



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Corinthians 16:1-12

Corinthians

“Practical Christianity”

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Mark, and our text this morning is in 1 Corinthians 16, so as Mark said, we are nearing the end. In fact, I think next week is the final lesson in 1 Corinthians, and I'll be kind of sad to leave it as well. But as he said, I do have something special in store for you. It's another book of the Bible. Well, we're going to look at verses 1 through 12 of chapter 16 this morning.

“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.

On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.

When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem;

and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.

But I will come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; and perhaps I will stay with you, or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go.

For I do not wish to see you now just in passing; for I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits.

But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost;

for a wide door for effective service has been opened to me, and there are many

adversaries.

Now if Timothy comes, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid, for he is doing the Lord's work, as I also am.

So let no one despise him. But send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I expect him with the brethren.

But concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all his desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word, and our time of study together. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do ask your blessing upon us this morning. We are privileged to be here, privileged to be with your people, privileged to open your book, the Bible, this unique, supernatural book that transforms us as we read it and study it. And we pray for that transformation this morning as we look at a passage that on the face of it may not seem to offer much in the way of edification and encouragement, but certainly does as we probe it.

And as we do that, Lord, I pray that you would give us an understanding of the things we’ve read and what we study, and may we be encouraged by it and moved to live a life of obedience and service to one another. It is of great value to serve you in the most mundane way, because it’s not mundane nor common nor unimportant to you.

Everything has its value, and when a work is done in your service, it has infinite value; far more than the gold and silver that we set our eyes upon in this world. So help us to understand that, and to appreciate that, and resolve by the power of the Spirit of God to live a life of service to you, and service to one another. So bless us with an understanding of what we have read and what we’ll study, and build us up in the faith.

And we pray, Lord, that you would bless us materially as well. We consider the prayer requests on the back of our bulletin, and are reminded that there are many needs that people have; some in this church, some in other towns, other places. And we pray that you’d bless them, and look over them, and take care of your people. You have a variety of ways of doing that, and I pray that you would do that for each individual. If it be healing, heal them of the surgeries or

procedures they’ve undergone.

Give them health and wholeness. That’s not always your will, Father, and I pray that you would bless everyone, and all of us here as well, with a mind to accept your will, whatever it is, and even rejoice in it. That’s a hard thing to do when your will is not easy, but we sometimes cannot understand your ways. But we know you, even if we don’t understand your ways; we know you, and that you’re faithful, and you’re perfect.

You’re good and gracious, and you care only for us, only for our good, and you do produce that, so Father, we pray for healing. We pray for encouragement. We pray for all of that, but we pray that through all of the trials that those who’ve asked for our prayers go through, and those who haven’t – all of us – we pray that you would bless us with a mind that accepts your will and rejoices in it. Bless your people, Father, and those who are just discouraged with life, give them encouragement.

It is an easy thing to become discouraged, particularly in hard times and stressful times, and we are all weak, and the greatest of us have experienced periods of great letdown and discouragement. But we know from your Word there’s no basis for that. There’s no real reason to be discouraged, because you are in absolute control, and you’re bringing everything about to a good and perfect end. So Lord, encourage us with that, and fix our minds on that.

Bless those who are in need of special attention and your special grace and help. I pray for those who are returning from the retreat today, that you give them safe travel. I pray for those who are on the road for other reasons, traveling for business, some returning from weddings. I pray that you would give them safety as well. And I pray now that you bless us as we continue our worship and our time of study; may it be edifying for each of us, and honoring to you.

I pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] Sometimes you hear enviable stories about people finding riches in unlikely places, like entering an attic and finding an antique in the corner, or a treasure stuffed away in an old trunk. There’s a popular television show on that very thing, about people who have an heirloom with value they never knew it had. 1 Corinthians 16 is a little like that; like an old chest. It has been called prosaic, ordinary, and as you read over it, it does appear a bit dull.

