

Labouring Together with God – Part 3

Humans are creatures given to extremes, as well as inconsistency. For this reason, few Christians quickly learn the balance of how to live the Christian life with all their heart while still depending on God's grace.

In this series, we have been looking at the topic of how we are to cooperate with the grace of God in the Christian life. Understanding that the Christian life is all of grace, and yet demands all of our effort, is paradoxical and confusing to us. We tend to go to one of two extremes, or even mix the two extremes in our lives at different points.

As we saw in Part 1, the one extreme is laziness. This view disregards the responsibility of man and presumes upon God's grace. Sometimes, under the pretence of not wanting to mix works with grace, or wanting God to get all the glory, it is simply a cover for disobedience.

This person has antinomian or lawless tendencies. They dismiss obedience as something only partially necessary. They assume God's grace will always overwhelm their disobedience in the end.

Libertarians fall under this umbrella too. They think that God's grace authorises all manner of sin and licentiousness. Quietists fall under this groups as well. 'Let go and let God,' they say – the more you try, the more you are in the flesh. Just be passive and God will fight the battle for you.

But no matter what their reason – such Christians are effectively lazy. They are denying, dismissing and disobeying hundreds of commandments that call for diligent, disciplined wholehearted obedience.

Basically, this group pleases themselves by remaining disobedient. They refuse to submit themselves to God's Word, to apply themselves to His grace to work with all His might. They might have supposedly theological reasons for doing so, but one day, God may well say to them, like the master in one of Jesus' parables, '*You wicked and slothful servant*' (**Matthew 25:26**).

The other extreme we looked at in Part 2 of this series is legalism. This view disregards the grace of God and overemphasises the responsibility of man. Under the pretence of being zealous for God, faithful to His work and diligently obedient, they neglect, dismiss and make void the grace of God.

Legalists believe their actions are sufficient to provide spiritual growth. They believe their obedience is an end in itself. They believe they can grow themselves, or perhaps even save themselves, by following a method, a formula, a strategy. They are guilty of what Paul called will-worship. They worship their own willpower; they glory in their own discipline. Such people pay lip service to God's grace.

Legalists are typically hard, intolerant and given to man-pleasing. Man-made standards are made, and keeping those standards become the measurable, controllable, quantifiable test of spirituality, commitment and holiness. As we pointed out, the problem with legalism is not its intense discipline or narrowness of life. The problem is that it glories in its own discipline and is self-reliant. Its focus is on man, its enablement is man, its motive is man, and its glory goes to man. But we saw, Jesus pulled the covers off the legalists of His day to expose the ugliness of their interior spiritual condition.

Basically, this group pleases themselves by obeying in the flesh. They refuse to submit themselves to God's righteousness – this would require humility and faith. Instead, they run ahead of God and establish their own righteousness. This they submit to God, and arrogantly assume He must be pleased with the strange fire that they present on the altar.

As we saw, both extremes are a dead end. Laziness leads to bondage to comfort, ease and further slothfulness. It leads to spiritual poverty and continual frustration. Legalism leads to spiritual deadness, despair, hidden debauchery, divisions and strife, inverted spiritual priorities and ultimately frustration with God and man.

Neither one of these approaches to God's grace are pleasing to God. God has given us the biblical balance in Scripture – it's what we've titled this series: Labouring Together with God. You could call the correct attitude that of being a loving labourer.

Mr Loving Labourer

Let's see some characteristics of the loving labourer in Scripture.

1. He sees God's grace as something which must initiate and finish all acts of obedience

The clearest verse on this is **Philippians 2:13** which is given as the explanation for why we Christians should work out our salvation: *"for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."*

In other words – the reason, the basis, for you being able to work out anything in your Christian life is that God first works in you. The presence of the word *'both'* in this verse suggests there are two things that God works in us. Firstly, He works in us to **will** – that is, He creates a desire or a willingness to do His pleasure. Secondly, He enables us to *do* His good pleasure.

This is probably one of the most concise definitions of grace – God creating in you the desire to know and love Him, and then providing the power to know and love Him. The loving labourer has this truth fixed firmly in his mind: 'God's grace initiates, and God's grace consummates. I have a part to play – but I am neither the one who dreams up things to do for God, nor am I the one who is charged to finish off what God began.'

God starts, God completes, and yet we are given a role in between. We are told in **Hebrews 12:2** that Jesus is the Author and the Finisher of our Faith. He is the Alpha and the Omega – you will find Him at the beginning, and you will find Him at the end. As Paul put it to the Philippians:

"...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Philippians 1:6

Now, why is this significant? Isn't this just playing with theological ideas? Nothing could be further from the truth. Without a fundamentally correct view of the grace of God as being the initiator of all our efforts, the enabler of all our efforts and the finisher of all our efforts, we are sure to run off into the direction of laziness or legalism. Instead, this truth can ground us. It comforts us – God is at work. It motivates us – God will enable me. It challenges us – God is involving me. It assures us – God will complete it.

