

Text: 2 Timothy 4:1-8

Title: "Paul's Local Church Laborer Handbook"

Time: 9/1/2019 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Labor Day is tomorrow, and I thought we might say a few things about laboring for Christ this morning. I was truly blessed by the labors of many who helped with my daughter's wedding a couple of weeks ago. Some did a lot of work to make our goodbye to the Hendersons special last week. The fact of the matter is that the work of Christ in the local church is a lot of work, and someone must do that work for the ministry to prosper.

And just like every workplace carefully outlines in an employee handbook how it wants its work to be performed, we have something of an employee handbook in this passage from the Apostle Paul when it comes to our work for Christ in our local church.

I work for a company that has a "Code of Business Conduct" that is 25 pages long covering 46 different topics including workplace harassment, religious accommodation, internet usage, drug and alcohol-free work environment, and much, much more.

The good news is that when Paul speaks of what is necessary to become a good worker in the local church, he was not writing with concerns about corporate litigation. His context was much different. He was writing his last words to his successor in the work of the gospel about the one thing truly worth living for. Doing so, he basically covers two things: (1) a charge, and (2) a course.

I. Paul's charge for the local church laborer (vv. 1-5).

A. It was a solemn charge (v. 1). The word *charge* is a solemn word that means that we need to take something very serious-

ly (see Luke 16:28, where the rich man is asking Abraham to send Lazarus back to charge his brothers not to come to the place of torment he found himself in). This charge is solemn because it is given in view of awesome accountability (the presence of Christ who is God and Judge).

Illustration: Bryan has spent some Sunday School sessions speaking about authority in the home. He illustrated the need of the home for God's plan in this regard by referring to the importance of an organizational chart to any organization. He also talked about the need for onsite commanders in a crisis, which is part of any emergency response plan. Even the world understands the need to remember to whom we report in order to have a successful operation.

Application: Paul is reminding us to whom we report as church members. He is not saying, "I charge thee because you report to me." No, he is giving Timothy the Lord's charge, because Timothy reports to God and the Lord Jesus Christ who shall judge both the living and the dead at His appearing. We ought to take our responsibilities as members of a gospel church very seriously because they come to us as a solemn charge from the Head of the Church who will hold us accountable.

This past week I have spent some time in 1 Corinthians in my devotions. I mention that because my heart was especially challenged and blessed by the first verse of chapter 4: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." The word *minister* in that verse is a nautical term that means literally *under-rower*. This was the person in the bottom of the boat that made the boat move at the captain's orders.

Paul says, when someone thinks about who and what I am, I want them to think that I am my Lord's under-rower and a steward of the mysteries or revelation of God.

That reminder was both a challenge and a comfort to me. It was a challenge because I had to ask myself whether I have ministered as a church member in such a way that people think of me that way. And it was a comfort, because it means that I can concentrate on giving my life to those two simple things without worrying about all the other expectations people may have for me, which brings me to the next thing we want to see about this charge.

B. It was a charge focused on the Word of God (v. 2).

Application: Teaching, learning, believing, and obeying the Bible is what the responsibility of a Christian local church member is all about. When Paul gave his final solemn charge to Timothy, he did not say “serve God your own way” or “teach what you think is important”; he said, “Preach the Word.” If we miss the teaching of the Word of God, we know little or nothing of our most important responsibility as Christians. The solemn charge left behind by Paul was focused on the Word of God.

Illustration: Have you ever listened to a baseball game on the radio and heard a crack of the bat on the ball that told you that that it was going somewhere far away? When a batter hits a fast ball just right, the crack of the bat is a distinctive sound.

Application: Paul charges young Timothy to focus on the Word of God, and he indicates that if he does so his preaching will have a distinctive sound. He does not mention great oratory skills or entertaining audio-visual media, but rather three important characteristics of healthy Bible teaching:

1. “in season and out of season” faithfulness – This is long-term stable consistency in good times and bad. It is not that we are committed to God’s Word only when things are going well, nor is it only when things are going badly. In the Corin-

thian passage I mentioned, verse 2 says simply, “It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.” That faithfulness is this in-season and out-of-season consistency.

Application: Remember that both “in season” times and “out of season” times can be temptations for a lack of faithfulness. When things are going well for us, maybe we think we can be less faithful. In those times we need a vision for what more must be done. When things are difficult, maybe we think it is no use to be faithful. In those times we need to remember the promise of the Lord, that our labor is not in vain in Him.

2. “reprove and rebuke” - We ought to be convicted of our sin before the Word of God and caused to change. Sin is the sinner’s problem; repentance is the sinner’s solution.

3. “exhort with longsuffering and doctrine” - We spoke of longsuffering last week. We need compassionate forgiveness, patience with people, and detailed doctrine as we teach, learn, believe, and seek to better obey God’s Word.