First half is about taking up a collection for some poor saints, and about travel plans, one a visit to Jerusalem, another a visit to Corinth. Paul has finished with the important subjects of the book, both moral and doctrinal. Now he concludes with some final directions and greetings, which is all a little mundane. We might even think that we could skip this chapter and close the book, yet when we begin to search through it, we find we’ve opened a trunk full of treasures.

It has information on Christian worship, and even gives some proof of the authenticity of the letter itself. The instructions that Paul gives here about the collection of money fit so correctly with details in other books that it supports its own genuineness. We also learn that the church met on Sunday rather than Saturday. The reason was to commemorate Christ’s resurrection, which was on the first day of the week.

Now, we just finished a section, a large section, chapter 15, on the Lord’s resurrection and the resurrection of the saints, so that gives some added support to that very doctrine. The fact that Jews, who grew up in the synagogue, would switch their day of worship from the seventh day to the first day, from the end of the week to the beginning of the week, is a strong proof of the resurrection. Something dramatic happened to bring that change about.

By the time of this letter, Sunday worship was the regular custom of the church, and the fact that Paul recognized that shows that the practice of meeting on the first day of the week, on Sunday, the Lord’s day, has apostolic approval. It’s important, I think, to know that our practice of worship and assembling together follows the pattern of the apostles and the New Testament church. This passage informs us of that.

But chiefly, it instructs us in the practical Christian life; on being a help to others, and how to do that. Now, that’s the real treasure of this passage. Paul has just told the Corinthians to live in the hope of the resurrection of the body. This present earthly life isn’t all that there is; we are eternal. Our soul is eternal. Our body is eternal. Our bodies, while being placed in the grave and will turn to dust someday, will also be translated, transferred, transformed from dust to glory.

So what we do today counts forever; therefore, be active. That’s what Paul is telling the Corinthians. Don’t waste a moment of this oh so brief life. That’s how he ends chapter 15. “Be always abounding in the work of the Lord.” But what is the work of the Lord? We covered that a little bit last week. We could spend a lot of time on the work of the Lord, because it’s lots of things.

It’s being a missionary, as Paul was, traveling across continents to give the gospel,

suffering hardship, planting churches. Yeah, that’s the work of the Lord; that’s what we normally think of as the work of the Lord, hitting the missionary trail, or preaching sermons on Sunday morning. But it’s also being a witness at home. We are Christ’s representatives. He is the head in heaven. We are the body on earth.

We are his ambassadors to the world, wherever we are. So he calls some who are bricklayers, some who are bankers; he calls some who are doctors, some who are lawyers, some who are schoolteachers. He calls people in all works of life. He calls some in the private sector, the public sector, in management, in labor, in all aspects and areas of life. He calls his people so that he will have his people there to be his witnesses, to be his ambassadors.

And that’s what we are. We’re his ambassadors. We are his witnesses in both word and deed. Our lives are a testimony. Our conduct must be consistent with our confession; as it’s often been said, we must have a belief that behaves. So the work of the Lord is as simple as being a good person; of living your life to the glory of God, reflecting that to others.

Caring about people – speaking to someone who’s discouraged, giving a word of encouragement or wisdom, or as difficult as it is, sometimes giving a warning to people. Taking an interest in them, and helping them as they need help. We represent Christ wherever we are, and someday we’re going to stand before him. We’ve been taught that already in this book, back in chapter 3.

He’s going to evaluate our lives. He’s going to look at our lives. He’s going to examine everything. Some things are going to go up in smoke; other things aren’t. And it’s at that judgment seat, at the *bēma* seat of Christ, when our lives are evaluated, that he is going to give you praise for what you’ve done for him. And he will say, “Thank you. Thank you for taking the time to talk to that dejected brother or sister in my place.

“You did that for me. Thank you very much for being useful to me, and to my church.” Imagine hearing that from God Almighty; from God’s eternal Son. We just sang about him. We just sang about the trinity, one God who subsists in three persons. When Jesus Christ says that to us, God Almighty is speaking to us, and he’ll have great praise for us, and that is an amazing thing, if you contemplate it.

