Tim. 4:16).⁹

II Be abounding in God's work

Following his encouragement to the Corinthians to be characterized by steadfastness and immovability, he then proceeds in our verse to encourage an activity—to be continually doing the Lord's work.

The aspect of frequency can be seen from the Greek text. Continuous activity in God's service is indicated by the present participle form of the verb

⁸ The quotations from Goethe and Edison are taken from M. Water (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

⁹ Cf. 1 Timothy 4:16 which says, 'Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.'

perisseuō, the word for 'abounding.' Since this participle is found in the present tense, it indicates continuous activity. This frequent activity is furthered by Paul's use of the adverb *pan-tote*,—'always'. Together these nuances from the Greek text encourage the repeated activity of being involved in God's work.

In other places of his writing, Paul also encourages Christians to be constantly involved in God's work. For example he says,

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more (I Thess. 4:1).

To the Colossians, Paul encourages frequency in doing God's work—'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3:17). Then again, in Romans 14:8, Paul writes, 'If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.' Thus, this encouragement to be abounding in God's work is one that is found throughout Paul's letters as an activity in which Christians are to busy themselves continually.

While Paul does not state it directly in our verse, there is blessing to be found in hard work. Throughout the ages, great men and women have known this. For example, the Greek comic dramatist Menander (342 BC–292 BC) wrote, 'He who labors diligently need never despair; for all things are accomplished by diligence and labor.' Many hundreds of years

later, Samuel Johnson, the English author, critic, and lexicographer said, 'Few things are impossible to diligence and skill. Great works are performed not by strength, but perseverance.' Even more recently, Colin Powell, former United States general and Secretary of State said, 'There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.'

Paul probably would have noticed the benefits that emerge from diligence as a result of his Jewish background. As one well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures with a mind saturated with Jewish Scripture that influenced his writing consciously or unconsciously, he would have been familiar with texts that promoted diligence.¹⁰ For example, Proverbs 10:4 states, 'A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.' Proverbs 13:4 says something similar, 'The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.' These are a few of numerous verses within the Proverbs that speak of the benefits to come to the one who is industrious (e.g., Prov. 6:9–11; 12:24; 21:5).

Of course, there is much work for the Lord in which Christians can be busy. Within the church there are many needs. When I served as a pastor, there

¹⁰ For other studies where Paul's Jewish background influences his writing consciously or subconsciously in 1 Corinthians, see B. S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics* (AGJU 22; Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 15–17; H. H. D. Williams, *The Wisdom of the Wise: the presence and function of Scripture within 1 Cor. 1:18–3:23* (AGJU 49; Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 21–34.

were always more visits to homebound and shut-in members of the church to make. There were always more events to attend for youth to encourage them. Visitors and sporadically attending members needed to be contacted. Then, more time needed to be invested to help parishioners understand the Bible. There always seemed as if there was more work to do than could be accomplished.

Outside of the church, there is work to be done as well, including the great task of world evangelization. The world's population is over 6 billion people, and over two-thirds are not professing Christians. Many have not even had the opportunity to hear of Jesus Christ as Saviour. There are still nearly 3,500 people groups that have few if any Christians amongst them. While every country has a Christian witness, there are ten countries without a visible congregation. Eighteen countries have a resident Christian population of less than 1%, and a further 22 countries have a resident Christian population of less than 5%.¹¹

Then, there is the need to positively influence social problems. Over 1 billion people, approximately 1 out of every 6 people in the world, live in poverty.¹² Approximately 852 million

people in the world are hungry.¹³ There are 200 million Christians, too, who are persecuted for the faith who need support as well.¹⁴ Other issues such as the mistreatment of women and children, lack of education, the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, as well as other social issues deserve Christian influence.

Indeed, the needs are plentiful but the labourers are few (cf. Matt. 9:37). There is much good work in which to abound in this hour. Certainly, the benefits of being diligent in this type of labour will be rewarded.

III Christian labour will be rewarded at the end of time

We come now to the final part of Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 15:58. The first part contained two attitudes to have—steadfastness and immovability. The second part encouraged an action—'always abounding in the work of the Lord'. The third part of this verse encourages something for Christians to believe—'knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain'.

This belief provides a basis for the two attitudes and one action Paul wants the Corinthians to enjoy. Paul uses the Greek participle *eidotes* to introduce this matter of believing. It is most likely that Paul is using this participle causatively, providing a reason

¹¹ The statistics are from *Operation World*, a well-known resource for evangelism. P. Johnstone and J. Mandryk, *Operation World* (6th edition; Carlisle: Paternoster/WEC International, 2001), pp. 15-16.

