

Vain Things

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Vain is capable of two distinct meanings, depending upon context. When used in reference to a person, *vain* refers to a conceited, narcissistic, arrogant, or proud attitude. *Vain action*, however, refers to futile, ineffective, worthless, or unavailing effort.

The New Testament describes various behaviors/entities that are vain – they are thereby a waste of both time and effort with eternal consequences. A review of some of these is instructive.

- **Worship may be vain:** “But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Mat. 15:9). Many assume God is pleased to accept anything in worship they offer – as long as they are sincere in doing so. Clearly, this is not so, as important as sincerity is. We must offer in worship only that which the New Testament authorizes, or our worship is unacceptable to God, thus meaningless. It must be “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23–24).
- **Grace may be vain:** “...His grace which was bestowed upon me was not found vain” (1 Cor. 15:10). This assurance was so because of Paul’s unfailing obedience and loyalty to the Christ. Had he (or indeed anyone have backslidden and not repented once he received God’s grace in the forgiveness of his sins, God’s original bestowal of grace would have been to no avail (2 Cor. 6:1). One who has received God’s grace in salvation may so behave as to forfeit it and be lost (cf. Gal. 5:4).
- **Idolatry is vain:** Paul called the idols worshiped by the people of Lystra “these vain things” (Acts 14:15). Just as the idols of the ancient world could neither hear, see, speak, nor act, so the idols of the modern world are likewise lifeless creations of men. To bow before such senseless imagined gods is to worship the creature rather than the Creator and to practice folly while professing wisdom (Rom. 1:19–23).
- **Religion may be vain:** One who professes Christianity apart from its daily practice of such things as tongue control, mercy toward the helpless, and purity of life engages in “vain religion” (Jam. 1:26–27). Such practitioners are hypocrites who waste their time in pretense, deceiving themselves as well as others – but not God.
- **Labor may be vain:** “...Your labor is not vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58b). *In the Lord* means as authorized in His Word. Just as He does not accept all worship, He does not accept all our work. Merely pronouncing His name over an act does not result in His approval. All such labor will be found vain at the Judgment (Mat. 7:21–23).

All that will matter when we stand before the Lord Jesus in Judgment will be whether our lives have proved worthwhile or vain to Him, learned only from His Word, the New Testament.

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