In fact, you have the sentiment that we will have, whether we say it in words or not. It’s that of Luke 17, where the slave says, “We are unworthy slaves. We’ve only done what we ought to have done.” The best that we can do is only what we should do. We

can’t go above and beyond the call of duty in the Christian life, because that is the Christian life. Yet God will praise us for everything we do. Nothing we do for Christ will have been done in vain.

It is all of eternal value, and there’s a lot to do, and there’s not a lot of time to do it. So Paul begins chapter 16 with an example of how the Corinthians could abound in the work of the Lord. It was by taking up a collection for the saints in Jerusalem. They were very poor. They needed financial help, and the Corinthians had the means of helping. Why the church in Jerusalem was poor is not explained.

A few years before, there had been a worldwide famine that had devastated that region of the world. Luke records it in Acts 11, and maybe that’s what explains things. Maybe that had something to do with the situation in Jerusalem. But Jerusalem generally was not a rich city. It was dependent on Jews outside the land, those in the diaspora, for support, and they would raise collections and they would be brought to Jerusalem to help the Jews there.

But many of those Jews in Jerusalem were not Christians, and when they became Christians, they were kicked out of the synagogue. They were ostracized by their society, and they were persecuted. For various reasons, the saints there were suffering. They needed help. So Paul organized a relief effort from the churches that he established. He had given instructions to the churches in Galatia, in the southern part of Asia Minor.

The Corinthians had asked about this – you’ll notice the subject here begins, “Now concerning the collection.” If you’ll remember from our studies through this book, that’s something of a formula, “now concerning.” It introduces a question that they had asked Paul in a letter they had written to him. This letter is a response to that letter that they had written. They had questions. They had concerns. They expressed all of that.

Some delegates from Corinth had come over to Ephesus, brought him the letter, and talked to him about the conditions in the Corinthian church that he’s been addressing here, and he introduces that with these words, “now concerning.” And so they had an interest in taking part in this collection, so Paul tells them what to do. He tells them to follow the instructions that he had given those churches in Galatia.

On Sunday when the church came together, he writes in verse 2, “On the first day of the week, each one of you is to put aside and save as he may prosper so that no collections be made when I come.” Now, there are two things I think it’s important to notice in this statement. The first is each one was to contribute. Now, Paul could’ve raised the same amount from a few rich members of the church.

And you go back to some of the earlier things that Paul taught specifically about the Lord’s supper and how it was being taken, and how it was being abused; that there were rich and poor within the church. Some very poor, and we can imagine that in that church, being a wealthy city like Corinth was, with some wealthy merchants, that some of them had been saved, so there was some wealth in the church.

And he could have sought the full amount from some of those wealthy people, and just gone to them for the collection. But this was the responsibility of all the members. Everyone in the church is to support the ministry and help where it is needed. But it was not only a responsibility; in fact, I think Paul would say it’s chiefly not a responsibility. It’s chiefly an opportunity. I’m not being clever with the words. I think that’s really what he’s saying.

In the act of serving, there is blessing for the one who serves. For these Corinthians there was blessing. They were doing God’s work. They were acting in God’s character. God is one who gives, and gives the greatest gifts. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” That’s how much he loves, and that’s how much he gives, that he’d give his own Son for enemies. So are we not to do that ourselves?

When we give to help others, we are doing his work, and we’re always blessed when we conduct ourselves in God’s way, in the way that he acts. When we do his deeds, we’re blessed. So this subject of charity was as good for the Corinthians as it would be good for those poor saints in Jerusalem. And it’s the same for us. This is a book that was written 2,000 years ago to a people long gone in history, and yet it’s as applicable to us in principle as it was to them.

In fact, long before this book was written, Solomon wrote in Proverbs 22:9, “He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor.” God blesses the generous. He will bless us in this life. Now, I’m not preaching health-wealth theology here; don’t think that. But nevertheless, it is true on the basis of what Solomon says in Proverbs 22 that God will bless us in this life.

