

"Do We Run in Vain?"

Scripture Passages: 1) Psalm 84
2) Matthew 6:19-24
3) Galatians 2:1-10

Moving Rock: As you know there was a period in my life where once a year I travelled to Juarez, Mexico on a mission trip. The last two times I went they were trips of high school students and their leaders. I was one of the staff people.

During one of those years we finished the construction project that we went to accomplish a day earlier than anticipated. So our hosts scrambled to find something for us to do our last day there. After that final breakfast we got in our vans and went to another church site where they were going to be building a new church building. In the middle of the vacant lot was a large pile of gravel. We were told that the pile of gravel was in the wrong place. It needed to be moved about 50 feet away. There were about 20 of us. It took us all day filling buckets and passing them in a fire brigade line. It was exhausting. I don't think I have ever felt so fully that I had labored in vain, as I did at the end of that day. Although, sometimes, our Presbyterian addiction to meetings is a close rival.

When in your life have you felt as if you labored in vain?

Paul's Situation: What we quickly learn from Paul's letters is that being the church is never easy, but filled with ups and downs and many difficult struggles. Since this is Paul's first letter, I think it safe to assume that even the self-confident, extremely gifted Paul had some self-doubt. We see that in the section of the letter we are going to read today.

After Paul left the churches of Galatia, some new teachers arrived. They were Christian-Jews from Judea. They were convinced that the Jewish laws were essential for faith and life, not only for the Jewish people but for everyone. So when they arrived in Galatia they began to teach a different Gospel from the one Paul taught, a gospel focused on following Jewish law.

In contrast, Paul had taught a Gospel of grace. He taught that trusting in God's saving grace, given to the world through Jesus Christ was all anyone needed to believe and then follow. That was Paul's message. He taught that when we receive the gift of God's grace in Christ, then we are free to live as faithful followers attentive to the leading of God's Spirit, not necessarily tied to the Jewish laws, particularly the laws of circumcision and food. The new teachers were attempting to lead the churches away from the gospel of grace to the gospel of Jewish tradition and law.

As Paul heard of this going on, he wondered whether his work in those churches had been in vain. And even more critically, he wrestled within his own heart about which gospel was true. If the gospel of law was true, then not only was his work in the churches of Galatia in vain, but all of Christ's life, death, and resurrection were in vain?

Listen as we hear of Paul's struggle. **Read Galatians 2:1-10.**

Proof and Guidance: As Paul struggled with whether both his faith and his ministry were in vain, he did two things. First, he gathered a co-worker and a person transformed by the Gospel of grace. Paul grabbed his friend Barnabas, the one who most closely knew about the ministry that he and Paul had been involved in. Then Paul grabbed Titus a Gentile whose life had been transformed by the Gospel of grace. In other words Paul brought a fellow co-worker and fruit

produced by their labor.

The second thing Paul did was he traveled to Jerusalem to talk to others who were also in ministry; so that he could affirm that the Gospel of grace he was teaching was the same Gospel being taught to the Jewish people. Also Titus could affirm that the Gospel of grace had transformed his life even as a Gentile, just as it was transforming the lives of Jews.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul was relieved to find that Peter, James, John and the other leaders were also teaching a Gospel of grace, the same Gospel he was teaching. He was also blessed when Peter, James, and John affirmed the importance of Titus' transformation and that the Gospel of grace was for everyone, not just the Jews. Paul left Jerusalem affirmed that his ministry was not in vain, nor was Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in vain.

Ministering in Vain: It seems to me, that Paul shared his story with the Churches of Galatia with the hope that they would have a fuller understanding of the Gospel; and to affirm within those churches that sharing the Gospel of grace with the world is not work done in vain.

I think this topic has two critical messages for us. First being a church that points people to Christ is not work done in vain. Like Paul, sometimes we get discouraged. We too wonder whether being the church makes sense, or has a purpose. But being a beacon for the Kingdom of God is essential work. The God of all creation has called us to this work. Our life together and our ministry are not done in vain.

Secondly, however, I think we need to be very intentional and diligent to make sure that our ministries, and the way we live life together truly do express the Gospel of grace that Jesus brought to us, taught us, and sends us out to share with the world. I want to share a little video clip with you, that I think tries to illustrate this point.

Watch the Video:

Interact Don't Just Watch: That clip is both ludicrous and incredibly sad, but often way too close to the truth.

The good news of the Gospel is meant to be shared with the world. As people following the way of Jesus we are not called to just observe our broken and hurting world, only to return to our safe church to talk about how sad it is out there. That kind of ministry truly is in vain. And yet, how often does that closely describe our life here in the church? How often do we use the church as a safe place to hide?

As followers of Jesus we are called to interact with the hurting and broken world in which we live. We are called to take the Gospel of grace out there. We all have friends whose marriage is in trouble. We all have friends who are without work. We all know single parents for whom it is impossible to do it all. We all know people unable to take out the trash, mow the lawn, pull the weeds.

Everyday we interact with person after person who hunger for just a word of grace, an act of generosity, an outpouring of love. Everyday we interact with people who need healing, and who are filled with demons, and who are outcasts. Christ calls us not to watch them from a safe distance, but to take the Gospel of grace into their lives. It is then that we will know that we don't labor in vain.

Conclusion: Sharing the Gospel of grace, following and living the way of Christ will bring healing and transformation to the world. We can be passionate about following Jesus, after all where does our treasure lie? The way of Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We are called people, called into this way of life. We are to be God's light, God's hands, God's feet, God's instruments in the world. Let's face it to only gather in the safety of the church is vanity. Going out into the world is ministry. Let us not be afraid. Amen.