In **2 Corinthians 3:5**, Paul writes: *"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God."* Paul knew the essential part this view formed in correct service – to understand we do not have it in us to perform the ministry God has for us. We can make up our own ministries and perform them in the flesh – but what God has for us requires Him.

In this way, we are brought face to face with the paradox – God must do the work as we work. He will not do it if we do not work. And if He does not do it, we will not be able to work. But we can work out what God is

working in us. That is why the **Philippians 2:12** says: “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

2. He sees his work as co-labouring with God

“For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field...”

1 Corinthians 3:9

What a privilege to know that we are God's fellow workers – labourers together with God. This is a fundamentally important truth to grasp. Countless Christians think it is their task to dream up schemes and plans and ministries for God and then ask God to bless it and sign at the bottom. They think and act like God is passively watching the world, waiting for the creativity and ingenuity of His people which He, in their minds, apparently lacks.

However, this is not the God of the Bible. God is always at work. He works to reconcile the world to Himself. He is on a mission to glorify Himself in the world. And lovingly, He involves His children. He does this not because He needs the labourers. He could in fact do everything much more efficiently than involving the often clumsy and broken efforts of sinners themselves in need of change.

But God involves you and I the way a father lets his 6-year-old son help him change a tire. He could do it a lot faster without his boy, but through that time, they grow in love for one another, and his boy learns valuable lessons. God involves us in His work not because we are indispensable to His endeavours, but because He wants us to come to know Him as He works.

God wants us to enjoy the privilege of seeing His grace flow through us. He wants us to learn of His ways, His purposes, His will in the world. And so, though our pride inverts the situation and thinks we must involve God in what we are doing, the reality of the situation is that God chooses to involve us in what He is doing.

Our Lord Jesus said this time and time again. When accused of violating the Sabbath – He pointed out that His work of healing the man was actually His Father's work.

*But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working."
..."Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do;
for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.*

John 5:17,19

Jesus says, ‘I do not initiate works. My Father has been working, and as a result of that – I have been working. I do not step out on My own. Whatever I see the Father do, that is what I do. I join the Father in what He is doing.’

You see this all through Christ's ministry. He knew as the Samaritan woman approached the well, that His Father was working, so Jesus joined Him and began to speak to her. He knew as Nicodemus sought Him out, His Father was working – so Christ worked with his Father to teach Nicodemus.

A loving labourer has rest and joy in the fact that he is not a consultant to God, he is a simple labourer who watches for the Father's hand in everyday life, and goes to work where God calls him.

How many Christians would come to a new place of joy if they would recognise the hand of God all around them all the time, drawing people to salvation. Consider conversations about spiritual things, people asking

for spiritual guidance, people seeking understanding about God, sin, and salvation. This is God at work! And this points to another fundamental mindset of the loving labourer.

3. His obedience is not to a man-made standard, but to God Himself

Consider Jesus' response when questioned about His disciples eating with unwashed hands:

He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."

Mark 7:9

While claiming their high regard for the Word of God, legalists end up tearing out the heart of the commands, turning attention to their own traditions and then making void the commands of God. The loving labourer is devoted instead to pleasing God, not man. The standards he holds to stem from his understanding of God's Word, not out of allegiance to a particular group.

When you are violating your conscience or doing something purely because a group expects it, with no biblical mandate for expecting it, and no biblical wisdom to suggest it – you are not lovingly labouring – you are probably deferring to legalism. You may tell yourself it is submission and loyalty to God's church – and while these things are biblical and good – there is a place where you are not pleasing God – you are pleasing man.

Mature Christianity can see other people as vessels which God uses, not substitutes for the Great Shepherd Himself. This leads us to the next point:

4. He believes God's Word, and therefore obeys it. His obedience rises from faith

Loving labour rises from faith in God and His stated expectation in the Word. A legalist yields to the expectations of others. He obeys his own high standards, and his so-called obedience does not require a shred of faith. A lazy man also doesn't exercise faith, as he just obeys his own flesh. But a loving labourer loves God, trusts Him, and so yields and submits to His authority.

A loving labourer obeys because He believes in the Person, character, promises and power of Christ. His enables him to step out in obedience, trusting God to enable and provide grace. Listen to Jesus again:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father."

John 14:12

He who believes in Me, says Jesus, will do the works that I am doing. A true worker, a true labourer, trusts God and His Word, and His faith produces works.

5. A loving labourer walks in the Spirit so as to fulfil God's Word

"I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish."

Galatians 5:16-17

To walk in the Spirit is to take each step of life in an attitude of humble dependence. It is to live a life of abiding – to make the mode of my transport through every situation the empowerment of the Spirit.

The loving labourer is not trying to grit his teeth and fight his own way through. He works hard, but deliberately looks to God for enablement and empowerment. Such a person will be breathing out short prayers regularly. His eyes will frequently return to his Master to look for what He's doing, to hear what He wants.

Of course, the Spirit does not enable a believer apart from the Word. The Word of God is the Spirit's leash on us. When we are soaked in the Word, we will feel His loving leadership on us like a good, strong leash. But too many believers live on a thread of Scripture, and feel bewildered that it seems so easy for them to snap loose from the Holy Spirit's control over them. The final thing about a loving labourer draws the parallel truths together:

6. His obedience is wholehearted, diligent and disciplined, and yet fully dependent

The loving labourer is not lazy or passive. Nor is he a fleshly, self-reliant legalist. He works with all his heart, while depending on God with all his heart.

"For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

Colossians 1:29

Here Paul strikes the marvellous balance. He toils – labours to the point of exhaustion, struggling, agonising. He is not lazy or passive. When Paul has finished labouring for God, he is completely worn out. But, says Paul, 'I do so with all *His energy* – that He powerfully works within me. I am doing the working, but God is giving the power. The strain is mine – the power is His. The effort is mine, the energy is His. I move, He enables. I strive – He strengthens.'

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

1 Corinthians 15:10

Here again, Paul essentially says, 'I laboured – I worked harder than anyone else.' But just when we might think he is boasting, he adds, 'Yet not I – it was God's grace working in me.'

We again see this balance in the well-known verse: **"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"** (**Philippians 4:13**). It's what I call dependent discipline. The loving labourer understands his obedience is not sufficient in and of itself. But he also understands God's grace uses means – and the means it uses is obedience. God's grace comes proportional to the strain.

The loving labourer fights, strives, toils, denies himself, and obeys with every resource he has, all the while being completely yielded to God's Word and dependent on God's enablement. He knows it is God's grace that will do the work – but that does not make him passive. And he knows it is up to him to obey – that does not make him a legalist. He is dependently disciplined.

Jonathan Edwards understood this balance, when he wrote:

In efficacious grace we are not merely passive, nor yet does God do some, and we do the rest. But God does all, and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what he produces, viz. our

own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain; we only are the proper actors. We are in different respects, wholly passive and wholly active.

In the Scriptures the same things are represented as from God and from us. God is said to convert, and men are said to convert and turn. God makes a new heart, and we are commanded to circumcise our own hearts; not merely because we must use the means in order to cause the effect, but the effect itself is our act and our duty. These things bring to mind the Scripture that says, *“God worketh in you both to will and to do”* (**Philippians 2:13**).

And the Bible is clear on what kind of life will result from this approach. There will be **fruitfulness**. As Jesus said:

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

John 15:4-5

Instead of frustration, the loving labourer will see God give the increase. A harvest of increased Christlikeness and useful service to God in the lives of others will be forthcoming. The loving labourer will not live in the continual frustration of the legalist, with little fruit for his self-reliant efforts, or the continual frustration of the lazy Christian, who desires but never has. He will see God at work and rejoice in God's work in and through him.

There will also be **rest and peace**. Jesus said:

“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

The legalist has no rest or peace. He is burdened by man's expectations and the pressure to perform. He is weighed down with his own standards. He is cracking under the strain of trying to restrain his flesh in his own strength. And his physical and emotional life betray the inner turmoil.

The lazy man is also racked by restlessness. His conscience bothers him, and he is without the rest he disobediently seeks. But the loving labourer takes on the yoke of Jesus, follows Him, and finds rest.

The loving labourer also finds **joy**. Jesus put it this way:

“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.”

John 15:10-11

This is the experience of the one in an obedient love relationship with Christ. There is a deep gladness welling up in the soul that comes from knowing and showing Christ. The legalist can find no joy – his life is filled with bitterness, criticism, envy, jealousy, sourness and even hatred. All of this is justified, but his hard heart has long ago chased away the gentle dove of joy.

Finally, the loving labourer brings God much **glory**.

“If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever.”

1 Peter 4:11

God gets no glory from the lazy man who is disobedient. He gets no glory from the legalist –because the legalist attributes his success to himself, not to God. But the loving labourer serves in the strength God supplies – so that God gets all the glory.

The path of the loving labourer is the one God calls us to. The extremes wound us and dishonour God. Instead, may we understand God’s grace as the Author and the Finisher. May we see ourselves as co-labourers with God – joining what He is doing. May we walk in the Spirit and may our obedience rise from faith in God, not from man’s expectations.

And then, may we obey with all our heart, while depending on His grace with all our heart. A life of joy, peace, fruitfulness and increased glory for God awaits.