And I think that stands behind what Paul’s saying here, encouraging these Corinthians to give. He’ll bless us in this life. If not with material things, he’ll bless our souls. He’ll bless our character. And really, it’s a far greater blessing to become a better person, to become a person more like Christ, than it is a person with a little more money, and that’s a great blessing. We don’t really think that way, I suppose, but it is.

And certainly at the end of it all, we’ll be recompensed in the resurrection.

Remember, he’s just finished a great discourse on the resurrection, and in that day, we will all be blessed. God is no man’s debtor. We cannot give up more than he will give back. And I mean in this life he gives back; he takes care of his people as they walk by faith, and as they trust him.

He’ll take care of you now. He will certainly take care of you afterwards, in the life to come. But nothing that we do for Christ in this life is in vain. So this collection was to be taken from everyone; all had their part to play. But the amount they gave was their own decision, according to their own conscience. That’s the second thing to notice. “Each should give,” Paul says, “as he may prosper.”

Not everyone can give the same amount. This wasn’t to be a hardship for them; this was to be a blessing. God doesn’t ask us to impoverish ourselves in giving. If a person has money, he has an obligation to use that money for the Lord’s service. Remember, we don’t have anything in this life. Money, health, friends, occupation, hobbies, personality – some people have magnificent personalities; you wish you had it. They can meet anybody.

They’ve never met a stranger. They know how to speak and talk. They’re great salesmen. That’s all a gift, really. I think we can develop things, to be sure, and we’re responsible to do that, but in the end, the final analysis, it’s all a gift from God. And so that’s true with our possessions, and we’re to use them if we have them in his service.

But if a person has no money, then he has no obligation, and he would have no shame in not giving if he doesn’t have anything to give. God hasn’t blessed him with that, so that’s not to be a concern. It’s not the amount of the gift. That’s not what God depends upon. He’s not dependent upon our generosity. It’s not the amount; it’s the motive behind the gift that matters.

Later, in 2 Corinthians 9:7 – in fact, in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, you have another significant discussion of giving. And in 9:7, Paul explains that a person shouldn’t give grudgingly, for God loves a cheerful giver. That’s how the Macedonians gave, and in that portion of 2 Corinthians in chapter 8, he uses the Macedonians as an example of giving.

By the time we get to 2 Corinthians, these Corinthians in 1 Corinthians have cooled in their interest in that gift, evidently, and so he’s telling them about the Macedonians. That in their deep poverty, they contributed liberally to the collection, but they did that because they wanted to; they considered it a privilege, and a great joy, to help the poor saints, even though they themselves were very poor.

And Paul wanted this to be a joyful, fulfilling service for the Corinthians, not a burden. Giving should never be considered a burden. God’s not pleased with that gift if

you’re here on a Sunday night and you put a check in the plate, or a few dollars, and say, “I really wish I had that, but I’ve got eyes on me, and I’d better.” He’s not pleased with that. He doesn’t need that money. He does amazing things to support his people.

It’s our privilege, and it shouldn’t be a burden. We should think of it as a blessing, as an opportunity. So Paul didn’t mandate an amount they were to give, and he didn’t make a pledge drive, or set a goal. He didn’t manipulate them in any way. Our gifts should never be wrung out of us by clever requests for money. Paul left the amount of the contribution to the personal discretion of the Corinthians.

One thing he did request of them was that it all be collected when he arrived; that that all be taken care of before he got there, as he says, “So that no collection be made when I come.” He didn’t want to be involved in the collection of this gift for the saints of Jerusalem. In fact, Paul is very careful to keep a lot of distance between himself and the money. That was a wise policy for him. It’s a good policy for ministers, for people in authority in the church.

Be careful about your relationship with the money. In verses 3 and 4, he tells them to choose the people who would carry the gift to Jerusalem. He wanted to remain completely independent of this. They’re not his people that are taking care of the money; it would be the choice of the Corinthians. So he maintains his independence in all of this; in fact, he says that he would only accompany them to Jerusalem if it seemed appropriate.

