

Abounding in the Work of the Lord

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:58-16:12

Code: 1285

Let's look together to the Word of God this morning at 1 Corinthians, chapter 16. As I suggested earlier in the service, rather than returning to our study of Matthew, we thought it would be well to, having reflected last week on the past 25 years, perhaps look ahead to the next 25 this morning. As I was asking the Lord for a portion of Scripture for which to draw your attention to give us some focus, there were so many things that flooded my mind, so many different passages and portions, and approaches, and themes that we might have considered.

But I was drawn again and again in my thinking to this rather simple portion of Scripture that we pass over so very readily in Chapter 16 of 1 Corinthians. It is a portion that appears at first to be well, rather useless in terms of spiritual application except for the first few verses. But as we look deeply into it, it becomes a tremendously profound challenge to our thinking. Let me read for you beginning in verse 58 of Chapter 15. And I'll read through the 12th verse of the 16th Chapter. "Therefore my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. For as much as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality under Jerusalem. And if it be suitable that I go also, they shall go with me. Now I will come unto you when I have passed through Macedonia, for I do pass through Macedonia and it may be that I will abide, yea and winter with you that ye may bring me on my journey wherever I go. For I will not see you now by the way, but I trust to tarry a while with you if the Lord permit. But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost for a great door, and effectual has opened unto me, and there are many adversaries. Now if Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear for he worketh the work of the Lord as I also do. Let no man therefore despise him but conduct him forth in peace that he may come unto me; for I look for him with the brethren. As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren, but his will was not at all to come at this time; but he will come when he shall have a convenient time." We'll stop there.

Now as you read through that, you probably not only were not profoundly blessed, you don't even remember what it was about. It seemed like a lot of rather busy details about Paul's goings here and there. And at first glance, that's exactly what it is. But at second glance, as you look deeply into it, you find that it reveals his perspective on serving the Lord.

Go back to verse 58 for a moment and we'll begin with the phrase, "always abounding in the work of the Lord." Now Paul gives us this very great statement that we are to be steadfast, that means consistently moving ahead, immovable, never distracted to the side, resolutely pursuing our goal and always abounding in the work of the Lord because we know it's not in vain when we know it's in the Lord. In other words, we are always giving ourselves to that which we know has eternal value. And we are to be steadfastly, immovably, resolutely committed to doing the work of the Lord because of its eternal quality. And we never waiver from that.

And you know, we sit at a time in history here in our church when so much has been done that the tendency for us is to simply ride out that which has been prepared for us with a lower level of commitment than those who gave us this legacy. That would be a tragedy. We must always, it says in verse 58, "always," at all times it means, "be abounding in the work of the Lord." Now the word abounding is a very important word, it means to overdo it, basically that's what it means, to overdo it, to go beyond. It isn't the idea of just doing enough to get by. It is the idea of doing, get this now, as much as is possible. The way to work the work of the Lord is to do as much as is possible, to go to the very extremity of your limits, to go as far as you can go, to do as much as you can do, as well as you can do it. So overdo it.

In Ephesians 1:8, and it tells us that God has overdone it in this way, "in which He has abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence." He didn't just give us enough to get by. He gave us as much as was possible for us to handle. Magnanimously did God give to us. In Philippians 1:9, Paul says, "I pray that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment." And not just enough to get by, but more than is just enough. In 1 Thessalonians 3:12, it says, "The Lord is to make you to increase and to overdo it in loving one another and all men." In chapter 4, verse one of the same 1 Thessalonian Epistle, "We are to abound more and more." And in verse 10, it says the same thing, "We are to abound or increase more and more." And you'll remember that the giving of the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8, "Out of their poverty, there came an overabounding liberality." In other words, they did as much as was possible from their poor circumstance.

So the word means not to just do enough to get by, but to overdo it. And that's really I think what is the key to this church. The reason this church is unique, and the reason the church has become what it is, is because there were people who were willing to do more than what was just enough. There were people who were willing to do as much as they could possibly do. That's the calling of God to the work.

Now this entire passage, as we move into 16 then, reflects off of this concept. It's about doing the work of the Lord. You'll notice verse 10, it says at the end of the verse about Timothy, "He worketh the work of the Lord." So Paul is talking in verse 58 about abounding in the work of the Lord, in Chapter 16, verse 10 about Timothy doing the work of the Lord, and we assume then that the

passage in between is about the work of the Lord. And having said we are to overdo it in the work of the Lord, He now tells us how to overdo it. And He gives us, and I'll give you about eight principals of abounding in the work of the Lord.

There's an illustration I want to share with you before that though. Turn to Philippians Chapter 2. And I think the life of Epaphroditus may serve to us as a graphic picture of what it means to overdo it. In verse 25 he mentions the name of this man, Epaphroditus to the Philippians. And he calls him a brother. He calls him a companion. He calls him a companion in labor. He calls him a fellow soldier. He calls him a messenger. And he calls him a minister, a tremendous list of credentials for this man.

And he said that "Epaphroditus longed after you," the idea there being of an aching heart. He had just an aching heart for the Philippians. He longed for them. "And he was full of heaviness." In other words, he bore a tremendous burden. He was, and it's really kind of a double statement in its fullness. Not only did he have heaviness, but he was full of heaviness. He was profoundly depressed, if you will, "because he knew that you heard that he was sick." In other words, his depression came not because he was sick, but because he was concerned that the Philippians would be sorrowful over his sickness. He longed for them so deeply that he did not want them to feel bad about him. Now that's a selfless man. He was sick, verse 27. "He was sick near unto death." He was deadly ill.

