

**Date:** April 22-23, 2023

**Title:** *Embracing Hope*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 15:58

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We have been working our way through First Corinthians really going back to last year. And at Easter, we jumped back into First Corinthians 15 because it's about the resurrection of Jesus. We've called this four-week series *Embracing Hope*, and if you were around over the last couple of weeks, we looked back at the resurrection to talk about how we can have hope in a world that sometimes feels hopeless.

Then last week we talked about looking ahead and how we can have hope by looking forward. And I started last week by saying that I had given myself one of those texts to teach on that was really challenging. It was long. It had all kinds of convoluted ideas that went in all kinds of directions. And so, I just acknowledge that.

Well, this week is exactly the opposite. There's one verse, and it's really easy to understand. Now, the challenge with something that's easy to understand and relatively straightforward is that sometimes you can so simplify it that it becomes almost meaningless. Here's what I mean. If you were to think about cliches, they're generally statements that people make that are platitudes that are kind of true, but they don't necessarily help you.

For example, here are just a few. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I mean, has that ever helped anybody for real? Like to tell somebody who's going through a hard time, hey, if it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. I think there was a song like that a while back, and every time I hear that song, I think that it is ridiculous to tell somebody who's in the middle of a crisis.

Here's another one, all that glitters isn't gold. So don't reach for something that you want because it may not be what you think. I mean, is that helpful? Or someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Just a way to say yeah, you're an unhappy person. Only time will tell. Or he's as old as the hills. Or don't cry over spilled milk. Or all's well that ends well. And the one that I want to think about today is the idea that you can look within for what you need now.

If you're tracking with this, the idea of the series and the reason that I divided the text

with a long, complicated one and then a short verse today instead of splitting it more, is because thematically, what we have when we talk about hope is look back to the resurrection and there's hope when we look back. There's hope when we look ahead to the resurrection of the body and the reign of Jesus Christ, and then this verse that says, therefore. So, look back, look ahead, therefore, stand firm, be immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because the work of the Lord isn't in vain. I'm going to say that this is look within.

But here's the challenge. As soon as I say look within, what we hear in our culture is the answer is within you. And the reason we have this idea is that in our movies, in our TV shows, there's often a moment, you've seen this moment, where you're watching a show and somebody's up against great odds. And then they have a conversation with a guru, a friend, or somebody in their life, and the friend says all you need to do is look within. When you look within, you're going to find the answer that you need. Does anybody know what I'm talking about? And then they look within, you know, they have a moment of reflection, they're like, oh yeah, it's in here. And then they go, they suddenly win, the movie turns, and they become the hero of their own story.

And so, our idea a lot of times when we say look within, is look within because the strength is within you. But in First Corinthians 15, I don't think that's the idea. I think the idea is, therefore, whenever you see therefore in a passage, you say what's it there for? It's there because when you look back, when you look ahead, now you have the strength to say I'm going to continue even in the challenges that are in front of me.

On Easter weekend, we talked about this idea of fog a little bit and how sometimes in our lives we end up in a place where there's fog, where we're not exactly sure how to go forward or how to go back. And so, we end up in a place where what we do is say, I don't know what's next.

And here's my guess, and this, I'm guessing is true whether you're somebody who's been a follower of Jesus for 30 years and you know your Bible well and you've been a church person, or you're a person who says I'm not sure I'm a church person. I'm not sure that I know my Bible. I'm not even sure I believe. Here's my guess, and that is almost every one of us has somewhere in our lives where we say what it is that God asks of me or what it is that the Bible says or what it is that I think God wants and what I think is best don't seem to square.

And that's the fog. And that's the moment where you say, is it worth continuing on the course that I'm on? And so, verse 58, the Apostle Paul, writer of First Corinthians says, therefore here's what I want you to do. I want you to stand firm, simple image that just means to stand and not be moved by stuff. And a little earlier in the chapter in First Corinthians 15 he says don't be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals because there are people in our lives who will tell us that following the ways of Jesus doesn't make sense. That the pathway that God has for you isn't the best pathway. And so, to stand firm means to say I will stand in what God has rather than what the world says.

And then he says to be immovable. The only place this word is used is in the New Testament. And these two words are probably just simple synonyms. Paul's probably just trying to say, I'm trying to find a way to say it in a fresh way, so you get it that the idea of not giving up, not changing course, not stepping into the place where the fog is foggy and saying, I'm getting off course because I don't know for sure to say that is what I'm going to do.

And then he says this, always abound in the work of the Lord. Now my question is, how do you hear that? My guess again, is that many of us hear that and we think that it means church stuff. The work of the Lord is like church stuff. That we do church stuff. And certainly, the work of the Lord is church stuff. There's a lot of stuff that happens around a church that I hope is the work of the Lord. There's probably some that isn't if we're honest, but our hope is that that's true. But the work of the Lord isn't confined to the church. And this is really important because the work of the Lord is something that you do in your everyday life by being a follower of Jesus Christ wherever you are and bringing the perspective of Jesus to the place where you live, to your company, to the school that you're at, where you bring it to your dorm, you bring it to the place where you're providing healthcare, where you're providing goods and services, where you're providing economic opportunity, and where you produce art and beauty. Those are places where you're bringing the work of the Lord to bear.

Now, that isn't to say that there's not some church stuff that's part of it that we don't collectively come together and say, how can we take what God has called to be the church and make it the best rendition of what God calls it to be as we possibly can. But what he's doing here is he's saying these are the things that I don't want you to lose track of, that you stand firm and that you in many ways abound constantly in

the work of the Lord. And then he says this statement. He says because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Again, if you were around on Easter, we talked about the word vain and some of the different ways that that's translated from the original language. This is just one of the words and it means useless or empty. It means something that just doesn't have an impact. And he says, here's what I want you to know, that every decision you make, every time that you choose to follow the directives of the Lord God of the Bible, that it's not empty. It's not useless. It's not pointless.

Paul could really speak to this because Paul was somebody who experienced the concept of pain and difficulty. In Acts chapter 20 we read about Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders. Here are just a few of the things that we see in this text. In verse 19 and following it says this, "I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents." And so here he's very simply saying that there are incredible trials that he persevered, and he had tears and humility in trying to live out the work of God where he was.

Then he says this about getting on God's agenda rather than his own. Verse 22, "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there." And what we know is when he got to Jerusalem it wasn't pretty. And so, he's basically saying my comfort, my agenda, is secondary to what God wants. Verse 23 in Acts 20, it says, "I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me." And Paul writes about knowing that your work in the Lord is not in vain. He's not writing from one who said, you know what, I've got my life and everything's going well, and I spend, you know, an hour or two kind of casually volunteering. He's talking about one who is put in prison for the very things that he believed, who was pushed to the edge.

In verse 29, he talks about this idea of the sheep. He says, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock." And in other places, he talks about his heart for people. In verse 31 he talks about the internal conflict that exists and the things that he renounced in order to, in essence, serve the purposes of God.

Now, why do I point all of this out? Because again, my guess is that wherever you are today, wherever you're coming from, you have an area where you say I'm not sure it

makes sense to me today to continue to do what I think God tells me to do because I think there's probably a better way.

I remember some time ago I was talking with somebody who was part of our Wexford campus here and the person was volunteering a lot of weekends, all three services. So, Saturday night, two on Sunday, and then Christmas came, and the person volunteered for like 100 Christmas Eve services. If you're not from around here, we don't actually have 100. It just feels that way. And after he was halfway through the run, he just said to me, you know, my partner, he was talking about the person he was with, he said, thinks I'm crazy to spend all this time here serving and volunteering. He said, do you think I'm crazy? And I had a moment when I heard that question, I thought, that is a question that we all ask at different times. Am I crazy to do the things that I do?

Here's what I think that this verse is basically saying, and that is look back, see what Jesus has done, look ahead, see what Jesus will do, look within, and when you're tempted to abandon, to tap out, to say this doesn't make sense, say I'm going to stand firm, I'm going to be immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because it's never in vain. What's done to the Lord is never in vain.