¹² Statistics are taken from the organizations World Bank and Netaid. See http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2005/Table2_5.html. See http://www.netaid.org/global_poverty/global-poverty.html.

¹³ Statistics are taken from the organization Bread for the World and Bread for the World Institute. <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-basics/hunger-facts-international.html>.

¹⁴ The statistic is from Lausanne and <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/worldreports/540>.

for the attitudes and the actions that he wants the Corinthians to have and to perform. Some versions, such as the New Revised Standard, translate this participle more causatively, saying, 'Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, *because* you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.'¹⁵

This belief that God will reward people at the end of time is an idea that has been found throughout the context of 1 Corinthians. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 Paul writes,

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

In the following chapter, Paul writes again about the certainty that the future will bring reward and judgment for Christians. In 1 Corinthians 4:5 he writes,

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will

receive his commendation from God.

This is a significant motivation for Paul in this letter as well as in other portions of his writing (cf. Rom. 2:1-10; 2 Thess. 1:5-12). It is this belief that provides the basis for steadfast and immovable attitudes as well as constant activity in the Lord's work.

At some points in history, Christians have especially valued this belief. Such an expectation was particularly influential on a group of Christians living in the nineteenth century called the Clapham Sect. This small group of Christians influenced the life of Victorian Britain immensely. Amongst its members were William Wilberforce who was devoted to the abolition of slavery and the reformation of morals in Britain.¹⁶ For forty-five years he struggled against this evil in British society, finally achieving the passage of the Abolition of Slavery Bill in 1833.¹⁷ His dogged determination and constant activity to abolish the slave trade can be traced to the influence of this group.

John Venn who was the Rector of the Clapham Sect, laid much stress in his sermons on moral accountability to God. His emphasis on moral account-

¹⁵ When Paul uses *eidotes* on other occasions, the ESV translates it causatively in places. Note how the ESV translates this participle causatively in 2 Cor. 1:7; 1 Thess. 1:4.

¹⁶ Other influential leaders in the Clapham Sect included: Edward James Elliot (Parliamentarian), Charles Grant (Chairman of the directors of the British East India Company), Hannah Moore (writer and philanthropist), and Lord Teignmouth (Governor-General of India).

¹⁷ For a presentation of his views on these see W. Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity: Personal Faith as a call to Political Responsibility* (K. Belmonte, ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996).

ability led R.C.K. Ensor, a journalist of his times, to write about Evangelical Christianity in nineteenth century Britain in the following way:

[A characteristic of Evangelicalism is]... its certainty about the existence of an after-life of rewards and punishments. If one asks how nineteenth-century English merchants earned the reputation of being the most honest in the world... the answer is: because hell and heaven seemed as certain to them as tomorrow's sunrise, and the Last Judgment as real as the week's balance-sheet.¹⁸

This viewpoint affected members of Clapham radically. Henry Thornton, a Member of Parliament, explained at one time the reason for his vote, 'I voted today so that if my Master had come again at that moment I might have been able to give an account of my stewardship.'¹⁹ William Wilberforce and other members of Clapham could have said the same thing. An awareness of the kingdom that will come at the end of time was a driving motivation for these influential Christians of the nineteenth century. It influenced them to be steadfast and immovable in the face of great opposition and constant in their work for the Lord.

IV Conclusion

The message from 1 Corinthians 15:58

is an encouraging one. Paul urges Christians then and now to have steadfast and immovable attitudes—stubborn for the Lord. He also encourages us to be busy for God, excelling in the great work that needs to be done in his name. Finally, he encourages Christians to remember the Lord who will reward us, for he will reward the faithfulness of Christians at the end of time.

In the fourth century A.D., an anonymous author that Erasmus later named Ambrosiaster lived at a time when it would be natural to be discouraged. He wrote following the apostasy of Emperor Julian, who fell away from the Christian faith and embraced a religion called Theurgy, a pagan religion concerned with magic and ritual. Naturally, the apostasy of a high official could lead others to do the same. In the face of this, Ambrosiaster could still write this concerning our verse, 1 Corinthians 15:58,

Those who persevere in a life of faith and good works have the assurance that they will be accepted by God and receive their reward and that they will not be led astray by wicked arguments.²⁰

In a time when many Christians can be discouraged, may the truths of 1 Corinthians 15:58 motivate us to serve the Lord with more persistent attitudes and more abundant service in the light of the certain future judgment and reward that will be found in Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 137-138.

¹⁹ M. Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), p. 207.

²⁰ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles in Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (Academia Scientiarum Austriaca: Vienna, 1866), 81:187. Translation provided by G. Bray, *1-2 Corinthians*, p. 184.