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“Better to Give”

Sermon Series: “Faith and Finances,” No. 4

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Acts 20:27-30

17 And from Miletus, Paul, sending to Ephesus, summoned the elders of the church, 18 and when they came to him, he said to them, “You understand from the first day I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and tears and trials happening to me by the plots of the Jews. 20 I kept from declaring nothing that would benefit you, but taught you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly witnessing to both the Jews and Greeks repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.

22 And now see – having been bound by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will meet me there, 23 except that, in every city, the Holy Spirit witnesses to me saying that bonds and afflictions await.

24 But I make my life of no account, that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus: to solemnly witness the gospel of the grace of God.

25 And now, behold, I know that none of you, whom I’ve gone about preaching the kingdom, will see my face again. 26 Wherefore I witness to you on this day that I am clean from the blood of all men. 27 For I kept from declaring to you nothing of the whole counsel of God. 28 Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Shepherd the church of God, which he acquired through his own blood. 29 I know that savage wolves will come in after I depart and not spare the flock. 30 Even some of your own men will rise up and pervert the truth in order to drag the disciples away after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, remembering that, night and day, for three years, I did not cease to admonish you with tears.

32 Now I commend you to the Lord and to the word of His grace, which is able to build and give an inheritance among all the ones having been sanctified.

33 I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. 34 You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the needs of those with me. 35 In all things, I showed you by this labor we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus that he said, “Blessed is it, rather, to give than to receive.”

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The last part of Acts chapter 20 is our text today, if you’d care to turn there with me...we’ll get there in a few minutes. Chapter 20 of the book of Acts.

For a few weeks now, we've been looking at some of the ways faith and finances are tied together, and how they're making an impact on the economies of our nation and world even today.

That first week, we looked at some of the ways sexual immorality is causing financial problems because of our failure to fulfill the cultural mandate of Genesis 1. In the global west...and here in the states in particular, we're not filling the earth and subduing it by making godly families, and that causes negative financial ramifications.

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The next week, we looked at how the idolization of money always winds up causing hurts and griefs in people's lives. Paul warns us about replacing God with money in 1 Timothy 6.

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Last week, we talked about how ungodly shepherds have hurt, and are hurting today around the world millions of people...their own people...as they steal from them to enrich themselves...all because of the lure of money.

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A few years ago, Roy Lauter told me how New Hope mission had been drilling water wells for people in remote villages in Kenya...and just as the wells began producing water, all at the **expense** and **labor** of the mission and villagers, once the well began producing, the Kenyan government came in, capped the wells, put meters on them and began charging the people for their own water.

"Hello, I'm from the government and I'm here to help you."

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Now let me say, if that surprises you, you have a naive view of what government is capable of. Let me also say...that very kind of thing is exactly why immorality in government is so much more dangerous than immorality in business.

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In a fallen world, there's certainly a check and balance needed between the two ... I understand that. But there's a difference between business and government, and that difference is...you very rarely **have** to do business with any specific business.

If you don't like the way Honda builds cars, you can buy a Ford or a Buick.

If you don't like Apple phones, you can buy a Samsung.

If you don't like Captain D's, you can eat at Long John Silvers...like, apparently, a few billion people did a week or so ago up on Nicholasville Road when the new one opened. Did you see that crowd?

It caused a shortage of grease all over Lexington. [*congregation laughs heartily*]

The point is, in a free land, you have a choice with business.

But you don't have a choice with government.

Government can put you in jail if you don't do what they say. That's why the framers of our Constitution set up government like they did; they knew that you can't trust government – their forebears came from places where government couldn't be trusted...as have millions of other people as they've immigrated here.

People came here, and still come here, to escape governments that have become corrupt and have abused their own people because of the lure of money, and that temptation is impossible to control without God's help and influence.

Once God and His principles are out of government, there's nothing left to check government's power, which is why governments so often set themselves up against God.

Even Israel did that in Ezekiel's day...we read about that last week.

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De Tocqueville was right when he wrote,

“America is great because America is good. When America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

Any *goodness* any nation *had, has* or *hopes* to have comes from God. You take away God, you take away good, and you wind up with what you have in Kenya and a hundred other places around the world: shameless and overt governmental theft of private property so a few in government can get rich off of work that someone else does.

And if you don't do what government says...if you make a stink, you go to prison.

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No government is immune to this temptation, including ours right here. This experiment in democracy will only endure as long as our leaders look to God for practical wisdom and moral guidance. It's *all* an issue of faith, and as the church, we'll only have done our part if we speak boldly for Jesus and pray for our leaders ... at least as much as we complain about them.

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Today, we see in Acts 20 the account of Paul leaving the Ephesian believers...letting them know that he was going to Jerusalem and, generally speaking, what would happen to him.

