What Drives Your Life?

Acts 20:22-27

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I was a senior in high school when I experienced the loss of a personal friend and classmate. He had been drag racing. In both cars there was a passenger, each fellow classmates. As the cars were racing side-by-side and the drivers’ veins filled with adrenaline, there came a gentle, easy-to-navigate curve; but for some reason my friend lost control of his car, rolled it, and was instantly killed. To this day, I don’t know if he knew Jesus Christ. I didn’t know Christ at the time, so the thought held no interest for me then. But what did grab my heart is that his life was over at such an early age--an age when we think we are invincible and have little thought of eternity. I was struck with the thought that there was no more that he could accomplish. His life was over and done with. That was it! At his memorial service, words of sorrow and grief were shared, but there was no mention of what he stood for or what was truly important to him. Nothing was said of his relationship to God or his eternal destiny. It was simply stated that he would be missed by his friends and family. I don’t know how his parents managed to move on with their lives after having lost their son. Obviously, it weighs on me to this day or I wouldn’t be sharing it with you.

But it brings up an important question that all of us would be wise to consider, regardless of our ages: If you could write out your legacy, one that you would like others to remember you by, what would you write? That sounds like a morbid subject, but it really isn’t. It is a subject that helps us to refine our focus on how we plan to invest our lives from this day forward. We can do nothing to change our past, but we can make a difference with what we do today and in the future. Furthermore, if you leave a positive legacy, it reminds others as to what was most important to you.

Two weeks ago, my son told me of a peer of his who had already made it big in the financial world. He is a millionaire several times over, and by the time he reaches forty, he hopes to be a billionaire. That is his sole ambition in life. On the way to fulfilling this, my son’s friend runs through one illicit relationship with a woman after another.

In another situation, my son tells me of a classmate who also has made it big as a major programmer for a well-known world-impacting company headquartered in the Silicon Valley. At thirty, this man plans to quit his job this year and then start another company. When asked why, his friend simply stated, “Because I would like to try to do it.”

A day after those two conversations, my son and I had dinner with another of his closest friends, one we have known personally since he was about three. He is a bright young man with a great deal of potential. He is married with a family. He has already developed a legacy of faith with his friends and partners. They know that his and his wife’s major objective in life is to be missional about the Gospel. When was this missional view birthed in his life? When he was a very young man, a teenager. He learned early on to live today with an eternal eye on the future.

Hence, if you are twenty-five years young or younger, understand that right now you must begin to think about what matters most, because even the decisions you are making in middle school, junior high, high school or college will affect the way you invest the rest of your life. We must all be intentional with our choices. Even now, at your young age, how you invest your time, talents, and treasures will make a difference in how you spend eternity.

This morning, we are going to read a man’s words, his legacy, if you will. They are the words of the Apostle Paul, spoken to the elders of the church of Asia. In these words, we will see what was of first and foremost importance to him. We will see the passion behind his ambition. We will see what determined his intentional choices. If I were to summarize in one word Paul’s message concerning his calling by Jesus Christ, it would be “faithfulness.”

As we look at Paul’s example this morning, we will see him model the truth that faithfulness is the badge of the successfully lived Christian life. In fact, in **2 Timothy 4:6-8** he gives us his clearer and even briefer legacy statement at the end of his life, written from a prison cell. This passage and the one we are about to study have a lot in common. He writes:

**6For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7I have fought the good fight; I have finished the course** [my long distance race]; **I have kept the faith; 8in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing**.

That passage was written near the very end of Paul’s life. Our passage for this morning was written six to eight years before his death. It reveals to us Paul’s focus, his modeling of what faithfulness looks like in route to the end. It gives us a snapshot of Paul’s life that models the heart of one whose greatest desire in life was to be faithful to the one who loved him more than any other being, Jesus Christ.

Our passage for study actually begins in **Acts 20:18** and continues to **verse 31**. It makes up the Apostle Paul’s farewell message to the elders of the churches of Asia Minor, who were meeting with Paul for the last time. Paul’s farewell words to them were meant to be lasting, weighty words, so we should take them as such.

There were three parts to Paul’s message. First he reviewed his past with them (**Acts 20:18-21**), which we have already studied; then he discussed his present situation (**Acts 20:22-27**), which we will look at this morning; finally, he spoke about the future of the church in his absence (**Acts 20:28-31**). In the first part, he emphasized his faithfulness to the Lord and to the church as he ministered for three years in Ephesus. The second section reveals Paul’s personal feelings in view of both the past and the future. Whatever was driving these feelings is what was foundational to Paul’s being faithful. In the third part, he forewarned the churches of the dangers they would face.

Let’s look more closely at Paul’s heartfelt passions, in **verses 22-27**, as to how he was facing each of his remaining days as a faithful follower of Christ. When we finish, we will see three marks of a faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

**22And now, behold,** [Note the phrase “And now, behold” shifts the emphasis from Paul’s past relationship with the Ephesian elders to his present day focus on life] **bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. 24But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course** [his long distance race that he referred to in **2 Timothy 4**] **and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. 25And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. 26Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.**

What does “**bound in the Spirit**” mean? You can’t tell from the original Greek word for “**Spirit**” whether it refers to Paul’s or to God’s. But there may be no big difference in reality, because in the end, you come to the same point of conclusion: Paul is a man under strong conviction and constraint; his spirit is held captive by the Spirit of God to do the will of God.

In Paul’s case, doing the will of God that day gave him no understanding of what the specific outcome would be for his life the next day. He does know that it will not be easy, because he tells us in **verse 23** that “**bonds** [imprisonments] **and afflictions await me**.” In other words, he is not going home to a great celebration and welcoming party for all of his years of labor for Jesus Christ. Quite the opposite. According to **verse 23**, with every progressive step he takes in his travels from one city to the next on his way to his destination of Jerusalem, the Spirit of God has been telling him, “Paul, it’s going to get progressively worse.” Ultimately, what awaits Paul is jail and affliction, but he doesn’t know any of the details.

Living as a faithful servant of Jesus Christ means serving without full knowledge of how the details of the next few days, weeks, or years will unfold. You may see storms on the horizon, but you don’t focus on the storms. You focus on Jesus and His calling or His reason for saving you and leaving you here on earth to serve Him.

This is tremendously freeing. If you are a pessimist, you probably are kept awake at night by dreams of a dozen things that may go wrong tomorrow that will make you miserable. Here a few worries you might have:

I may not be able to keep my spouse from leaving.

I may not be able to keep my kid out of trouble.

I may not be able to keep my job.

I may not be able to close this sale.

I may not be able to win my friend or loved one to Christ.

Hence, the freedom we have in focusing on Him rather than the outcome is that what God requires of you tomorrow is not that you have to make things work. Success in human ventures is not the measure of God on your life. What God requires of you tomorrow is that you be faithful to Him and let the chips fall where He wills. That is very freeing.

In spite of what God has already shown Paul, it’s full steam ahead! Paul is headed to Jerusalem. He is not distracted by the political or economic chaos of the world. He is not distracted by what others think. He is not put off by the promised trouble that lies ahead. He has only one focus, to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in his life.

But you might ask, “Why would Paul do this? Does he have a death wish?” No. There are two motivations behind Paul’s faithfulness to Jesus Christ. In **verse 24** he says, “**But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself**.” If he didn’t consider is own life dear, if he didn’t love his own life, then what did he love? Paul answers that in **2 Corinthians 5:14-15**. “**For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; 15and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf**.” A faithful servant serves Jesus because he has been gripped by the love of Jesus.

Has your heart been captured by Christ’s love for you? If so, how have you invested your life this past week? What holds onto your heart? What has gripped your spirit?

Has fulfilling the American Dream been the driving force of your life?

Is your spirit gripped by the possible love relationship of another human being--a child, a parent, a close friend, a grandchild or grandparent?

Is your spirit captivated by the accumulation of wealth or the power it can afford you?

Is your spirit held by the goal of living safe and free and with as little discomfort as possible?

Is your spirit gripped by getting a just outcome for some wrong you are presently suffering?

Or, in light of the mundane afflictions of life, is your eye on the goal of fulfilling the will of the One who gave His life for you?

If our spirits are presently gripped by anything other than the love of Jesus and our seeking to do God’s will, then I would suggest that our spirits are not presently gripped by what held Paul’s spirit--the understanding that the King of Kings, the most important being in all of life, loves us. When the Holy Spirit has a hold on our hearts, then that which will be the driving force of our lives is to do the will of God, whether or not it brings comfort, wealth, recognition, love, justice, or power.

When God’s Spirit has a hold on you as it did on Paul and does on one of my son’s friends, then you will discover that Jesus’ will, to do the will of God, will be your passion, regardless of what others think of your choices or the hurt you may be called to endure. John Piper in one of his sermons said, “If you can honestly say with Paul that ‘faithfulness is better than life,’ it will mean not only that you can be content with ignorance about tomorrow; but you can also be content with the assurance that tomorrow is going to hurt!”

I can just imagine what a Christian American from this generation would have said to Paul if he were transferred back in time to sit with Paul at this point in his life: “But Paul, you’re getting old. How about a little cottage on the Aegean Sea? You’ve already done more in your ministry than most people could do in five lifetimes. It’s time to rest. Let the last twenty years of your life be travel and golf and puttering around. Let Timothy have a chance. He’s young. For goodness sake, don’t go to Jerusalem. And don’t go to Rome. And give up that crazy plan at your age to go to Spain. You could get yourself killed. It isn’t American! It’s not the American dream of what to do with the last years of your life.”

But Paul valued faithfulness more than life! Faithfulness is better than leisure life in retirement, better than leisure life in the middle years, and better than leisure life in youth. Do you want to hear some definitions of the word “retire” from my *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*? “To withdraw from action or danger.” “To fall back.” “To go to bed.” “To march away from the enemy.” Retirement may be the American dream, but it has no foundation in Scripture at all.

For us, faithfulness may require that we set our face like flint against the American dream. In **verse 24**, the word “**accomplish**” means to finish the race without dropping out from weariness or frustration or pain or pleasant detours.

Is there any other reason than love for the Lord that would motivate Paul to literally sacrifice his life for the gospel’s sake and for the sake of those who have yet to meet Jesus? Yes! This second reason comes from the only other passage where you find the two words “f**inish**” and “**course**” together as in our passage. We have already looked at it once. Let’s look at it again to see what else helped to drive Paul on to fulfill God’s calling upon his life, amidst pain and torture. We read, in **2 Timothy 4:6-8**:

**For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.**

What else moved Paul forward? The very promise of Jesus Christ that Paul, for his sacrificial service here on earth, would be rewarded with “**the crown of righteousness**.” Hence, eternal rewards based on how we invest our lives here on earth will be given to us and will affect the way we spend our eternity ruling with Jesus. Look at just two of Jesus’ promises concerning this:

“**Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven**.” [**Matthew 5:11-12**](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%205.11%E2%80%9312)

“**No one has left anything for my sake and the gospel’s who will not receive back a hundred fold**.” [**Matthew 19:29**](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%2019.29)

Eternal rewards is what Paul is referring in **2 Corinthians 4:17** when he writes,

“**This slight momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison**.” That phrase “**eternal weight of glory**” refers to the eternal weighty role of responsibility that the believer will one day hold in heaven. It is this very subject of the importance of eternal rewards that Paul points to again in the next chapter in **2 Corinthians 5:10**. Keep in mind, Paul is writing these words to Christians, and they have nothing to do with being saved. These words are written to those who have already been guaranteed salvation in Christ. Paul writes, “**For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body according to what he has done, whether good or bad**.”

The point is that the faithful servant of Jesus Christ serves Him so as to receive the eternal rewards that Jesus promised.

You might remember the little booklet we handed out recently, free to all of you who filled out our church evaluation questionnaire during the month of June. It was entitled *The Life God Rewards* by Bruce Wilkinson. We offered this book to you because it is not only true, but it is important for you to understand the truth about eternal rewards. If you have not read it, it would be a very good book for you to read.

I’m personally convinced that one of the most important truths of Scripture that has been neglected is this subject of eternal rewards for the believer, and their loss as well. Jesus clearly teaches on this subject throughout the gospels, yet, for some reason, few know anything about it.

If you are a teenager, imagine this. You don’t know it, but tomorrow is your last day on this planet. What will be your eternal rewards? What will you receive, based upon how you have invested your brief life? My suggestion is that you not wait to begin serving the King of Kings until adulthood, because you might never have that opportunity.

Paul loved Christ and was grateful for what He accomplished for him on the cross. He knew he was forgiven and accepted and approved of by God. But Paul also let us know that when times got tough, the “**crown of righteousness**” reminded him that even in death, being a faithful servant of Jesus Christ was worth it!

When the Apostle Paul died a martyr’s death for Christ and the gospel, he died with no regrets. It was his glorious privilege to finish life with joy. If you died right now, could you say that you lived and died with no regrets? I hope you never enter into the state of being on your deathbed, reflecting back upon your life, and realizing that your course produced little or that you had wasted your life. Or, even worse, that the path you traveled was one after evil. The only way in which the course of life may be finished with joy is by meeting faithfully every duty and encountering, as Paul did, every trial with a constant desire to glorify God.

I really like the way that Warren Wiersbe summarized Paul’s account of his life. He noted six words that paint six pictures of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. The first is *AN ACCOUNTANT* (**Acts 20:24**). Paul had examined his assets and liabilities and decided to put Jesus Christ ahead of everything else.

Second, Paul also, in **verse 24**, saw himself as A *RUNNER* who wanted to finish his course well in joyful victory. In **Philippians 2:17-18**, Paul writes from prison, “**But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me**.” What a challenge Paul passes on to us through his word and deeds.

Paul’s third picture is also found in **verse 24**. It comes from his statement that his ministry was something that he had “**received of the Lord**.” Hence, this makes Paul and each Christian A *STEWARD* of the ministry he or she has received. The steward owns little or nothing, but he possesses all things. His sole purpose is to serve his master and please him. “**Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful**” (**1 Corinthians 4:2** nkjv). (This verse is found on the headstone of RC Sproul.)

The next picture is that of the *WITNESS*, “**testifying of the Gospel of the grace of God**” (**Acts 20:24**, and note **verse 21**). The word means “to solemnly give witness,” and it reminds us of the seriousness of the message and of the ministry. As we share the Gospel with others, it is a matter of life or death.

Picture number five is the *HERALD* (**Acts 20:25**). The word “**preaching**” means “to declare a message as the herald of the king.” Today, we call such heralds ambassadors, who carry a message from their leader to another country. Again, Paul speaks of this in **2 Corinthians 5:20**. “**Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God**.” The distinction between a witness and a herald is that the witness tells what has happened to him, but the herald tells what the king tells him to declare. A herald is a man commissioned and sent with a message, and he must not change that message in any way. And since he is sent by the king, the people who listen had better be careful how they treat both the messenger and the message.

The final picture, and perhaps the most dramatic, is that of the *WATCHMAN* (**Acts 20:26**). What a serious calling it was to be a watchman on the walls! He had to stay awake and alert, ready to sound the alarm, to “**declare the truth, the whole counsel or purposes of God**” if he saw danger approaching. He had to be faithful, not fearful, because the safety of many people rested with him. Paul had been a faithful watchman according to **Acts 20:31**. “**Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears**.” He had declared to sinners and saints all the counsel of God.

I have one final challenging question for you: As you look at your past six months, how have you faired as a faithful follower of Christ? To measure your level of faithfulness, what can you point to on your calendar that reveals you have served Christ in such a manner that you would rightly expect one day to receive some eternal reward? How do you plan to invest the remainder of your days?