C. It was a charge that anticipated a need for endurance (vv. 3-5).

Illustration: I had a nice visit with my dad last week. One of the things that has changed about those visits has to do with how dad has become hard of hearing. He has a hearing aid, but he does not like to use it much. Just about everything I said to dad last week had either to be shouted or repeated. Dad’s ears do not work the way they once did.

Application: Our Bibles tell us that when God speaks through His Word, people need to have ears to hear (remember the letters to the seven churches in Revelation). Unbelievers are completely deaf in this regard. The most quoted OT passage in the NT makes this point (Acts 28:25-27). Only God’s Spirit can give someone ears to hear what God says in His Word.

But in our passage, Paul's concern is slightly different from that. He says that the time would come when Christians, who can hear, would begin to go deaf and lose their ability to hear. The tragedy of this condition is not only its deafness, but the fact that this is something that our enemy convinces us to choose for ourselves. Who would choose to be deaf? Well some do.

Illustration: The father of a girl I once dated used to turn off his hearing aid because his wife, her mother, was very talkative. Getting back to my dorm room on time after a visit in their home listening to Mom was always a challenge.

Many Christians do that to the Lord and His Word today. One thing you have to say about the Bible is that it is "very talkative" in a sense. It is a big book. God has had a lot to say. And it will be the natural tendency of our flesh, especially in our age of Instagram and Youtube and the never-ending din of rock-n-roll music, to turn our ears away from the truth so that our ears (and eyes) can be better entertained by something less complicated and more attention-grabbing. When we turn away from the truth in this way, however, we are not only entertained, we are lied to, and those lies destroy the soul.

How might we teach, learn, believe, and obey God's Word in local churches filled with people who have chosen to turn their ears away from the truth toward fables? Paul tells us how (v. 5): "watch thou" (especially in prayer); "endure afflictions" (faithfulness); "do the work of an evangelist" (preach the gospel and make disciples); "make full proof of your ministry" (finish the job).

The charge of the local church member is solemn, focused on the Word of God, and requires endurance. Will you accept the Lord's charge? If so, it will set your life on a certain course.

II. Paul's course for the local church laborer (vv. 6-8).

A. The starting blocks - a living sacrifice (v. 6).

Note: Verse 6 is one of those verses in which those who are using a more recent translation have a distinct advantage over the King James Version. The KJV sounds as though it is talking about the end of the course when it says, "For I am now ready to be offered," but the tense in the original makes it clear that Paul is talking about the beginning of the course, not the end. The phrase should be translated, "For I have already been offered," or as our NASB says, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering."

Application: There is a sense in which the apostle Paul experienced death long before he came close to dying. In Rom. 12:1, he begins his chapter on local church membership beseeching believers to become living sacrifices. This is how the course of faithfulness begins for the local-church laborer. You may be saved, but you are not on the course of a faithful local-church member unless you have come to the point of self-sacrifice in your own life, the point where you sincerely pray for Christ as He did for you, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." That is where the course starts.

B. The obstacles -- fighting, finishing, keeping (v. 7).

Application: The course Paul is talking about is an obstacle course, like one used to train soldiers for battle. More accurately, it is the front lines of war, not basic training. Paul said the fight was a good fight. It was certainly a hard fight, but it was also a good fight. The work of the local-church member is the work of a soldier at war. There are battles to be fought and won.

Then he said his course was finished. Each of us gets a different course to run as local church members. Some of us are

called to start earlier in life, some later. Our task is to run with patient consistency and finish our course.

Finally, Paul said that his labors for Christ required Him to keep the faith. He was to run *his* course, but to keep *the* faith. It was not his faith he was supposed to keep, but the faith once delivered to the saints. We all have a different course to run as church members, but not a different faith to keep. It is the same truth of the Word of God that we embrace faithfully together with single-hearted unity. This is what the course Paul speaks of requires.

C. The finish line - a reward (v. 8).

Illustration: Last week I heard a story about coal miners in Harlin County, KY, who were laid off by a bankrupt employer without their final paychecks. They have taken over a last train shipment of coal in protest.

Application: Our God cannot go bankrupt. The finish line of the course of the local church member is a time of reward. Paul sat in Nero's prison awaiting execution but looking with anticipation for his future ("Henceforth"). The end of his course would be a wonderful reward.

Conclusion: Should the Lord tarry, every one of us will come to that final point when we know the words we are writing or speaking will be some of our last. Paul could write what he did at this time because he could look back with satisfaction on a life that had kept the charge of the local-church member and had begun and finished all the requirements of the local-church member's course.

Will we be assured of our reward as Paul was of his? We can be only if we are willing to labor as he labored. Think of the regrettable circumstance of looking back in our final hour and having to say, "I tired of the fight, I quit my God-assigned

course, I forfeited the faith for things far less valuable." What will be laid up for such a one then when he appears before God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the living and the dead at His appearing?

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching