

“LABOR OR LABORING?”

Scripture: I Corinthians 15:58

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Introduction: I want to start out today by thanking many of you, from the church family, for your kind comments about last Sunday’s sermon. Several times, during the previous week, people impressed me by bringing up the topic of last week’s message – CONFIDENCE. And you remember, don’t you, that we can have **confidence** during the interim....

.....*Confidence in the congregation*

.....*Confidence in church leaders*

.....*Confidence in God Himself*

I think I was most impressed by the number of people at last Tuesday’s softball playoff game, who spoke phrases from the sermon– these folks spoke at the start about the importance of **confidence**, and I’m assuming that they wanted our team to have **confidence**, that they could win the game

- The only problem was that the other team didn’t get that memo.....

and they were the ones who played with the most **confidence**,

and we were left, at the end of the game, saying to ourselves

“We’ll get ‘em next year!” (we’re **confident** about that, I guess)

- * Well, if the key word in last week’s message was **confidence**, then the key word in this week’s message is **labor**.....which seems kind of appropriate considering the holiday weekend we find ourselves in today (Labor Day, right?)

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- * *You might be impressed to know that the English word “**labor**” occurs 107 times in the New International Version of the Bible – that’s fairly frequent!*

- * *“**Labor**” in its English word form occurs 16 times in the N.T., including its use in today’s sermon passage, in I Corinthians 15:58 (we’ll get into a definition of “**labor**”, from the original N.T. language of Greek, in a little while)*

- * But, in jumping back to the English word, “**labor**”.....doesn’t it seem that the vast majority of usage of the word “**labor**” today carries somewhat undesirable connotations?

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1. *For my first witnesses, I call every woman who has ever given birth to a child, to testify about the undesirable nature of **labor pains**.*

- * Being a male member of the human race, I can honestly say that I have never experienced labor pains nor the pains of child birth.....except to say that I was there, in person, when Sharon experienced them (but somehow, I don’t think it’s quite the same.....)

* Carol Burnett: "Giving birth to a child is like taking your lower lip and pulling it over your head."

* Yes, the labor pains associated with child birth don't really sound that desirable.

2. Then, we could talk about something called **labor unions**and I am not sure that everything associated with labor unions has been totally positive over the years, has it?

3. Oh, and then there's the phrase **manual labor**just hearing that phrase, in which difficult physical work sounds just about guaranteed, makes me wonder where the Advil and bandaids are. Isn't there a machine we can find somewhere that makes the job easier, and makes a lot of **manual labor** obsolete? (wish we'd found a machine like that when we were clearing off the thorny trees/bushes of this property, before the building was built!)

4. Yes, and then, if you are standing in front of a judge in some courtroom, one of the last things you want to find out is that the judge is *sentencing you to many years of **hard labor***.

* Would it be fair to say then, that, with the possible exceptions of "Labor Day" and perhaps "fruits of your labor", that the word "**labor**" seems to have more a negative feel to it, rather than positive?

* You might be thinking, at this point: "What does all this negative talk about **labor** have do with us, the people of God?"

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* Well, I think it has a lot to do with us, at times. I've been a pastor (in one form or another) for over 22 years now. And, over those years, I have been observing Christians who serve their church and serve the Lord.....and I wish I could report that I've seen all joy and contentment and fulfillment written on the faces of every one of those Christians.....but it wouldn't be true. I wish I could report, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the *majority* of Christians I know serve the Lord and the church with joy and contentment and fulfillment, but I'm not sure that I would be accurate there.

* Now, don't get me wrong here.....I am not against Christians serving the Lord and His Church – I rejoice when I see a Christian move out to be a help in areas of service where they are needed.

* Example: When I saw many of the men of the church (and a couple of ladies, too) step up to help George Edwards set up the Community Picnic last Saturday, a great sense of "This is super!" came over me. And I say: "Great job of labor, George! Great job of labor, helpers!"