It says in verse 4, “and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.” Paul was very concerned to do things in a way that was above reproach. He didn’t want to touch the money. He didn’t want to give any opportunity to question his integrity, and money is an opportunity for integrity to be questioned. He guarded the ministry. He guarded his testimony. But he also had a great concern for the needy saints in Jerusalem.

He loved them, and that was what was behind all of this – his concern and his love for them. Now, commentators, if you get into a study of this, have tried to analyze Paul’s motives in raising this contribution for the saints in Jerusalem. They have suggested, for example, he wanted to help the church in Jerusalem because that would show the common bond that Jewish and Gentile Christians shared.

And it certainly would do that, and that’s a good reason for having a contribution, but others have thought, well, it would also demonstrate to the Jewish believers the genuine faith of the Gentile believers, and it would promote better feelings between both groups. There was a lot of suspicion, evidently, and resentment toward Paul by some in the Jerusalem church. He was in their mind too oriented to the Gentiles for them.

Now, that was completely wrong on their part. Paul was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. God had sent him out. Christ had sent him out to the Gentiles, to the nations. But some had trouble with that, his association with Gentiles, and so the thought is he’d see this as an opportunity to appease them, and show that the Gentiles are believers just as Jews are. It’ll be a proof of that.

All of that certainly is in itself true, but who can really know what Paul was thinking? We don’t know his mind. This is for certain – the church in Jerusalem needed help, and sending a contribution was the right thing to do, and that’s reason enough. In fact, I personally feel that it was a disinterested act of benevolence on the part of the apostle Paul, meaning he did this without any personal motive, any selfish motive.

He loved those people. He loved the people of the church. He loved his Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He wanted to help them. But it’s also true that the Gentiles owed a debt of gratitude to the church in Jerusalem. I think that’s very much what’s behind the Macedonian interest in this gift that was given. The church in Jerusalem could’ve been called the mother church. The gospel went forth from it first of all.

Jews were the first believers. Jews were the first evangelists, and they suffered much for their faith there in Jerusalem, and still were. So the Gentiles had an obligation to them, as I think we do, to a great extent. I years ago read a book when I was in college. I was talking about this in the first service. I said 50 years ago; it wasn’t that long ago, fortunately. It’s getting there.

So my memory of it is not all that clear, but it was written by Richard Wurmbrand, titled *Tortured for Christ*. Maybe you’ve read it. You may be familiar with Richard Wurmbrand. He was a Romanian Jew, and I think, as my memory serves me, he was, in the years before the Second World War, a Communist, an atheist. There was a shepherd there; a peasant, a Romanian peasant.

And this shepherd had a prayer that he’d prayed for some time – many years – that God would give him the privilege of leading a Jewish person to faith; bring them to Christ. And he had that burden because he wanted to see salvation among the Jewish people. And the Lord granted him that, because it was through that very simple man, that peasant, that shepherd, that Wurmbrandt was introduced to the gospel.

He believed, he became a Lutheran pastor, and had an international ministry. He was imprisoned for I think it was 12 years; he suffered for his faith, and then had a great testimony after that. I think that’s proper. I think that’s a good desire, a proper attitude. Paul had a special affection for his people according to the flesh. He calls them that in

Romans 9:3. He said he would willingly suffer perdition in their place, if that were possible.

That’s not possible, but it certainly shows his love for the Jews – for unbelieving Jews, which the church today should have towards God’s people Israel, toward the Jewish people – toward all people, for that matter. They are God’s chosen nation. They’re in discipline right now. The branches have been broken off, but they’ll be grafted back in. But remember, the Bible came to us through those people; through that nation.

Christ came to us through Israel. He is forever a Jew in his humanity, so I think there is a special burden on the heart of the believer, on the heart of the church, for physical Israel. But that’s especially true of those who are God’s people spiritually – Christians, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. And regardless, helping those in need is the right thing to do. It is the work of the Lord, and we are to be abounding in it.

