Labouring in the Lord

Our New Testament reading for today describes the honour that ought to be given to those who labour in spiritual things:

> "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who ***labour in the word and doctrine"*** (1 Tim. 5:17).

And the importance of the doctrine is expressed in the preceding chapter:

> "take heed unto thyself and ***unto the doctrine;*** continue in them: for in doing this, thou shalt both ***save*** thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16).

Bound up in these words then, is the promise of salvation: as we shall see later, those who do not "labour" in, and "take heed" to the doctrine will be workmen that do need to be ashamed (2 Tim. 2:15). For our exhortation today, we shall endeavour to consider this aspect of labouring in the Lord: labouring in the word and doctrine.

Labouring in the Word implies also labouring to perform that word, not being hearers only. So the Lord describes those who do the things that his word commands:

> "... whosoever ***heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them,*** I will liken him unto a wise man which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the wind blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock"

But conversely, he likens those who neglect the performing of the word they have heard:

> "and everyone that ***heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not,*** shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell, and great was the fall of it" (Mat. 7:24-27).

Notice that both men were labouring builders: they both built a house, evidently of the same design: the difference was the foundation. It is easier to build upon sand than it is to dig down to the rock, but the easy option is not aways the best option. For those who built with no regard to the instructions of Messiah their house fell, and "great was the fall of it". But those who dug deep, and had a sure foundation, their house was preserved despite the stormy trials that came upon it.

The context of this parable is also highly significant: it immediately follows a statement that an acceptance of Messiah's Lordship is not enough by itself:

> "May will say to me in that day, ***Lord, Lord,*** have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast our devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Mat. 7:22-23).

There are those who reject this principle, claiming that salvation is by Grace alone, and that we are therefore not saved by works. But to say this, is to confusingly mix truth and error! Indeed, the Scriptures do teach that "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). However, the Bible also teaches that if we are alive, we must demonstrate that faith in the things that we do:

> "Even so faith, if it hath not works, ***is dead,*** being alone" (Jas. 2:17)

And again:

> "but wilt thou know, O vain man, that ***faith without works is dead?*** (Jas. 2:20)

And further still:

> "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so ***faith without works is dead also"*** (Jas. 2:26).

True, it is that Grace that saves, through faith – but that doesn't mean that works have no place. A living tree will provide fruit – a dead tree cannot. If we believe the Gospel message, we must obey it also: "be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (Jas. 1:22).

LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

The aspect of labouring is again brought out by the Master in his parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. In this parable, a householder "went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard" (Mat. 20:1-2). A little later about the third hour, he saw others "standing idle" in the market place, and recruited them also, "and said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you". He did the same about the sixth and ninth hour, and on the eleventh hour, he went out again" and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us" (vs. 5-7). He subsequently hired them also.

At the end of the day, each man was given that which had been agreed: a penny. This was given both to those who had laboured all day, as well as those who had worked for a much shorter period, just one hour. But those who had laboured all day assumed that they had an entitlement to more than the others: "when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more: and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, the murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but on hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day" (vs. 11-12).

Here, those who laboured the most thought that they had an entitlement to more than those who laboured for a short time. The Penny, it is suggested by brother Roberts, represents the resurrection from the dead. They had a legal entitlement to the penny, as it was their agreed wages (vs 2, cp Rom. 4). The ungrateful murmured and wanted more, yet were sent away (vs 14). And the lesson drawn out from the parable is: "So the last

shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen" (vs 16). This would seem to fit the resurrection, which will take place for all who are accountable – yet only a few will be finally "chosen", and given everlasting life. The others who are not grateful will be sent away. There will be some who have endured the heat of the sun in their labours for many years, and there will be others who have just been baptised recently: both will be rewarded equally, and they will enter the kingdom with great joy, gladness, and thankfulness.