"But God was merciful, not only to him but to me also," says Paul, "because I didn't want to lose him or I would have had sorrow upon sorrow. And I have sent him to you eagerly so that when you see him you may rejoice," and so forth. "Receive him in the Lord with gladness, and hold him in high reputation." Now watch verse 30, "because it was for the work of Christ that he was near unto death." Now that's overdoing it. He didn't regard his life in order to supply your lack of service toward me. In other words to fulfill the service that Paul needed and that couldn't be rendered to him by the absent Philippians, Epaphroditus literally gave his life. He did as much as was possible.

You see, that's what it means to serve the Lord, not to do as little as is possible and get by, but as much as is possible to the point where you would even give your life. Now that goes against the grain of our leisure oriented society, and it's tough to get a handle on that concept on the day in which we live.

We are called to overdo it in God's work. Now what does that mean? Let's look at Chapter 16 and see what it means. And let me just mention this people. I really believe that we are living in an era when this is hard for us to grasp because most people don't know what it is to work hard. Sixty percent of our people in America, 60% of the employed people in America don't manufacture or produce anything. They're strictly involved in service activities. And in a sense, we've lost a sense of work and labor. And of course we get pumped into us forever and a day, the leisure approach to life. Now we're not living in a day when hard work was a part of life. And it's difficult for us not to see our Christianity in the same low level line of commitment that we tend to see everything else in life.

And Paul is trying to tell us something here that really speaks to our era. And I hope we can get a grasp on it. We tend not to be able to commit ourselves unto death, as it were, to the cause of Christ, to the service of the Lord, to the work of the ministry. We are not, as Paul said to Timothy, "diligent to be approved of God, workmen that need not to be ashamed." We don't know really what hard work is.

We tend so much toward the ease of the flesh because that's what we're being told is right. And you know, you don't want to overdo it. You don't want to get high blood pressure, and so forth, and so on. And I might add that that doesn't come from work. That usually comes from anxiety. In fact the best thing for people may be exercise, as they're telling us now, when we have to exercise to compensate for the fact that we're not engaged in physical activity in our work. But going beyond all of those physical things and cultural things, the mandate of the work of God is that we are to overdo it, that we are to go to the limits, and the extremes of our capacities in working for the Lord.

Now let me give you eight things that are involved in that in Chapter 16. And we see them by illustration from Paul. They aren't commands. They're illustrations that we see in the flow of the text. Number one, if you're going to really do as much as is possible, you must begin with liberal giving, liberal giving. Verse one begins, "Now concerning the collection," sound familiar? We've heard that all our lives. Oh, another message on the collection. You know we sort of, whenever we hear somebody making a pitch for money, we sort of recoil a little bit. Sit on your wallet Martha. Don't let him get it no matter what he says. And we have a sort of a basic resistance to that.

And I really believe that the church in many ways, has resistance to that because it has been abused so much. So many of us have suffered for so long in situations where unbiblical approaches have been made to get money, that we feel like we're getting conned all the time. And maybe we have been. And that's not right. And really, people have become resistant to the appeal for money because it has been so abused.

But Paul says, "The work of the Lord begins here, concerning the collection." This must occur. Now look at the verse he says. "I have given orders to the church in Galatia, and I'm just telling you to do the same thing concerning the collection." Now what is he talking about? Now Paul was making a collection of money.

If you go all the way back to the day of Pentecost, you remember on the day of Pentecost of course there would be at least a million or maybe more, pilgrims in the city of Jerusalem. They were there for the feast times. They would come in. They would move into the city. And there were no inns or hotels or whatever to take care of them. And so they would stay in the homes of the people who lived there. And the government, the city, the actual religious community of the city would provide money to help those people accommodate strangers. There would be available water and food for them and so forth. And they would just move in during the feast time.

And of course when Peter preached and 3,000 were saved, some of those 3,000 were the strangers in the city. And then, the only church was the church of Jerusalem. So they didn't want to leave. They wanted to stay. Well that left the city with these rather poor people with no resources and no living there. And then the church grew thousands more, thousands more, thousands more. And so there were in that church, many who had no source of income and had left everything to come, and had stayed because the church had been born there. Additionally, the Gospel always had a marvelous, and sort of high percentage appeal to the poor people, the people without resources. And so the church in Jerusalem was filled with people who had no resource.

Paul then, as he traveled around in the Gentile world, made a collection of money from all these various churches to take back to support the poor saints in Jerusalem. This was a thing he was doing for years. Now additionally, he realized that there was a tension between the Jewish church and the Gentile church. And so he wanted to conciliate that. And he figured if he could get the Gentile church to give a great amount of money in an act of love to the Jews, that there would be a conciliating of the Jewish and Gentile elements of the church. So he had a theological perspective in mind, as well as a very economic and a very pragmatic perspective in giving them that which they needed for physical help. So Paul was moving around receiving this money.

He also had in his heart that he would not just take the money back from all these churches, but he would take representatives of each church so they could personally extend their love in the act of giving in the gift, which he eventually did. Now in that process, he here calls on the Corinthian church to be a part. And he says, "I want you to give your part to this collection just the same as everybody else in Galatia has done." And Galatia by the way, is not a city, but it's a territory with many cities. So he's saying is, "I told them. I'm telling you to get a collection."