And what this means is there will be decisions that you make that other people in your life will think are crazy. There will be things that you believe, you affirm, you hold true that other people will say that is crazy because there are things bad company corrupts good morals. There are situations that'll make us say I don't know if this makes sense. And what we need to do is keep coming back and say it's not crazy, it's not vain, it's not empty.

Some of us might be here and maybe this is in the area of our purity or sexuality. We say, look, I know what God's word says, but I think if I do that, then maybe my life won't be satisfying or fulfilling. If I stay with the person who's right or wait for God's timing, I'm not sure that things will work out. And what we need to do is we need to come back and say I can be steadfast and immovable because it is not vain to serve God's purposes in that area of my life.

For some of us, it'll be maybe in the area of serving, maybe not in church stuff, maybe somebody in our lives that we keep serving and it seems like they're unappreciative or it seems pointless that we continue to say, how can I help somebody who doesn't

want to be helped? And we need to keep coming back and saying always abound in the work of the Lord because it's not vain to continue to serve some of us.

It might be around our finances, and we learn what the Bible says about taking the first portion of what God gives us and giving it back to Kingdom purposes. We'll have a moment of saying there's a whole lot of stuff I could do with that money that seems like it would be better than giving that away. And what we need to do is say, no, this is not vain, it's not empty to give of my resources.

Some of us maybe have some people in our lives who are challenging for us, and we feel like we're constantly working to control our temper and every now and then it just feels so good to say not today, I'm letting it go. I'm letting you know exactly what I think, what I feel, and how I want you to experience this. And yet, we need to remind ourselves that it's never in vain. That it's worthwhile. That it's not crazy to say I'm going to work to still honor God with the way that I interact with people even if at times it feels like all I want to do is give somebody a piece of my mind. It's not crazy. It's not vain to choose gratefulness.

When you have so many things in your life that you could say, I'm going to point to this and what isn't happening, how this isn't working, and what isn't right to say, I'm going to choose to express gratefulness in the heart of God and thankfulness for what he's done. It's not crazy. It's not vain.

It's not crazy. It's not in vain to stay in a marriage when it feels like it isn't going the way you want it to go because you keep thinking, you know, if I don't have biblical grounds, maybe I'd just be happier somewhere else. And it's not crazy to say I'm going to be steadfast, immovable, and trust what God says, even if it doesn't make sense to me.

It's not crazy to choose to forgive people who've wronged you, people who've hurt you. In Matthew 18, where Jesus is teaching about forgiveness, so many times what we do is have this idea that says well, if I forgive a little bit, but Jesus' teaching is basically if you've been forgiven by God an enormous amount, how can you not forgive even a little amount. And when you hold a grudge and say I'm not going to. Because the fog says if I let go of this, this person won't pay. Yet, you're missing the point that it's never vain. It's never empty. It's never crazy to say I'm going to choose to forgive.

It's never crazy to affirm what Scripture affirms, even in a culture that's constantly pushing narratives and ideas that are antithetical to the things of Scripture. And sometimes you'll feel maybe as if science or culture is on another side and to say no if this is what scripture says, then this is what scripture says, and it's not crazy. It's not vain for me to hold to this.

I don't think it's crazy to invest in church stuff. I know sometimes even as a pastor, it's like, do I really want to do that? So, I know you feel that way. But here's what I also know, and that is this is the bride of Christ that God has called to be his representation on the earth. And so sometimes, even when it feels as if things aren't happening or there's a critique or disparity among people, it's still worthwhile to invest. It's not crazy. It's not crazy to continue to say I'm going to serve even when the people closest to you feel like maybe you're unreasonable.

It's not crazy to say that you are going to continue to serve the ways of God even when there are some things that other people look at in your life and they say you don't have any right to serve God because of all these other things. And you're tempted to hear that little voice and say, well, you're right because of that. I can't say anything here. It's not crazy to say, you know, I am a person who has been forgiven, and I'm not a perfect person, but I still choose what Christ has.

Now, I know that as we talk about this, as I said earlier, whether you're a church person or not a church person, there are some areas where for you it feels like, do I want to affirm what God is doing? And looking within, based on looking back, looking ahead is being able to say I'm going to continue the course of action even when the fog exists, even when it's difficult because I believe that God is at work even when I don't sense it or see it.