Now, in the remaining verses, Paul talks about some future visits to Corinth. First, his own, in verses 5 through 9 – he reminds the Corinthians of his intention to come to them. They knew of his plan to visit them. He had indicated that back in chapter 4, when he warned them that he would come to them. They needed to get things straightened out, because he was coming to them, and he’d rather come to them with a carrot rather than a stick.

In fact, he speaks about coming with a rod. He’d rather come in gentleness rather than harshness. So they knew that he was coming, or he was planning to come, but they didn’t know his itinerary, and so he informs them here that he planned to come via Macedonia. He would be on something like a preaching tour, and he was going to come to the churches that he’d established and check on them, and teach in them.

And he would pass through Macedonia, so he’d come from the north down to the south. He wanted to spend more time with the Corinthians. They probably needed it, and needed more of his attention, and so Paul planned to stay the winter with them. That was not only a necessary plan for them, but also very practical, because travel around the Mediterranean was usually suspended in wintertime.

The storms on the Mediterranean would cause shipwreck, and so he would use that time to spend with them. And they would have the opportunity to speak about the questions they had, and be taught of him, and have many of their misunderstandings and their problems cleared up then. So he would spend time with them, but he would do that only, he says, if the Lord permits. That is the attitude of a true servant of God.

He will go where and when the Lord wills. He makes his plans, as James tells us

in James 4; it’s always wise to make plans, but with the caveat, “if the Lord wills.” And we know in this case that the Lord did not will; we know that from 2 Corinthians. He wasn’t able to come when he thought that he would be able to come, or when he planned to come. His visit was delayed. His plans were changed.

God knows best about these things, and we need to plan, but we need to plan with caution, recognizing God may intervene. He may change things. Eventually, Paul did come. Eventually, he left Ephesus, where he wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians. He went north across the Aegean to Macedonia, and then from there, south into Greece, and ultimately into Corinth. Luke records all of that in Acts 20:1-3.

Even as he wrote then, though, he explains in verse 8 that he had to delay his trip there because the needs were pressing in Ephesus, and he explains that in verse 9. “For a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” That tells us a lot about Christian ministry; a lot about the Christian life, which is Christian ministry. But it tells us about the Christian life, Christian ministry, and its opportunities.

God makes the opportunities. God opens doors, and he closes doors. Luke recounts the events of all of this in Acts chapters 16 through 19. On Paul’s second missionary journey, he intended to go into the province of Asia, which was the western province of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, and that’s where Ephesus was located. Ephesus was one of the great metropolitan centers of the ancient world; very important city, located on the coast.

He planned to go into Asia, no doubt to go to Ephesus. Paul had a strategy that he went to the major cities of the ancient world, and was always moving west, and his goal was to get to Rome, and then from there he would go to Spain. But that was certainly what he was planning to do, but Luke says the Holy Spirit forbid them. We don’t know how, but some providential event prevented them from going west into Asia.

So they changed their plans, and they decided to go east into Bithynia, another region of Asia Minor, but again Luke writes the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them. So they ended up on Troas, on the northwest coast of Turkey, near the site of ancient Troy, and confused about things. About their plans, which had all been exhausted; they were no doubt wondering, “Why are we here? This was not in any of our plans. This is just where we are by default.”

And then one night there was a vision, and it was a vision of a man in Macedonia, calling them to come over and help, and so they did, and went to Philippi. They took the gospel to Europe. From there, Paul travels south, establishing churches all the way down to

Corinth. They then crossed over to Ephesus, so he made it to Ephesus, just not in his way and his time, and then that was a brief visit.

He went on to Jerusalem and then back to Antioch, and then soon after that he began his third missionary journey, and in Acts 19, Luke describes that missionary journey and the great awakening that occurred in the city of Ephesus and that whole province of Asia. Large numbers of people were saved out of paganism; in fact, out of the worst kinds of paganism. It was a center of paganism.

A great temple of Diana was there, one of the seven wonders of the world, and they were saved out of the occult, witchcraft. They burned their amulets and their books on witchcraft and all of that. Luke writes, “So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.” So there was great opportunity there; a great door had been opened, but there was also opposition, as Paul writes here, “And there are many adversaries.”