Now he tells them how to do this, verse two. And here, we come to the very practical part. "This is of course, part of the work of the Lord, giving to the needs of those saints, and conciliating by an act of love. On the first day of the week, let every one of you," and the Greek text says, "put into the treasury, according as God has prospered." Now we are told then, that giving is to be done on the first day of the week, that's Sunday. That's why at Grace Church we take our offering, receive our offering on the first day of the week because that's what the Bible says.

Paul, writing under the inspiration, gives us a standard, or a principal, to receive our gifts upon the first day of the week. It says, "Let every one of you do this." And it says, "You are to put it into the treasury." The word there is thesauridso. We get the word thesaurus which means a treasury. You've seen a book called a thesaurus which is a treasury of words. And every Pagan temple had a treasury. And that's the same term that is used here. It is a place to hold money. It referred to the chamber, or the treasure chest, or the warehouse, or the storehouse that was very common in the temples of those days. Every temple would have its treasury, its thesaurus.

And so he is saying, "You are to bring your money and put it into the treasury." Now some people have tried to tell us that this is a private bank account or a private safety deposit box, or a private sock in your closet, or whatever. But it can't be that because the second part of the verse says, "So that when I come there be no offerings." Now if it was everybody had it in their own private place, the one thing they'd have to have when he got there was an offering to collect it. But he's saying, "I don't want to have any offerings when I come to collect this. So I'm going to ask you to be sure that you've already given it, and it's placed in the treasury, and it's there when I come."

Now this gives us a tremendous standard for giving. The work of the Lord demands, to begin with, a perspective that says every Sunday, every first day, I give to the Lord. And I place it in the treasury. The treasury is that deposit which is held by those who lead in the church, so that when any needs comes up there doesn't have to be a special collection, but rather, it is already there and available. And I am to do that every week.

I remember a man said to me, he had just joined the church and he said, "Well I'm new. And I've just joined. And I'm going to write you my check for the whole year." And I said, "Well, have you ever read 1 Corinthians 16:2?" And I opened my Bible and I said, "What does that say? Upon the first day of . . ." "Oh." I said, "You see, we don't want your check for the whole year." Some people say at the beginning, "Well I got that out of the way, wrote that deal for the whole year." You say, "what's wrong with that if he's decided how much he's gonna give?" And then some people will say at the end of the year, "Well let's see it's December 28th and I'm gonna write my check for the whole year. Cover that thing and so forth." Now I want you to know, it's better to do that than to do nothing. But the right way to do it is every week.

You say, "Well what's the difference?" The difference is that if you give every week, then you face the fact of giving every week. And you face the reality of stewardship every week. If you just determine what you're gonna do and do it all in one shot, or wait till the end and give what you give then, you're only responding to the impulse at one point in time, and you ought to be listening to the Spirit of God every week of your life about this matter of giving.

And I know in our own family, we set aside a certain amount to give all the time. We purpose in our heart. We do that regularly week by week, by week, even if we put the check in every two weeks. None the less, we work through every week what we're going to give, and then as God lays it on our hearts, we will change that and alter that as we feel the Spirit of God directing us to give more, as God lays it upon our hearts. And that happens all the time. And I'm reluctant to use myself as an illustration. But just recently, I felt in my heart that I should, I don't know why, I just felt that I wanted to give a gift of X-number of hundred dollars extra to the church because the Lord seemed to lay it on my heart. And my response initially was, "Well the Lord then if you want me to do that, then you provide that." That's an easy kind of commitment, right?

And then, through a totally unexpected avenue, I received that exact amount given to me. And then I said, "Now Lord, I'm just gonna check back in and make sure I had that right impulse," right? I mean it was easy before I had it. Now it's a little tougher. There was a little question in my mind, and so I gave. But you see I am forced to face every week, every week, every week, the leading of the Spirit of God in my life as I give to His work. That has to be a constant pattern for me to respond to the Spirit.

And so every one of us is to do that, faithfully every week. And I believe the intention is that we give not only enough to meet the current needs, but enough so that there's a surplus so that when another need comes along and I collect collection for the poor saints, you don't have to take special offerings. It's there and you can use it. We are to give that way.

You say, "Well, how much are we to give?" Well basically, we're to abound in the work of the Lord. So whatever you determine to give, you ought to give more because you ought to overdo it and do as much as is possible. You say, "Now wait a minute. I don't have much." Well, then the Macedonians would be your illustration, 2 Corinthians Chapter 8 it says, "Out of their deep poverty, they gave liberally." Or the widow who had only a tiny little bit, and gave it all. And if you're wondering about percents, that's 100%. And Christ exalted her over the others. So whatever it is, it should be more. Don't just give as little as is possible and get by.

The whole purpose and principal here is to abound, which means you give more, and more, and more until you've given as much as is possible at the limit. You see the difficulty is we are so trapped in the materialism of our era that we find ourselves not giving, not because we have to meet our needs, but because we don't want to lessen our ability to purchase luxuries. That's a big difference. So we must be committed to giving. Now he says, "When you give, you give as God has prospered." You say, "Well how much is that?" Well there's no percent given.

May I tell you there is no percentage given ever for giving in the New Testament. May I say this, there is no percentage for giving ever in the Old Testament either. Did you know that? They're the same. There is no percentage required for giving in the Old and New Testament in the matter of what we choose to give the Lord, none. Well you say, "Well what about 10%? What about the tithe of the Old Testament?" What about it?