Supposedly, Mother Teresa wrote a poem, and I say supposedly. There's some debate about whether or not she did. If she did, it has probably more credibility than if somebody else did just because she's Mother Teresa. But here's what is said. "People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish and ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you're successful, you'll win some false friends and some true enemies. Succeed anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you. Be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight. Build anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, there may be jealousy. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough. But give the world the best you have anyway. You see, in the final analysis, it's between you and God. It has never been between you and them anyway."

Mother Teresa says as one who served and was criticized and said I'm going to continue to be immovable, if that's her, abounding in the work of the Lord, because I know it's not in vain. I'm going to do it anyway.

Now here's the real challenge that I see, and that is many of us quit too soon. Here's what I mean. One of my sons started watching a reality TV show called *Alone* and roped my wife into it. And then I started watching a few episodes with them. So, I've seen a few episodes of this show *Alone*, and if you're not familiar with it, what it is, is people are dropped into the wilderness and they have to survive alone, and whoever survives alone on very minimal stuff wins. And they win like \$500,000 or something.

And so, the premise is basically you're watching these people try to match their survival skills, but none of them knows how the other people are doing. Now I don't know if they're really alone because there's cameras there, but it's called *Alone*. So, these people are out here alone. But here's the issue. If they knew that the other people were going to tap out in just a day or two, many of them could say, you know what, I could do this for another three days. But what they don't know is when the other people are tapping out. And so, what they do is they say, you know what, I've had enough, I can't keep going, and they quit. Now the show *Alone* is different. Obviously, it's got other restraints and money involved and all of that, but what's similar is that if you are tempted to say it's not worth it to be a person of faith in my school, it's not worth it to stand on biblical ethical principles in my business, it's not worth it to try to live a pure life before God right now, then you are tempted to say I want to tap out because there's a better way.

And what happens when we do that is we quit too soon, and we end up not seeing the hand of God in our midst. And what this text teaches us all together is that even if God doesn't do something now and we say, well, this feels like I've prayed about it, I've hoped for it, I've longed for it, and I thought God would come through by now, that God is still at work in ways you may not understand. And ultimately an eternity will bring about things that will be good because of what you were allowed to endure.



You see, I know that some of us are in a place where we're saying I've prayed, I've hoped, I've served, I've given, I've been faithful. Why hasn't God? And that's the fog and it's the tap-out moment where we need to come back and say I'm going to be immovable, I'm going to stand firm, always abounding in the work of the Lord because it's never empty. It's never in vain. It's never useless. God will work in ways that I don't necessarily see or understand.

And here's what's different than "look within" with the movie culture that we have in our day and age. Look within says you look within and have strength and then you try to live it out. Looking within spiritually is based on looking back at what Jesus has done and looking forward to what Jesus will do. And because you look back to Jesus going to the cross, being raised to life, you're able to say God is for me, He is good, and because he's good and I know he's good and he's promised good to me in the future, therefore, my looking within isn't simply saying I'm just going to try to muster some strength to get through this. But instead, I am choosing to entrust my life to the hands of a good God.

So, my encouragement today is just to say don't tap out wherever you are, but keep taking steps toward the path that God has called you to because your hope will reemerge when the fog dissipates just a little and you say God is still at work even where I haven't seen or noticed entirely.

Let's take a moment and pray together. I don't know what challenge you're facing here today, but I know in a room full of people that there are challenges and heartbreaks and places where we want to tap out. So, Lord, I asked today that in the midst of that temptation, whether it's with marriage, with our finances, with our purity, with serving, with kindness, with controlling our temper, whatever the area is God, just trusting your goodness after a hardship or a betrayal or a loss that you would let your goodness be seen and be trusted and savored by each one of us who's part of this church. And God, as a church I pray that our reputation in this community wouldn't be people who have a great building and great programs and cause traffic problems, but it would be people who are filled with hope and resolute in the direction, even when it doesn't seem positive. Because we know whom we have believed and we're convinced that you are able to keep that which we've committed to you for that day. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.