



“Total Commitment”

Joshua 14:7-9; Acts 20:25–35; 2 Corinthians 8:1–12
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? A very important mentor in my life shared with me, “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 they, 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 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.” 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” 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.

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

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.