

Joshua 14:7-9 (CEB)

⁷I was 40 years old when Moses the LORD's servant sent me from Kadesh-barnea to scout out the land. I brought back a report to him of what I really thought. ⁸My companions who had gone up with me made the people's heart melt. But I remained loyal to the LORD my God. ⁹So Moses pledged on that day, "The land on which you have walked will forever be a legacy for you and your children. This is because you remained loyal to the LORD my God."

Acts 20:25-35 (CEB)

²⁵"I know that none of you will see me again—you among whom I traveled and proclaimed the kingdom. ²⁶Therefore, today I testify to you that I'm not responsible for anyone's fate. ²⁷I haven't avoided proclaiming the entire plan of God to you. ²⁸Watch yourselves and the whole flock, in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as supervisors, to shepherd God's church, which he obtained with the death of his own Son. ²⁹I know that, after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you and won't spare the flock. ³⁰Some of your own people will distort the word in order to lure followers after them. ³¹Stay alert! Remember that for three years I constantly and tearfully warned each one of you. I never stopped warning you! ³²Now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all whom God has made holy. ³³I haven't craved anyone's silver, gold, or clothing. ³⁴You yourselves know that I have provided for my own needs and for those of my companions with my own hands. ³⁵In everything I have shown you that, by working hard, we must help the weak. In this way we remember the Lord Jesus' words: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, we want to let you know about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia. ²While they were being tested by many problems, their extra amount of happiness and their extreme poverty resulted in a surplus of rich generosity. ³I assure you that they gave what they could afford and even more than they could afford, and they did it voluntarily. ⁴They urgently begged us for the privilege of sharing in this service for the saints. ⁵They even exceeded our expectations, because they gave themselves to the Lord first and to us, consistent with God's will. ⁶As a result, we challenged Titus to finish this work of grace with you the way he had started it.

⁷Be the best in this work of grace in the same way that you are the best in everything, such as faith, speech, knowledge, total commitment, and the love we inspired in you. ⁸I'm not giving an order, but by mentioning the commitment of others, I'm trying to prove the authenticity of your love also. ⁹You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.

¹⁰I'm giving you my opinion about this. It's to your advantage to do this, since you not only started to do it last year but you wanted to do it too. ¹¹Now finish the job as well so that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started, given what you can afford. ¹²A gift is appreciated because of what a person can afford, not because of what that person can't afford, if it's apparent that it's done willingly. ¹³It isn't that we want others to have financial ease and you financial difficulties, but it's a matter of equality. ¹⁴At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit. In this way there is equality. ¹⁵As it is written, *The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little.*

Most of us are pretty good at dealing with all the various pieces of our lives. But Jesus asks for more than a piece. Jesus wants every bit of who we are!

100%. All-in. Total commitment. This is what characterizes those who truly excel at what they do. From sports to music to art to engineering to design to mathematics . . . and so on. Sure gifts and talents are important, even crucial. But what separates those who truly excel is total commitment.

How often do you think of your discipleship as something at which you should strive to excel? For too much of my life, the "church stuff" was allocated time in my week but was

never seen as something at which I should excel, something that would take total commitment. At least not compared to my career. How sad . . . for me.

When I began work on this study, I set out to find a couple of biblical examples of total commitment to pursuing God and his ways. What I found were countless stories of people who were totally committed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Sure, their journeys had lots of ups and downs for them, like us, were marred by sin and lived in a broken world, but commitment grounded on faith and trust in God marked their life with God.

Remaining committed in the face of fear

After fleeing Egypt more than three millennia ago, the Hebrews followed God to Mt. Sinai, arriving there in just a couple of months. There, God gave them his Law and began to shape them into his redeemed people. Once Moses had brought down the tablets and the people put behind them the horror of the golden calf, God led them directly to Canaan, the land promised by God to Abraham.

But the people were reluctant to follow God into the land, knowing it was already settled. So they sent spies, one leader from each tribe, into Canaan to check things out. The spies returned home, with tales of giants and other fearsome obstacles. Sadly, despite God's assurances, the spies counseled the people to turn back and the people decided to do just that. But two of the spies urged the people to press on, to trust God and do as God had instructed them. Here is how it is put in the book of Numbers:

But Joshua, Nun's son, and Caleb, Jephunneh's son, from those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite community, 'The land we crossed through to explore is an exceptionally good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, he'll bring us into this land and give it to us. It's a land that's full of milk and honey. Only don't rebel against the LORD and don't be afraid of the people of the land. They are our prey. Their defense has deserted them, but the LORD is with us. So don't be afraid of them.' But the entire community intended to stone them.

After the people turned back, God pronounced that since none of them had been willing to enter the promised land – none of them would. Instead, they would wander around the Sinai wilderness for forty years until they had died. Their children would claim the land of milk and honey. Except for Joshua and Caleb. They had stayed true to God and they were allowed to enter Canaan. Indeed, God would choose Joshua to take the reins from Moses and lead the people into Canaan.