Ten percent was required to support the Levites. It was called the Levites tithe, or the Lord's tithe. And basically what it funded was the national government. You see Israel was a theocracy. They were a nation. They were an entity as a nation. God was their head. Under Him was the high priest. And under him were all the thousands of priests. And the thousands of priests ran the country. And they had to be supported. And so when you gave your 10% every year, that went to pay the salaries and support the livelihood of the priests. And by the way, the priests had to take a tenth of all that

they received, and give it to the high priest for his dissemination throughout the country to meet the needs of the people. So you were giving to support the government of that nation, which was a theocracy, a rule by God through His priests.

Then you gave a second 10%. And the second 10% was called the festival tithe. And it went to fund all the religious convocations in the land, all the great religious festivals and meetings. So that was 20% or close. And then you were to give a 10th every third year, which was called the welfare. That's Deuteronomy 14. The second was Deuteronomy 12. You were to give the welfare tithe every third year which was for the widows, the poor, and the strangers, and so forth in the land. And that would bring it up to about 23% or so. Then you had to pay a half shekel temple tax. You had to leave the corners of your field and any gleanings you dropped in the field for the profit sharing of the poor. And by the time you were done, you were somewhere between 20 and 25%. That was not free will giving. That was not what you chose to give to God. That was taxation. And the base was about 20 or so percent.

It's interesting that prior to that in the pre-mosaic time in the Bible, that when Joseph set up a taxation system, the first one we know about in human history in Egypt, he set it at one fifth, which is 20% to prepare them for the famine. And it's also interesting to note that the base tax rate in America right now in our day is 20%. So that has been a pretty common standard throughout all of history as we've experienced it, that there's a basic tax situation that we're to respond to. Jesus said now, when you come into the New Testament, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." And Paul says, "The government is ordained by God, so pay your taxes, tax to whom tax is due, custom to whom custom is due, tribute to whom tribute is due." But don't ever confuse that with giving to the Lord.

In the Old Testament it said again, and again when they built the tabernacle, they build the temple, "Whatever each man willingly in his heart desires to give, so let him give." It says give generously. In the Proverbs it says, we're to give the first fruits. We're to give whatever is in our heart to give. That's always been the standard, Old Testament or New Testament. So we are to pay our taxes.

But that's not what he's talking about here. Here he's saying give. You say, "How much?" Whatever the Lord's prospered you. "Well John are there any principles that I should follow? How do I know how much?" Well first of all, it ought to be sacrificial. It ought to be sacrificial as the illustration of the Macedonians indicates. "They gave out of their deep poverty." There ought to be a sense of sacrifice like the widow's mite. She was the one Jesus honored and exalted, because she gave everything she had. And because God has given us the greatest example of giving, and He gave, and He gave until He sacrificed His own Son. So giving is to be sacrificial.

Giving also is to be realized as an investment. You're not giving it away. You're investing it with God. In 2 Corinthians 9 it says giving is this, "You sow and you will reap." In Galatians 6 it says, "Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap." And in 2 Corinthians 9 it says, "You sow sparingly.

You reap sparingly. You sow bountifully. You reap bountifully." In other words, you're going to get a return on what you sow. You sow a little, you reap a little. You sow a lot, you reap a lot. Whenever you give to God you are investing with God, and God will give you a dividend on that investment. People say, "Well I don't have enough." Well maybe the reason you don't have enough is because you don't give enough. Because if you gave, God would give you back. And the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 9, "He'll not only give you bread for your food," that is take care of your physical needs, "but he'll increase your spiritual riches."

So to begin with, we need to do as much as is possible to the very limit in terms of our giving. People say, "Well we're in economic problems and so forth, and so on, and all of this." And that isn't the issue. The issue is that no matter what kind of economic problems we have, we all have still the mandate from God to do more than we're doing. It's not a question of need. All of us are more well healed than any society in human history's been.

And we are to plan carefully what we are to give as God has prospered us, sacrificially investing with God. And Jesus said in Luke 6, "You give and I'll give back to you. Press down. Shaken together and running over." Remember that verse? Luke 6:38. I always think of crackers when I read that verse because of those little boxes. I like those little cheese crackers. And you know you get that box and you shake it a little bit, and all the crackers are in the bottom, and it's half empty. But the Lord says, "When you give to me. I'll give back. Press down. Shaken together, and still running over." I like that. So God is not doing as little as is possible, but as much as is possible. And that's the way we are to respond. Generosity.

So, if we are to see the next 25 years of Grace Church be what the last have been then we're gonna have to give in a generous sacrificial, abundant manner, as those in the past have given to provide this for us. And the temptation, believe me people, is to sit in all that has been provided by that group of people, and just take it, and not make the same level of commitment to give for the future. You say, "But we've got all our buildings." Buildings are only the base. There is a world to be reached. And we must be faithful to take the foundation and move them here. So God's work demands giving.

And He says that in verse 3, "When I come to you, whoever you approve," that is whichever men you would like to approve, "I will send them to bring your liberality to Jerusalem." In other words, I want some people to go along with the money. "And if it's a suitable time that I can go also, then we'll go together." In other words, if I've gotten enough money and it's the right time for me to go, we'll all go together. So you be ready, he says, and you have a surplus.