Paul admits in verse 23 there, how the Holy Spirit had warned him that he'd face prison and affliction. In fact, Paul says there in verse 25 that the people of Ephesus “*will never see him again.*”

Paul knows what going to Jerusalem means for him – just like Jesus knew what going to Jerusalem meant for *Him*.

And the people of Ephesus...and Paul too...they're both sad about *parting*.

But Paul is not sad to *go*, because to go, for him, is to work, and his work is the gospel.

Paul's work is the proclamation of Jesus' great offer of redemption and freedom from sin.

He says in verse 24 there, ***“I make my life of no account, that I may finish my course and complete the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus.”***

You see, to Paul, there is nothing more important than completing the task that Jesus gave him. Everything else’s importance pales in comparison...even if completing that work involves suffering.

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Ajith Fernando, writing on this passage, says, “It’s well known that church leaders today find it difficult to motivate others to suffer for the cause of Christ. In fact, they often find it difficult to motivate Christians even to take on ***inconvenience*** for the sake of Christ.”

“I’m a Christian, so I shouldn’t have to be inconvenienced.” That notion has somehow been sold to the American church, but it’s just not true.

The truth is, being a Christian just about defines ***inconvenience***.

If ***convenience*** is what we’re looking for, then we still don’t ***understand*** the utterly giving nature of God, much less ***participate*** in it.

If we’re still looking for ***convenience***, then we’re still out for ***self***.

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Now, from the perspective of ***eternity***, we ***do benefit tremendously*** when we receive Jesus. We gain a profound hope and peace and joy and security that is not available anywhere else.

But very often Christians ***need*** that peace to be able to stomach what happens to us as believers here on earth – particularly in those places in our world where Christians are actively persecuted.

If you were to ask any of Jesus’ first disciples if following Christ brought them earthly ease and prestige...they would laugh in your face.

The blessings of the Kingdom of God are ***eternal***. They ***do begin*** here, but ultimately, they’re fulfilled in what comes later.

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Now, prosperity thinking is nothing new to ***today’s*** Church. In fact, it’s the very reason Paul speaks as he does here to the Ephesian leaders; he lets them know, right off the bat there in verse 29, that things would not be easy for them. He tells them they’d face ***dangers***...like ***wolves***...from ***outside*** the church...***and***...they would face ***corruption*** from ***inside*** the church.

Verse 30 there, he says ***“even from your own number, some will rise and pervert the truth, trying to take disciples away to themselves.”***

And that’s still true today. The church always ***has*** faced, and ***will*** face until Christ returns, threats from within and without. And Christians will always have to ***choose*** between their own ***safety***, their own ***popularity***, their own ***convenience***, their own ***financial gain***...often their own ***dignity***... Christians will have to choose between these things and the work of the Kingdom of God...because these ***just don’t always go together***.

In fact, in our broken world, they *usually oppose* each other, and believers have to follow Jesus in spite of the cost.

Paul points all this out to his friends here to help them have realistic expectations...and he uses himself as an example...an example of *sacrifice*.

*“You know what I’ve done in your midst,”* he says.

Verse 19 – *“I served with humility and tears, despite the threats of the Jews.”*

Verse 20 – *“I’ve taught you publicly and in your homes;”* because of the threats, that was a dangerous thing for him to do.

Verse 23 – *“I’ve faced hardship and persecution in every city.”*

Verse 27 – *“I’ve not hesitated to give you the whole will of God, whether it was popular or not.”*

Verse 31 – *“I’ve shed tears for you and your well being.”*

Verse 33 – *“I’ve not coveted anyone’s possessions – I’ve worked hard and supplied my own needs.”*

Paul doesn’t say all this to brag about himself. He says this because he wants them to see that his own life is an example of *giving*...giving of *himself*...*sacrificially*.

And now...he’s leaving the people to whom he’s given so much...in order to go to Jerusalem to face *persecution* at *best* and *death* at *worst*.

All this Paul has done. All these...sacrifices he’s made, and he’s suggesting here that others may well have to make them too.

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So...why?

That’s the question, isn’t it?

“Why?”

Why did *Paul*...why would *anyone*...put themselves through all this? Why choose a hard life when an easy life is possible?

There’s only one reason.

There’s only one reason why anyone, if given the choice, would choose the hard road over the easy one.

You choose the hard life for the sake of the greater cause.

People choose the hard road over the easy because you recognize there’s something more important...there’s some *truth*, some *principle*, some *commitment*, some *One* more important than...ourselves.

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According to Jesus, the *ultimate inconvenience* is to lay down your life for the sake of someone else. That’s what *He* did, of course; and that’s what Paul is getting ready to do here.

In following the leading of the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, Paul figured he would die; but he also hoped that, because of His obedience, whole worlds, who wouldn't have otherwise, would be able to hear the good news of Jesus.

And you know, they did!