Late in his life, Joshua reflected on his own life and his devotion to God, acknowledging that he had "remained loyal to the LORD my God" (Joshua 14:8). Few of us will go through trials such as those experienced by Joshua. Nonetheless, our own commitment will be tested. The only real question is how we will respond.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive"

You would be hard-pressed to find one of God's people who was more committed than Paul. The above passage from Acts 20 is the final portion of the speech that Paul gave to leaders from the Ephesian churches who had come to see him in Miletus before Paul headed off to Jerusalem, where trouble waited for him.

Notice how Paul ended the speech: "It is more blessed to give than to receive,"¹ quoting Jesus. Here, Paul is not speaking of money, but of the cost of discipleship and commitment. Paul had given much; here is a summary in his own words.

What I've done goes well beyond what they've done [Paul's opponents]. I've worked much harder. I've been imprisoned much more often. I've been beaten more times than I can count. I've faced death many times. I received the "forty lashes minus one"

¹ This exact quotation is not in any of the gospels, but it is certainly very much in line with Jesus' teachings.

² I'd guess that a lot of pastors read verse 8 of this passage and say to themselves, "I'm glad Paul said it, because I never could." Giving money as a proof of one's love! It seems so . . . concrete. Clichés are clichés

from the Jews five times. I was beaten with rods three times. I was stoned once. I was shipwrecked three times. I spent a day and a night on the open sea. I've been on many journeys. I faced dangers from rivers, robbers, my people, and Gentiles. I faced dangers in the city, in the desert, on the sea, and from false brothers and sisters. I faced these dangers with hard work and heavy labor, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, and in the cold without enough clothes. (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

Paul had given everything to the vocation given him by God and he hoped for nothing less from his fellow Christians. Christians today sometimes forget that Paul was a pastor to the many Christian communities that he started during his missionary journeys. Paul sought nothing but their welfare as they strove to understand and embrace a life of genuine discipleship. Paul sought nothing less than their total commitment to their new life in Christ. Paul's call would extend to the parts of their lives they held dearest, including their money. We can bet they were no less attached to theirs than we are to ours.

A "stewardship" letter

Like the rest of Paul's writings in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians is correspondence. Indeed, 2 Corinthians is probably pieces of two or three of Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth that were later stitched together and circulated throughout the larger Christian community.

Today's passage is as close to a "stewardship brochure" as we are going to find in the New Testament. We need to hear it as an appeal from pastor to congregation, an appeal that strikes all the right notes as Paul speaks to them, and to us, about sharing in the service to the believers in Jerusalem (see the page four textbox).

The example of the Macedonians

Paul opens his appeal to the Corinthians by pointing them toward the giving of the Christians in Macedonia, which included at least the communities in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea. Despite their extreme poverty and even persecution, the Macedonian Christians have given freely. "Their extra amount of happiness and their extreme poverty resulted in a surplus of rich generosity," Paul writes. The Macedonians had begged again and again for the privilege in sharing in the collection for Jerusalem. Indeed, they exceeded Paul's highest hopes, as their giving was an outgrowth of their dedication to Jesus.

In Paul's world, people learned nearly everything by modeling others. It is natural for Paul to lift up the Macedonians as role models so that the Corinthians might learn about Christian giving. Of course, Paul knows that comparisons can be dangerous. They are even more so in our world. I doubt many stewardship appeals begin by talking about the generosity of another congregation! But Paul has softened the comparison by emphasizing that this is God's work. God has been kind to the Macedonians, opening their hearts and giving them direction. The Macedonians' joyful giving is not really so much about them as it is about God.

In the same way, Paul emphasizes what God has done for the Corinthian Christians -- they have such faith, such knowledge, such enthusiasm, such love. Paul prays that they will also now share in the ministry of giving. They don't have to. This is not about requirements. The Macedonians gave "of their own free will" (v. 3). Paul isn't saying the Corinthians have to participate in the collection, but he does remind them of others' eagerness to share. More pointedly, Paul says that participating in the campaign is one way for the Corinthians to prove that their love is real (v. 8)!² And just so the Corinthians don't lose sight of what really matters, Paul points them toward Christ, who gave up all the riches of

² I'd guess that a lot of pastors read verse 8 of this passage and say to themselves, "I'm glad Paul said it, because I never could." Giving money as a proof of one's love! It seems so . . . concrete. Clichés are clichés for a reason, they often carry truth. In essence, Paul says, "Put your money where your mouth is." Tough but true.

heaven for them, so that they would be rich in what really matters – fellowship with God and one another.³

Advice: Finish what you started (v. 11)

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians has been strained, so he walks carefully here. Paul is not commanding them to do anything. Instead, he urges them to finish what they started a year before. Evidently, they had made commitments to Paul that he now hopes they will fulfill.