You know, if just everybody at Grace Church gave a tenth, we'd probably suffer about a \$5 million annual increase. And I think we could find something to do with that in terms of reaching the world for Christ, if we just responded that way. And I'm not saying you should give a tenth because that's not a Biblical mandate, but it would be a nice thought. Anyway, I'd really hope that we'd all give more than

that. But even that would be a dramatic increase. That's between you and the Lord.

The second point that I want to make, if we are to do the work of God and to do it to the very limits, to commit ourselves fully to it, we must have a vision for the future, a vision for the future. Notice what Paul says in verse 5, "Now, I'll come to you when I have passed through Macedonia. For I do pass through Macedonia." Now all he's really saying is I'm gonna come to you, but first I have to come along to Macedonia. Corinth was in Macedonia so he says, "When I come to Macedonia I'll get to you. I'm gonna come to you." And I don't want to make a big issue out of this, because I don't think Paul is intending it in the passage. It's just a note to tell them he's coming. But it speaks to me of the fact that the man was forever planning. He was never content with the status quo. He was always dreaming of something new. There was always a vision in his heart. There was always a goal. There was always an objective. There was always an unconquered world. There was always an uncharted sea. There was always an untracked path across a mountain, always something to pull his heart, to lure him to that region beyond. He was always looking ahead, always with a vision for the future.

And that, people, I believe is the key to the next 25 years at Grace church is we cannot say, "Oh, look what was done in the past, and we've arrived, and isn't it wonderful!" As I've said so many times, I think we've built the launching pad, and God's going to give us the responsibility of shooting the rocket off. We have a tremendous responsibility in the legacy that we've received. And the responsibility is not just to accept what's been done for us and sit and take it, but to invest what we have in the future from this base, and see what God can do. We have such great hopes and dreams of what can be done if Christ tarries, and if God is gracious to us in the future.

I have those kinds of visions. I have those kinds of dreams and plans for the future. I feel that there's so many things we've never done, so many souls we've never touched here in this city, in this state, in our country, and around the world. And I feel in so many cases, they have such a jaded view of Christianity that they can't get over the chaos of Christian television and radio, and so forth. And I feel that there are many who are trying to bring some sanity to the perspective. And I think we have a tremendous responsibility in our radio, and in our tapes, and in other ways.

To give you an illustration of it, I feel this country needs help in terms of the family. Something's gotta turn the family around. And it's more than just rhetoric, and it's more than just to rang about it. It's got to come from an understanding of what the Bible teaches so that the church gets back to living it. We can't keep yelling our Christian principals at a non-Christian world. They don't care. What we've gotta do is get our act together as believers, and get our homes and our marriages, and all those things right. And then we'll be able to be the salt and light of the world. And I believe that what we've been saying about the family across America. And boy the mail is incredible whenever we do anything on the family. And what we've seen happen here is just a taste of what can happen in our country. And I've asked the Lord in the last month, "Somehow Lord, help us to get this out. How can we get it out? How can we reach this country with this message?

And just well not long ago, maybe a week or so ago, I sat down with the people from Moody Films. And they said, "John we would like, we've listened to the family feuding album series and we would like to take all of that material, and we'd like to do an entire film series on that. And we'd like to do it, and then distribute it across America. And we have distribution across Britain, all of the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, everywhere we can take that series. And all you have to do is just do it and we'll take care of getting it out all over this country and everywhere else where English is spoken." Well I was just thrilled. I said, "Well how do you want to do it?" And they said, "We want to do it just the way you want to do it." I said, "Well if I were gonna do it, I'd just preach it." And they said, "Okay, that's the way to do it."

So starting February 14th, Valentine's Day, we're gonna start a six Sunday night series on the family. We're gonna do it right here in this auditorium. And they're gonna have cameras around. I don't know how all they're gonna do it. But we're just gonna have a great time. We're gonna do that family series. They're gonna take it and spread it all over the English speaking world for us. That's exciting! That gives you plenty of time if some of you want to lose weight because we will have audience shots *[Laughter]*. I just thought I'd give you a lot of warning on that.

But we have all kinds of dreams, and all kinds of things, and God is still placing them at our feet, isn't he? I mean we have not begun to touch what God can do. We're just 25 years of threshold. Remember that last Sunday night? Threshold, just built the base. And now, the challenge. We have such great plans. You know the other night, well every Sunday it seems like when the hockey team the Kings is in town, there's a group of players that come to our church, and they bring players from the visiting teams, and God's beginning to move through the National Hockey League in a wonderful way. And that's really exciting to see.

The elders the other night talked through a tremendous challenge. We have resources now where they're gonna send the message of Jesus Christ on a cassette tape, one of our tapes that presents Jesus Christ, as a Christmas gift to every single player in professional hockey in the United States. It's gonna be distributed through the Christians on each team. But this is just one other avenue through which God is using Grace Church and all of the contacts and people that we have to touch lives. So the future is exciting for us, the flocks, the fellowship groups. We see so many things that God has yet to do. And we have to have a vision for the future.

The third one, sure we're gonna give, and we're gonna have a vision for the future, and we're gonna lay some plans for the future. But we have to also have a sense of flexibility, a sense of flexibility. You know, you can't get everything so anchored in its concrete roots that God can't change it. And we've learned that through the year. Look at verse 6. I just love these two verses, 6 and 7. I think about them often when something changes, you know, some of the great plans you make change.