LABOUR NOT TO BE RICH

The proverb advises us: "labour not to be rich" (Prov. 23:4), where the word "labour" signifies to "wear out", hence some modern translations render it accordingly. We see an illustration of this in men and women of the world, who exert all their energies into labouring in order to accrue wealth and this world's goods. They wear themselves out in their worldly endeavours, and have no time or energy – or desire – to do the things of God. Brethren of Christ, however, have a different focus: "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Mat. 6:33) is the commandment of the Lord. The proverb continues to describe the transient nature of riches: " ... wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven" (Prov. 23:5). Truly it is written that: "wisdom is a defence, and money is a defense but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it" (Eccl. 7:12). But in order to benefit from the excellency of knowledge, we must labour in the Word and the Doctrine!

The Lord himself exhorted: "labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you ..." (Jno. 6:27). We must be as workmen, labouring in the vineyard to obtain the promised blessing.

The Apostle wrote: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, righty dividing the word of Truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The implication being, that if we do not so study, we will be workmen who do need to be ashamed. And the Greek word "study" signifies *effort*. We must not approach the Word of God in a casual way, only reading it when we please – we must use much effort in seeking out the hidden treasures thereof. We must diligently refer to it constantly, absorbing it into our minds and thinking.

Luke 17:10 cites the Lord as saying: "... so likewise ye, when ye shall have done all these things which I have commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have don that which was our duty to do". Here the word "unprofitable" really signifies "unworthy". That is, if we do the commandments of Christ, we cannot boast as if we have done some great work – as we saw earlier, there will be those who suppose they have an entitlement to the Kingdom on the basis of their "wonderful works", yet will be rejected. The servants of Christ, however, recognise that they have only done their "reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1). They have discharged their duty, no more, no less: they are "unworthy" yet will be blessed by their Lord, who will bring them into his kingdom at the appointed time.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

In their labours in the Lord, brethren and sisters have varying abilities. Some are more capable than others – yet they are all part of the same body. Matthew 25 records the

Masters' parable of the Talents (a "talent" being a unit of currency, where one Talant was approximately 20 years of an average workers' wages – a substantial sum), where the servants are giving varying amounts of money "to every man according to his several ability" (Mat. 25:15). And they were required to use what they had been given, to bring forth an increase for the Master's benefit – again, according to their circumstance and ability. The servant who had been give 5 talents doubled his money and he that was given 2 talents likewise. But the least able servant did nothing with his money. He just buried it in the ground, and was therefore considered "wicked and slothful" (vs. 26). But what was it that he should have done? He had very little ability in himself – so what he ought to have done, was to take his talent, and use the abilities of others to bring an increase:

> "Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury" (Mat. 25:27).

There are those who might for whatever reason feel unable to do much work themselves. Whether it be poor health, old age, or adverse circumstance, they cannot labour. But the Lord only requires a "reasonable service". For those in that circumstance, they can give their Talent to the exchangers, to be paid interest in due course. In other words, if they cannot do the work themselves, they should give their support to those who can! By this means, usury is provided, the Talent increased, and the Master is satisfied.

THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

When we consider One who laboured greatly in service to his Father, our thoughts come to the Lord Jesus Christ. He said "I must work the works of him that sent me" (Jno. 9:4). And to the One whose Will he came to perform, he prayed: "I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (Jno. 17:4). The promise is that "he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Mat. 24:13), and the Lord himself is an example of that. He, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

The Lord Jesus Christ laboured more abundantly than all men. And his labour was not in vain! Isaiah 53 describes his situation:

> "the pleasure of Yahweh shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of ***the travail*** of his soul, ***and shall be satisfied"*** (Isa. 53:11).

There is a great satisfaction in a work well done, because he did the "pleasure" of his Father, he is able to behold the travail that the endured, with satisfaction. He is the supreme example for us to follow: we must both labour in the Word and Doctrine, implementing it as we progress, that we will also find Grace in the sight of the One whom we serve, and be granted an abundant entry into Messiah's coming kingdom.

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