Paul is a practical man. Commitments made, must be fulfilled. Everyone needs to participate. Those who have more ought to give more. Those who have less ought to give less. Those with more now might one day have less and be in need. Those with less now might one day have more and be able to help those in need. Paul urges these Christians to give proportionally so that there might be greater equality. Bear in mind, Paul lived in a world of scarcity. He isn't speaking of equal abundance here (v. 13), but of equal poverty so that the needs of all will be met. We can also be sure that Paul's definition of "needs" would be much different from our own. For Paul, unity in the body of Christ would necessarily mean that the needs of all the saints would be met. Caring for one another is simply a given, both in the immediate community and in the larger body.

We'll close with this from Rev. Arthur Jones:

We are too busy. We outsource everything that we can – construction, food, finances, and more. . . . Faith, though, requires a total commitment and we can't outsource it. When Jesus asked Peter to follow him, Peter didn't send somebody else – he dropped his fishing nets and followed Jesus. Faith is not a portion of the heart, but the underlying core that drives everything. Likewise, faith is not what you do for an hour on Sunday morning, it is about an entire schedule oriented toward whatever purpose God has on earth. In other words – we are to orient our lives around the legacy that God has called us to. Here's the thing: when we put God first, it redeems everything and makes everything else better.

Paul's Collection for Jerusalem

In his letter to the Galatians (2:1-10), Paul tells the story of a meeting in Jerusalem to settle the question of whether Gentile converts must first become Jews in order to become followers of Jesus; namely, whether they must be circumcised and keep the Law (see Acts 15 also).

The leaders of the Christian community, James, Peter, and John (the "pillars" as Paul describes them) agree with Paul that circumcision was not a requirement. All that marks out the body of Christ is faith in Christ. They also agree on a division of labor. James and the other pillars will continue to work among their fellow Jews, bringing to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul (and Barnabas) would go to the Gentiles.

All that the pillars ask of Paul and Barnabas is that they "remember the poor," which Paul is "eager to do" (Galatians 2:10). This seems at first glance like a general request, but we find in Paul's letters that this is actually a specific mission.

The "poor" in mind here are the poverty-stricken among the Christian community in Jerusalem, all of whom are Jews who have embraced Jesus as Messiah. Indeed, most scholars agree that poverty characterized the entire Christian community in Jerusalem. There were surely a variety of factors at work, such as persecution by the Jewish authorities and a series of bad harvests in the mid-forties AD. The Christians' practice of using capital to meet current needs (the selling of property described in Acts 4 and 5) may also have contributed.

In any event, Paul undertakes throughout his missionary travels to collect money that he and a large contingent of Gentile Christians plan to take to Jerusalem. It seems that his appeal met with little success in the churches of Galatia but, as in today's passage, was embraced beyond his expectations by the churches in Macedonia (i.e., Thessalonica and Philippi). The Christians in Corinth had made a commitment to the collection and Paul urges them to follow through on their commitment (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).

³The best way to grasp Paul's meaning here is to read the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. Any sacrifice that we might be asked to make pales next to the sacrifices Jesus made for our sake. This is why Paul can hardly find a subject that he doesn't take to the cross for understanding. Sacrifice is the essence of Christian love.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What holds us back from making a total commitment to the life of discipleship? What tensions do you feel between your life with God and making your way in this world? How could we help ourselves to go all-in, to make a total commitment to our faith?

2. Today's passage from 2 Corinthians is an appeal for money from Paul to Christians in Corinth. Paul is gathering together a collection for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem. You might begin by sharing your reaction to Paul's appeal. What is its tone? Is there anything here that would inspire you if Paul were writing to you? Upset you? How about the comparison to other Christians? Why do you think Paul makes the comparison? How about this business of the collection being an opportunity for the Christians to *prove* their love? This strikes me as being pretty bold, more bold than most pastors feel like they can be in their own stewardship appeals. What makes Paul so bold and pastors so nervous?

3. In his commentary on Paul's letter, Sampley tells the story of a church whose members decided that in addition to their regular annual financial pledge, they would give to missions 10% of all the money they received unexpectedly – gifts, repayment of written-off debts, money that had been found, etc. They committed themselves to giving away 10% of all the little moments of abundance that popped up in their lives. How might you put such a plan into practice in your own life and family? How much money might we be talking about? How could we make our children part of this? If we our entire congregation practiced this, how much money might we raise for missions? What might we learn?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Galatians 2:1-10 In v. 10 Paul speaks of this work for the poor in Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 Paul's instructions regarding the collection for the saints. Each person's giving is to be commensurate with their income.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ephesians 3:1-13 Paul's ministry to the Gentiles</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 15:25-32 Paul speaks about the final stages of the collection as he prepares to take it to Jerusalem.</p>
<p>Friday, Acts 11:27-30 & 24:17 More references to the ministry of giving among the early Christians.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