Listen to this, "And it may be that I will abide yea and winter with you that you may bring me on my journey wherever I go. For I'll not see you now by the way, but I trust to tarry a while with you if the Lord permits." And when you think of the Apostle Paul, you think of this hard nosed, tough, resolute, absolute, definitive, declarative, almost dictator type of a guy who's got all of his plans and all the things in order, and in line, and organized, and led, and finalized. And then he says, "Well I think I'll come. And if I can come I might stay a little while. And I'd sure like to stay a while if I could if the Lord permits." I just really identify with that as a sense of flexibility. Great dreams, great plans, great ambitions, great hopes, and yet all of them submitted to the fact that the Lord has to allow it. And he uses the word, "if the Lord permit me", or the Lord overturns it, or the Lord turns it over, if the Lord makes it happen, if the Lord flips the switch if you will; flexibility. That's the adventure you know.

And that's why I never set too many goals in too solid a concrete base because I always want to make sure the Lord is gonna permit it to happen. We've seen the Lord change us, and thinks alter and go one direction, then another direction. I don't know if you know this, but David Livingston, that great missionary to Africa, spent all of his early years preparing to serve the God in China. Did you know that? And God changed all of that. And the Lord will do that. There's a tremendous need to be flexible.

In Acts 16 you have the classic illustration of Paul, and he says, "We wanted to go to Asia and the Holy Spirit stopped us. So we decided to go to Bithynia and the Holy Spirit stopped us." They couldn't go east, they'd been there. They couldn't go south. The Spirit said no. Couldn't go north. The Spirit said no. Only one way to go, west. They kept going west, they hit the Aegean Sea. And that night, Paul had a vision and a man in Macedonia said, "Come over and help us." And the Gospel leaped across the Aegean Sea. And it stopped being a middle-eastern cult in the view of people. And it became that which invaded the Greek world. The Holy Spirit said no, no, no, yes. And he walked down that fine corridor, the only option that was left to him. And the Spirit of God opened it up. There is a persistent goal that you go after with all your being, and yet at the same time, you are flexible to allow the Spirit of God to make changes.

You know, I think about that building we had all planned and designed, and everything for three and a half million dollars that we were going to build. And all of a sudden the Lord just pulled a curtain down and said, "No, that isn't what I had in mind. Scale it down to about a sixth of that and you can have it. And it's gonna work out wonderfully. In just a little time you'll be seeing it beginning to be built." Flexibility. And I'm excited about that because I know that's God's plan, flexibility. We have great dreams for the future. But they're all subject to God's leading.

There's a fourth principal that I want you to see here. If we are to do God's work to the very limits of our capacity, if we are to do more than just get by, if we are to do as much as is possible, if we are to about in the work of the Lord; then it must not be superficial. It must not be shallow, but it must be

thorough. I'm committed to excellence. I'm committed to thoroughness. And I really believe that excellence is the sine qua non of service to Christ. It's the most important element. Just doing it excellently, just doing it the best you can do it; you can't settle for anything less than that. You can't offer God anything less than that.

And so he says in verse 6, "I really want to spend the winter with you." And then in verse 7, "I want to tarry with you." Well why is he so concerned with staying a long time? Because he wanted to do a work that was deep and lasting. He was not a short spurt guy. I remember the students when I was a student saying about one particular preacher, they nicknamed him birdbath because his sermons were so shallow. I've always remembered that. I don't want to be birdbath MacArthur, believe me. I mean there needs to be a profundity in our service, and a profundity in our ministry.

There needs to be a thoroughness, and a depth. And Paul says, "I want to come and stay." Why? Because Colossians 1:28 says, "His goal was to teach every man and warn every man, to present every man perfect." His goal in Ephesians 4 is to "perfect the saints." His goal is to take the Word of God, 2 Timothy 3, "which is able to make you perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." And it took him time. The first time he came to Corinth, he stayed a year and a half. And when he does come back in response to his statement here, he stays at least three months. And he used all the hours of the days to pour out the truth that would make them whole.

In Galatians 4 he says, "I have pain." He uses the term for travail or childbirth. He says, "I literally have the pain of childbirth until I see you formed into the image of Christ." A thoroughness. And so while we look to the future, and pursue the future, and are flexible, it is not that we are just wanting to run amuck all over the world in a shallow ministry; but we want one that is deep, and excellent, and deep, and abiding. I mean we're not interested in Gospel bombs, just flying around dropping tracks on the group. Remember that film? That's not what we're after. We're not after superficiality. We are after something that is deep, and profound, and abiding, that builds down and has lasting quality. We're not just trying to pass on a program, but to change lives.

And so there must be this. And that's the way Paul operated. Oh there were times when he stayed a little while because He was pressed and the Spirit of God would do a work anyway. And then he would write back to those people, or he would send someone back to carry it on. But basically, he was committed to a work of depth. That's really why I believe you've got to stay, and be faithful, and plug at it, and stay in there, and hang in there. Just because it gets a little tough you don't quit because you can't be superficial. There is so much superficial "Christianity." And it must really grieve the heart of God.

Let me give you a fifth principal. Doing the work of the Lord in a way that honors Him, doing His work His way, filling up all of our capacity means we give sacrificially, magnanimously, generously. We plan for the future, yet we're flexible. We're thorough, not superficial. And the, this is very important, it

means we are committed to present service, committed to present service. It's so easy for people to dream about the future and do nothing in the present. Oh, they're going to do this, or they're going to do that, or the day will come when they really get into it over here. I know they used to harp on us with this point when I was in seminary preparing for the ministry that you're never gonna really begin to do anything in the ministry if you don't begin to do it right now.