- * But what really troubles me, for the sake of each Christian here, and everywhere, is the distinct possibility that your service for the church or the Lord might genuinely, inescapably, and continuously *feel like it is actual **hard labor!***

- * The Greek word for “**labor**” is ‘kopos’ – it’s a work word that carries with it the idea of bother, or trouble, or difficulty. One author says, of ‘kopos’: “This word is used to denote not so much the actual exertion which a (person) makes, but the weariness which he/she experiences from that exertion.”
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- * *Have you ever felt that sense of weariness as you try to carry on in hard labor for the church?*
 - * You get ready to go to a committee meeting, and you realize that someone is going to be at that committee meeting that you really don’t get along with well.....but you conclude that, “Oh well, I guess the church really needs my help in this area, so I’ll *muddle through* the meeting somehow.” [sigh]
 - * You wake up on Sunday morning, and recall that it is your turn *again* to be in the nursery during church, and you kind of dread the idea, for whatever reason.
 - * You hear the call from a pastor or lay leader to get involved in a specific upcoming all-church community outreach event, and you become relieved when you remember that your child has a ball game that night (and, whew! You don’t have to wrestle over the difficulty of “do I **have to** go to that event, or not?”)
 - * You get closer to the weekend, and you realize that it’s almost time for teaching that Sunday School class of yours, and you find yourself almost hoping that you’ll get sick on Saturday, so you don’t have to teach on Sunday.
 - * Or, you have occupied some ministry position at the church for a long time, and you feel that your enthusiasm for that ministry drained away some time ago, and you don’t look forward to it anymore.
 - * And, you know what really gets to some Christians as they labor for the Lord and His church? It’s found in verse 58, in the last two words.....”IN VAIN”. Anyone here ever spend time working in some ministry area, and come to the conclusion on certain occasions that what you’ve been doing just isn’t producing any results (or so it seems)?
 - * Illustration: A single page from the journal of the great Methodist minister John Wesley reads as follows:
 - “Sunday a.m., May 5 – Preached in St. Ann’s; was asked not to come back anymore.
 - Sunday p.m., May 5 – Preached at St. John’s; deacons said, ‘Get out and stay out.’
 - Sunday a.m., May 12 – Preached at St. Jude’s; can’t go back there, either.
 - Sunday p.m., May 12 – Preached at St. George’s; kicked out again.
 - Sunday a.m., May 19 – Preached at St. Somebody Else’s; deacons called special meeting and said I couldn’t return.
 - Sunday p.m., May 19 – Preached on the street; kicked off the street.

Sunday a.m., May 26 – Preached out in a meadow; chased out of meadow when a bull was turned loose during the service.
Sunday a.m., June 2 – Preached out at the edge of town; kicked off the highway.”

* Do you think, after a while, that John Wesley began to wonder if he was laboring in vain?

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* For whatever reason, whether it be one I have mentioned , or for a reason only you know about at this time, *you view the aspect of your service for the Lord and His church as difficult laboring indeed.* And you end up looking forward to that time of laboring like you would a visit to the dentist.....or a runner’s marathon.....or 5 loads of laundry.....or an endless stack of paperwork. Your Christian service has become more of struggle or a dread to you than anything else. *You aren’t involved in just labor for the Lord, you are actually **laboring**, with difficulty.* (Labor describes the actual word for work, but **laboring** describes the almost impossible struggle and and difficulty and consequential weariness with which you do that work.)

And with that in mind, it might seem logical to assume that you have a strong case of “CHRISTIAN LABOR PAINS”.

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* If you have been experiencing CHRISTIAN LABOR PAINS , then I have some hope to lend to you today. In fact, I would prescribe to you that you take 15:58 internally; and throw in verse 57 if you like, so I could say to you, in all honesty, “Take 2 verses, and call me in the morning”. Or,”take in verse 58 a couple of times a day, for the next two or three weeks, and see if it helps you.”

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* If I were experiencing Christian Labor Pains today, there are certain things that I would draw, out of v. 58, that would help me overcome those pains. I can recommend these things to you, not just because they are helpful to me, but because they were a significant help too, I believe, to the writer of I Corinthians.....Paul himself.