Now, that tells us something. The Word of God never prevails without opposition. If you’re going to be a witness for Christ, there’ll be opposition at work. People will oppose what you say. They may even try to undermine your position. Paul faced opposition. That’s part of the ministry. So eventually, Paul got to Asia and to Ephesus, but as I said, it was in God’s time and his way.

He opens doors and closes them for our good, and for the good of the gospel. He knows when the time is right – we don’t, he does – and his timing in all of these things is always right. So that raises the question in our minds, how do we find those open doors? Well, I don’t have a formula for it, but I think it’s as simple as this, and that’s being faithful. It’s as general as that, too, but it’s by simply living the obedient life.

Doing what you’re supposed to be doing, being where you’re supposed to be. We do that by preparing our minds through the study of Scripture and prayer, and serving the Lord when the opportunities are there. God doesn’t bless laziness, so he’s not going to bless us by just sitting back and waiting. He blesses us in our activity. He blesses us in our effort. He blesses us in our wisdom.

But as we walk by faith, doing what we’re supposed to do daily, being where we’re supposed to be daily, God opens doors. Getting up on time to go to work, working diligently, opportunities come. Now, I think we do make plans. I think we think strategically, but we should always know that the Lord may intervene, and we should always know that providence is what leads us, ultimately.

I love that statement by Matthew Henry, “Follow providence and don’t force it.” How important that is; follow providence, do not force it. Don’t force your way on things.

God is leading. Well, even if he couldn’t get to Corinth soon, he had sent Timothy to them. He mentioned that earlier in the letter, back in chapter 4. He would instruct them in all of Paul’s ways, he had said, and he reminds them of that again in verse 10.

Here he tells them that he might be coming to them, Timothy might be coming to them, so there you have in just those words a nod to providence. He might not make it, but that’s the plan, and if the Lord wills it, Timothy was coming. He tells them about the visit with a warning not to give Timothy reason to be afraid, which tells us something about Timothy, in that he was a young and evidently shy man.

F.F. Bruce wrote that “those who judge superficially would not be greatly impressed by him.” And we know that there were many in Corinth who were shallow judges of people; they were a fractious kind of people. They had been infected with that party spirit. Some were of Paul; some were of Apollos; some were of Cephas; and so Paul knows this is not an easy crowd to minister to.

And sometimes in the ministry, a person needs a thick skin, and Timothy didn’t have that, so Paul urges kindness from the Corinthians, and reminds them that Timothy was doing the Lord’s work, as he himself was. So Paul says, “Let no one despise him.” Timothy was a faithful young man, but he was diffident, he was timid; that was his personality. He had to deal with that. He had to deal with that all through his life, evidently.

Later, Paul had to encourage him to stay with the ministry. He was very discouraged. In 2 Timothy 2:1, he says, “My son, be strong; suffer hardship with me as a good soldier.” Timothy was getting battle fatigue; he was a bit shell-shocked from the challenges of the ministry. And what Paul was saying to him is, “Be strong. You are valuable in the ministry, Timothy. You’re valuable to me. You’re valuable to the Lord.

“Don’t quit. Don’t think of that. Instead, be always abounding in the work of the Lord.” It’s a good word for all of us. but on the Corinthians’ side, they were to encourage him, not threaten him. It’s hard to see how this is the work of the Lord that they were to be doing, when what they’re told to do is not make him afraid. That’s kind of the minimum way to help someone out.

But I think more to the point, what he’s saying is be kind to this young man. Be considerate of him. Don’t be rough with him. They were to be helpful. They were to listen to him. Timothy had a lot to teach them. He may be young, he may be timid, but he was doing the Lord’s work, and if they’d listen to him, they’d learn a lot, because he would teach them Paul’s way, the apostolic way. He was a man they needed to listen to.