And along that line, we had a man who was an executive in the Wycliffe Bible Translators come to chapel. And he gave a message one day. And I can't remember what the message was about. But I remember one statement that he made that I've never forgotten. He said, "We have found," and I think they have more missionaries in their mission than any other agency in America. So they're very large, and they've been at it for very many years. He said, "We have never in our ministry, seen anybody who wasn't effective here become effective somewhere else." If you're not willing to do it here, you're not gonna be willing to do it over there because the geography of your feet has nothing to do with the commitment of your heart. I never forgot that. What makes you think God's gonna use you somewhere else doing some other thing if you're not even usable now?

And it's so easy you know, to get all that stuff in the future in your mind and you forget what has to be done now. The work has got to go on now. There must be a commitment to present service. So Paul says in verse 8, "I want to come to you. My dream is to come to you. But I will for now, stay here." Why? Verse 9, "Because there is a wide door of effective service open to me." I mean there's still a tremendous opportunity here. So I say, don't shirk an opportunity here and now for an unknown future. This is your proving ground. When God gave Paul an opportunity he took it. Boy, when he saw an open door, he fired through that open door. That was just the way he was. He says in 2:12 of 2 Corinthians, "When I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, a door was opened unto me." He saw a lot of doors that were open and he went through. But the door here that he sees in 16 of 1 Corinthians is right where he is.

I don't know if I can say this the way I feel it in my heart, but I can sense in our church a lot of people seeing the vision outside, and maybe letting go of the opportunity right here. When our elders met about a month ago, they were deeply concerned. We had a special meeting of elders to just look at the future of this church. And the one major thing that I remember coming out of that meeting was this statement. We must continue to strengthen the base. We must continue to strengthen the base. And they went on and they listed priority, after priority, after priority of how the base is to be continually being strengthened. There won't be anything out there. There'll never happen anything out there if this is not sustained with the efforts of all of us to the very limit of our capacity and the energy of the Holy Spirit.

Sure that's wonderful to go to Macedonia, Paul says, "But I can't leave here. There's a door open and I'm gonna serve right here." And Ephesus was quite a place. I mean it was four main highways went through Ephesus. It was a traffic center, cultures of the world crisscrossing there. The temple of

Diana dominated it. It was one of the seven wonders of the world. The temple of Diana was the bank, the sanctuary for criminals, the house of worship, the place of orgies, the meeting place for the leaders of the confederacy, the Ionian states, the Greek states. Thousands of pilgrims filled its hall, spilled over the city. The city was full of evil spirits, cults, superstitions, idols. It was crawling with sorcerers, magicians, prostitutes, magical imposters. It was the Los Angeles of its era. "What a place," Paul says, "I gotta stay. Oh I gotta stay. I gotta stay because a door is open. These people can be reached." Don't you ever forget it folks. There are lots of people in other places in the world, but there are lots of people in LA who've never met Christ too, and right here in the valley. There is a door wide open.

The other day, two reporters from the Daily News came in. They sat down and they said, "We're gonna do a special three part series on religion. And we've come to ask you what you think of religion in America. And where are we?" And we had a good time to share with them. They are looking at us and saying "Maybe you can tell us the answers." We have an open door. And I figured we didn't have to buy the advertising, they'd do it for us. So I told them what I would like to have had them print, now whether they will or not I don't know. But God has given us an open door.

It just seems to never end how God has given us the open door. And we need to be faithful right here. We have children. We have young people. We have community to reach. Don't think it's been done. It hasn't. It's been done for folks like you and others in the past, but there are unreached multitudes all around us. And so, we must be faithful where we are. The need is so great.

A sixth principal, in doing the Lord's work to the very limit of our capacity, we must accept opposition as a challenge. We must accept opposition as a challenge. I like what he says in verse 9. He says, "There's a great door and an effectual opportunity for me, and there are many," what does it say? "adversaries." "You know why I'm gonna stay," he says, "because there's so much opposition." Now if there's a lot of opposition, that means there's a lot of territory to conquer. Would you agree with that? If there's a lot of opposition, that means you're really conquering the territory of the enemy. You know it is so exciting to be in a place where you're opposed. I mean it is so exciting to be in a place where there's opposition because now you know you're cutting the path of light through the kingdom of darkness.

It often amuses me that young men will say, "Well I don't want to go to that church, and so on and so forth, because they've got problems." That's a good reason to go. They need help. Well I don't know if I'd want to go there, boy! That is a hard place. Well, if you told that to Paul that's where he goes. That's where he goes, to the hard place.

People in the east often say to me, "Well I mean, can you survive as a Christian in California?" "Oh, we're making it." "Well your children, can you hold onto your children? Are they into drugs? Or are they abandoning the faith?" "Well no, we check them out each day. We look at their eyes, and they're

okay." "But the influences, all the evil influences!" "That's right, all the evil influences are all over every place, but boy, praise be to God! We're smashing into them head on, and we're seeing God change some people. And that's kind of exciting." You see, the adversaries, they just form the challenge. And you've got to see it that way. If it's tough, that means there's something to be done there, unless of course you're simply fighting cantankerous carnal Christians. And then maybe you ought to go somewhere else, and try some unsaved people, sometimes they're easier to get along with.