* If ever there were a servant of the Lord that could have lapsed into a laboring form of Christian service, it would be Paul. He experienced more negative circumstances, during the course of serving the Lord, than most of us will ever face!

[Read II Corinthians 11:23-28]

* And yet, for all the negative things he faced, he continued to serve the Lord and His church, and not in ‘laboring’ style either, but with notes of certainty and perseverance and steadfastness and victory.....you just sense those things in Paul’s words as you dive into the labor helps available to you and me, in v. 58.

- * **And what are those labor helps available to each of you, and to me, as found in v. 58?**
Well, there are four labor helps that I want to share with you briefly today:

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I. Labor Help #1 Is This: Make Sure That Your Labor Is Done “In The Lord”.

- * Did you notice, in v. 58, that Paul qualifies the word “labor”, in the 3 words after “labor”, as something that ought to be done “in the Lord”?
- * So, what does it mean to “labor in the Lord”? Well, I think that a key word in that phrase is the word “IN”. And the subsequent question might go something like this: “IN whose ability are you laboring?”
- * When you set out to do labor for the church, do you labor.....
.....IN **His** power, for example? You know, one of the things I’ve discovered about myself, over the years, is that I am a person with a daily list of things that I want to dive into, and get done. And there have been many times when I have arrived at the church, and had so many things to get done that day, that I wanted to get started on those things right away. The problem with that kind of approach is that I end up becoming like *a little boy who was attempting to lift a large stone out of his sandbox. The boy became frustrated as he wrestled with the heavy object, because he just couldn’t get enough leverage to lift it over the side. Finally, the boy gave up and sat down, dejectedly, on the edge of the sandbox, with his head in his hands.*
His father, who had been in the kitchen, watching his son’s efforts, went outside and asked, “What’s wrong, son? Can’t you lift that rock out?”
“No, sir”, the boy said. “I can’t do it”.
“Have you used all the strength that’s available to you?”, the father asked.
“Yes, sir”, the boy replied.
“No, you haven’t”, the father said. “You haven’t asked me to help you.”
- * Has God ever had to impress that on you? You moved out to serve Him and the church, but the labor turned into laboring, because you forgot to ask Him to give you His power.....wouldn’t it be wiser, on a daily basis, to labor IN **His** power?
- * You see, it is “*His divine power (that) has given us everything we need for life and godliness*” (II Peter 1:3), including power for effective labor. So, ask Him for His power, daily in prayer, and trust Him to give it to you!

* And, while you're at it, go ahead and choose to labor.....

..... IN **His** courage
.....IN **His** wisdom
.....IN **His** presence
.....IN **His** joy
.....IN **His** direction

* Because, you see, any labor that is not done in Him and in the ability He gives us is really nothing more than FALSE LABOR!
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* Beware of false labor, which is done without His power and courage and wisdom, and so on. For it is not being done "in the Lord".

II. Labor Help #2 Is This: When You Go Into Labor For The Lord, Look At Your Labor As "The Work Of The Lord". (The "work of the Lord" is a phrase found earlier in v. 58)
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* Have you ever taken time to say to the Lord, "May my labor for You and the church always be consecrated to You, so that it becomes the work of the Lord!"?

* It's a good thing for your labor to become the work of the Lord, because, when *your* labor becomes **His** work, He gets involved, and the Lord is very good at getting results! He gets the kind of results that are encouraging to Christian laborers like you and me, and can keep labor from feeling like laboring! And He knows how to take difficult service situations that seem hopeless, and turn them into profitable labor!

* Do you recall the page from John Wesley's journal that I shared with you earlier? Well, there is one entry in that journal page that I neglected to share with you, until now. After all the preaching efforts that didn't work, there finally came along one preaching labor that did work:

"Sunday p.m., June 2 – Afternoon service, preached in pasture; 10,000 people came." Could we conclude that God brought about some good results in Wesley's case? Absolutely! I think it's because Wesley's consecrated labor for the Lord was molded into the work of the Lord.....and *the Lord is very good at getting results, when it is His work. He can do the same for you, too, somehow, if you will let your labor become His work.*

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* It should be a Child Labor law for the children of God to trust in.....Trust in the work that our heavenly Father does, as we labor for Him!