Well, they really wanted to listen to someone else. And I don’t think it was so much the apostle Paul; it was Apollos. Verse 12 begins, “Now concerning Apollos our brother,” so again you have that formula, “now concerning,” so this is something they had written about. Evidently they had asked Paul, “Encourage Apollos to come back to Corinth; we love his ministry.”

And with good reason – Apollos was a great man, and he was a very different man from Timothy. He was a powerful preacher, mighty in the Scriptures, and unlike Timothy, he was bold. That is a gift. God had gifted this man greatly, and in Acts 18, Luke records how he spoke boldly in the synagogue in Ephesus. And then he came to Corinth and he refuted the Jews there, and then he was a great help to the Christians of Corinth.

So they greatly appreciated his ministry; it was very impressive ministry. He was a very impressive individual, and they were hoping that he would come to them. They’d asked Paul to invite Apollos to come, and Paul had done that. But he said it wasn’t going to happen, not any time soon. He wrote, “I encouraged him greatly to come.” In other words, he spent a great deal of time urging him.

“They have great needs there. They need your ministry. I urge you to go.” But he says, “It was not at all his desire to come now.” Maybe he knew about those rivalries – that some were saying they were of Paul, some were saying they were of Cephas, and some were saying they were of Apollos – and so he felt his coming would just exacerbate that problem. And so he stayed away, and in that way, this may have been a sort of a subtle word of correction to them.

Or maybe he was simply too busy doing the Lord’s work where he was; he didn’t have time. It wasn’t the right time. What I find interesting in this is Paul didn’t invoke his apostolic authority. He didn’t say, “Now listen, I’m the Lord’s apostle. I know what’s best. You go.” He didn’t do that. He left the decision to Apollos. Apollos was the Lord’s servant, not Paul’s servant. The Lord was directing Apollos, and Paul respected that.

Paul treats him as an equal, as a believer-priest. He respected Apollos’ opinion, his decision, and his reason for it. Well, I think we all need to do that. We all need to recognize that the Lord leads people in different ways, and not try to impose on them our will or our view of things. They’re responsible to God, not to us, for their response and their views. The important thing is that we walk by the Spirit and we be sensitive to his leading.

And seek by the Spirit’s help in obedience to God’s Word to be abounding in the work of the Lord. The assurance we have is that none of our works done in Christ, done in

his service, will be done in vain. That’s Paul’s promise to us. That’s God’s promise to us. Even the smallest, most insignificant work, at least in your eyes or my eyes, is not insignificant in God’s eyes.

I like what Luther had to say. He was commenting on the resurrection of the saints and the revelation of the deeds we will have done in this life - that examination that will take place at the judgment seat of Christ. And he said, “In that day, one good work done for God will be seen to show more glory than the whole frame of heaven and earth.” That’s his opinion, but I think it’s a good one.

More glorious than the whole *cosmos*, than all of the galaxies, and those spectacular pictures that the satellites give us, and the telescopes give us – can’t compare to one good deed that you as a Christian have done by God’s grace because it’s by God’s grace, and it all redounds to his glory; and to your great reward, to our great reward, as we serve him and abound in the work of the Lord.

But of course you can’t abound in the Lord’s work if you don’t know the Lord. You can’t be doing anything of eternal value unless you’re serving him, and the only way to serve him is to know him, and the way to know him is through faith. So if there’s anyone here without him, we invite you to come. It’s not a torturous path to salvation.

It’s simply through faith in Jesus Christ, who has suffered the torture, the suffering and pain of hell for all eternity, for everyone who believes in him. He’s saved his people from their sins, and those who believe are his people, and you’re saved forever through faith. So come to him, trust in him, and then live a life that’s meaningful for all eternity. May God help you to do that, and encourage all of us to live in his service. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray that for ourselves. We know that we are to be abounding in the work of the Lord, and we know that is a multifaceted thing; that there are many ways in which we serve. And we serve individually, and you don’t call us all to do the same thing, and some things seem big, and some things seem small. But they’re all infinitely valuable to you, and so give us a mind to do that.