Let me give you another principal. I believe that if we're going to do the Lord's work in a way in which we literally overdo it, we've got to function as a team. We have to function as a team. We begin by giving because that's what makes things possible in our particular world. Then by planning for the future, yet being flexible. In our plans and in our ministry, we are thorough. And even while we plan and look ahead, we are committed to where we are, and the open door in our midst. We accept opposition as a challenge. And we work as a team. We can't work in isolation.

And I think this is wonderfully illustrated in verse 10 and 11. Now Paul says, "If Timothy comes," and by the way Timothy did go according to Acts 19:22 and he took Erastus with him and maybe some others as well. So he says, "If Timothy comes, see that he's with you without fear. Don't intimidate him." And Timothy was basically a guy who could be intimidated. He could be intimidated in a lot of ways. Paul said on one occasion, "Let no man despise thy youth." Oh, you're so young, how could you know anything. He could be intimidated because he was young. He could be intimidated too because he wasn't worldly wise.

He got intimidated by the Ephesian Arrorists who came with their high powered genealogies, and their philosophies of the world, and they really kind of messed up his mind. And they got him into debated and arguments, and fights and squabbles. That's why Paul said to him in 2 Timothy, "Don't strive. Don't fight. Don't quarrel. You must be gentle." He could be intimidated also by the lust of his own flesh. Paul said to him, "Flee youthful lusts."

In fact at one point in his life he got so intimidated, he actually abandoned his ministry and Paul had to say, "Stir up the gift of God that is within thee. Get it on. For God has not given us a spirit of," what? "Fear." You see Timothy could be intimidated. He could know fear. And so what Paul is doing he's taking care of him. "If Timothy comes, see that he's with you without fear." He was susceptible to that. On one occasion Paul said to him, "Take a little wine for your stomach's sake." He was actually probably getting some kind of an ulcer. Now I don't know whether the wine would have helped an ulcer. People always argue about that. Some kind of a problem, diluted wine, or whatever kind, or whatever medicinal form it was, was believed to have been some kind of assistance to whatever problem he had. I don't know if it was an ulcer or not. But the point being that he had so much anxiety that he was ill over the whole situation.

So Timothy had the possibility of being intimidated. And I think what Paul is showing us here is this tremendous care for fellow workers, a team spirit. And he says at the end of verse 10, "For he is working the work of the Lord as I also am." He's part of the team. "So don't despise him. Don't look down on him and say, oh we always get second string guy, right?" I mean, "Why don't you come Paul?" Back in Chapter 4 he said, "I'm so concerned about you. I'm so upset about your sinfulness that I'm going to send Timothy. And he said he's my son in the faith and he'll bring you into remembrance of my ways." He was so much a reflection of Paul that it was as if Paul went. But to them it may have looked like a second stringer coming into town. And he says, "Don't treat him that way. You conduct him forth as you would me. He works the way I work. He works the work of the Lord that I work. And you take care of him in peace. You look over him." You see this is a team spirit. Bless Paul's heart, he cared for the people on his team. And that's the mutual kind of commitment that it takes to do God's work; supportiveness, concern, for all the brethren who labor together.

And then there's one last point, and that is this, if we are to do God's work in the future; if there is to be a bright future for us we not only work as a team, but we are sensitive to the Spirit's leading in others. It's so easy for people to get the ideas, and you want to crank them out, and you get everybody going along with your thoughts and your ideas, and you just want to run the show. But that isn't the way it works. Look at verse 12, most interesting, and he says, "Now let me just touch on our brother Apollos." Apollos was a great man. He was a great articulate preacher of the Old Testament who had become a Christian. He was not an Apostle, but he was nonetheless, a great preacher, a great man. And he said, "I greatly desired him to come to you." Now he said, "I thought Apollos ought to come because Apollos could really straighten you out." "He is a powerful man, and I wanted him to come." This is Paul's plan. "MY design was Apollos come to you, but His will was not at all to come at this time. And he'll come when he has a convenient time to come."

I like that about Paul. It would have been so easy for him to pull rank and say, "Hey fellow, I'm an Apostle. I am the Apostle Paul. I have seen Christ three times. I'm telling you to go." He didn't say that. He didn't pull rank. He just said, "You don't feel you ought to go, okay." And then he says, "He'll come when he feels it's the right time to come."

The only way we can work as a team is to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading in other people's lives. I think that's why this church has functioned so wonderfully through the years is because where there is leadership, there is also sensitivity to the Spirit's direction in the lives of people; very important truth. We have a great heritage, people. And the future is infinitely greater than the past. And the greatest tragedy of all would be for us to get to this point, and then just do as little as is possible to maintain the thing. God help us! The challenge is to do as much as is possible. What does that mean? That means to give more. That means to dream, and plan, and have vision for the future. It means while you plan, you still have flexibility. And in your plans there is thoroughness. And while you're looking ahead, you're still faithful to the present moment. And even where there's opposition,

you accept it as a challenge. And you work as a team. And you're sensitive to the Spirit's leading in other's lives.

Sidney Smith was asked why the Methodist revival was so effective. He said, "It's very simple. They are all at it. And they are always at it." And that's the key, to be all at it, and always at it. That's I believe, what God asks of us.

Let's pray. Thank you Father for the confidence we have in our hearts that if we are committed to do your work in your way, you will bless. We look to the day Lord when we can all gather here again in another 25 years and say, "Look what the Lord has done because of another generation of faithful people who were always abounding in the work of the Lord, and whose labor was not in vain." This is our desire and our prayer. We ask that you would make it so, for your own glory in Christ's name. Amen.

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