III. Labor Help #3 Is This: When You Labor In The Lord, It Sure Is A Lot More Fulfilling To Do It With “Dear Brothers” (And Sisters) In Christ.”

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- * Paul surely felt this way.....I find it interesting, at the start of v. 58, as he moves out to talk about Christian labor, that he has “dear brothers” in the Corinthian church in mind.....did you see that at the start of v. 58?
- * Not only is it on his mind in v. 58, but, right across the street in chapter 16, he fondly refers to some “dear brothers” in Christ, who were a great help to him. [Read 16:15-18]
 - * *What a help these folks were to Paul, during his labors in Christ! Did you see how they helped him? (“supplied what was lacking”; “refreshed Paul’s spirit”, in award-deserving fashion!)*
- * I concur with Paul about the importance of the help of brothers and sisters in Christ, as you labor for the Lord.....they **often** help keep labor from becoming laboring.
- * I tell you.....if you ever feel like your service for the Lord and His church has turned into laboring, then go spend some time Christian labor with folks like Tom Leamer.....Tom’s got more than his share of life struggles and challenges going on, but you’ll rarely meet a more positive person than Tom.....and as you talk to him, you’ll find that he is genuinely interested in you and how you are doing.....and you’ll discover that he will help you any way he can.....and you’ll find His appreciation for the Lord and this church to be very encouraging. (And, for \$ 29.95, you can have 5 minutes with Tom.....just kidding!)
- * I’ve found that there are quite a few people in our church like Tom, and they make labor in the Lord a lot more fulfilling than if you served the Lord and His church on your own.
- * So, take some time to get to know, and serve with, your brothers and sisters in Christ.....and enjoy a true and fulfilling LABOR UNION!

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IV. Oh, Yes.....And Did You Pick Up On Labor Help #4? It's found in part in the very first word in v. 58.....what is that word? It's the word "Therefore".

- * What's the big deal about the word "therefore"? Well, "*therefore*" is a hinge word that connects the labor truths of v. 58 with the truths suggested in previous verses.

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- * *What's the main truth that's found in the verses that precede v. 58? You can read all about it in your devotions this week, if you like.....and you will find that one of the main truths which stand out, in verses preceding v. 58, is that for God's people, who love Christ and belong to the Lord (and choose to labor for Him, I think we can safely add) – there is an eternity ahead with a lot of great rewards – And, in anticipation of those great rewards (victory over sin and death, a new body.....cool, 'cause I'm not real thrilled with the one I have now, etc.), we might as well keep on laboring for the God who makes these upcoming rewards possible.*

- * I can't wait for those rewards, fellow laborers.....can you? So, keep on serving the Lord faithfully, for eternity will reveal the **FRUIT OF OUR LABOR!**

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- * It's because of labor helps like these.....

.....laboring **IN THE LORD**, with the abilities and provisions He brings
.....laboring as doing the **WORK OF THE LORD** (He guarantees the results)
.....laboring **WITH BROTHERS AND SISTERS** in Christ (makes labor a lot more fulfilling)
.....laboring with **ETERNAL REWARDS** in mind

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.....that Paul rightfully calls you and me, in the rest of v.58, to **STAND FIRM** (as you labor, in the face of devilish attacks, as noted in Ephesians 6)

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.....and to **LET NOTHING MOVE YOU** (not discouragement, or lack of resources, or negative people) – let nothing push you away from your labor for the Lord

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.....and **GIVE YOURSELF FULLY** to the work of the Lord (for half-hearted labor doesn't accomplish much, you know!)

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- * Labor like this, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the kind of **LABOR MOVEMENT** that the Lord would be proud of! Are you ready to join me in labor for the Lord and His church?