Would the gospel have been so firmly established in Europe and westward if Paul hadn't gone to Jerusalem...and then on to Rome?

Would the United States ever have been founded?

Would you and I know Jesus if Paul had taken the easy way out?

Likely not!

You see, you and I...personally...we owe a debt of gratitude to the apostle Paul for choosing the hard road all those years ago.

You and I have been blessed because Paul determined that it ***really is***, quoting Jesus there in verse 35, "***better to give.***"

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The fact is, any ***good*** thing that has come to us in our lives has come because someone decided that it was ***better to give.***

Any good thing we have...we have because someone has sacrificed self for our sake.

Life itself is born out of sacrifice.

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From the beginning, we were all...every one of us...a very real pain to our mothers.

And ever since that first pain, we have all been a pain again, and again, and again...to some parent...at some point.

You see, we all cost something...and considering we're all alive here today, someone chose to sacrifice that something of themselves for us...for our good.

Life itself is born out of sacrifice.

And so is eternal life.

Eternal life is born, not just of the sacrifice of Jesus, but also of those who came to faith before us and passed that faith along to us.

There are teachers here in our church today who are giving of ***themselves*** so that ***others***, both young and old, might come to ***know*** and then ***grow*** in, Jesus.

You know, in spite of what you may have heard, people don't lead Sunday school or Children's Worship for the hourly pay.

People sacrifice their own desires and ease and convenience...they give their time and efforts...for a cause greater than self.

The fact that we can gather here at all...the reason churches across our nation (and really around the world) can operate is because of the sacrifice of explorers, missionaries and soldiers. A lot of

people through history decided that it would be better to give...and then they gave of themselves...many of them their very lives...so that I can stand here and proclaim the fact that Jesus loves you and died for your sins so we can be forgiven and cleansed and have a relationship with God.

Preachers and teachers can offer strength to live and power to forgive without fear...because of all those in our history who have valued the spiritual benefits of freedom *enough* to *inconvenience* themselves...for *better things*.

They determined the cause of Jesus to be of greater value than even their own lives.

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So, the question is:

What about us? What about you? What about me?

Who or *what* in *our* lives is *greater* than *us*?

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This change of seasons we're in right now...the beginning of a new school year...this is a great time to take stock of ourselves in just this way.

This is a great time to ask, "What cause in my life is truly greater than myself? For *what* or for *whom* would I be willing to *give*...and maybe even to *die*?"

I hope Jesus is at the top of that list.

If He's not, He should be...and He can be today.

Because here's the thing: if our own convenience rules our lives; if we've determined that we're just "gonna do what we want to do," then friend, may I say...we have no eternal hope beyond this life.

*But*...if we will allow Jesus to *rule* our lives, we have *all the hope in the world...because* we have hope for the *world to come*. We have a sure hope for eternal life...*and*...for a life here ... and however many the years the Lord gives us ... we have hope here for a life here that makes an eternal difference.

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If you're here today and you don't know Jesus, personally, please, please ...find someone who does...or come and speak with one of the pastors...and let someone here introduce you to Jesus.

If you *do* know Jesus, and He's telling you that you need to surrender to Him some part of your life that you've been holding on to, please...do *that* today. Do that today.

Let God order your life and make it something of eternal value. Let Him give you *something better*...something *better* than *self-gratification*...something better than just a life of *convenience*.

Give your life to those things will take you to the skies, not just to the grave.

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Let's bow our heads and listen for God's voice for a moment before we close.

If you've somehow given yourself to the world's idea of prosperity...if you have somehow come to believe that the pursuit of money and self-gratification is what really matters, would you let God speak to you about something better?

If there's a place in your life that God's Spirit is asking you to give to Him this morning...don't hesitate...don't delay...things that He's been asking for a long time...

Don't delay any longer. Give that to Him right now.

I have no idea what that may be.

It might be a goal, an ambition, an expectation ... maybe it's a life of convenience or ... frankly, ... just a life of doing what you want to do.

If you hear the Spirit saying, "You really need to give that part of your life to me, so I can be Lord there..." let Him have that...let Him show you something far better...how much better it really is to give than to receive.

Jesus take from us anything that competes with you, so that from this day on, ... this moment on, ... we can know, even if a **harder** life, that **better** life of walking in harmony with You is where we want to be.

Lord, thank you for Paul and for his example. Let us follow him as he followed Jesus. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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**Song of Response:** "Take My Life, Lead Me, Lord"

**Closing Word & Benediction:**

May we all...every one of us who follow Jesus...may we be part of that worldwide Church – that great body of Christ – about whom people say:

"They are like Jesus.

They give up themselves and their plans for the good of others.

They have learned that it is better to give than to receive."

May that be said about every one of us.

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Thanks for coming to worship today. The Lord bless and keep you. Amen.

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