

Living Life with a Loose Grip

Acts 20:22-24

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Steve DeWitt

The marathon of Easter weekend and this weekend's update on new chapters in Bethel's story make this a good weekend to take a break from 1 Corinthians. As our church grows, we work very hard to communicate with people interested in our church about who we are, our core values and ministry philosophy. The DNA of our church. These values have formed over the years and become part of our culture. Just because we've talked about them in the past doesn't mean we can stop talking about them. So we repeat "It's all about Him" as often as we can. We talk about our view of basic Christianity as *Exalt, Experience, Engage*. Exalting in Christ with a lifestyle of worship. Experiencing Christianity horizontally in community with one another. Engaging in a lifestyle of service to Christ as we serve the body of Christ. We have buzzwords like, "expository preaching" and "oblitunity." These church values have to be repeated over and over again. I want to talk with you today about one of those "need to be repeated" values.

We need it and I can tell you that *I* need it. Living life with a loose grip is easy when God's providence in your life is the way you want it. Like the song lyric to *Blessed be Your Name: Blessed be Your name/When the sun's shining down on me/When the world's all as it should be/Blessed be Your name*. (*Blessed Be Your Name*, words and music by Beth & Matt Redman, EMI Christian Music Publishing) That's a great place to be. When life is hard, now that's another story. The song continues, *Blessed be Your name/On the road marked with suffering/Though there's pain in the offering/Blessed be Your name*. I am in a season of the latter and God is refining me in some stretchy ways, but ways that are good for me. Spurgeon would tell his congregation that when life feels like you are in the cellar to "remember that the cellar is where the King keeps his finest wines."

Becoming a Christian is an act of faith in Jesus Christ and His saving work on my behalf; on the cross, in the tomb, and in His resurrection. We celebrated that last week. What is often missed is that not only is becoming a Christian an act of faith, living as a Christian is an act of faith as well. It is the application of the surrender to Jesus as Lord of my life that requires ongoing faith. Here's why. Life will eventually require the application of salvation's surrender of faith. For most of us, that will happen over and over again. To surrender to God's will in regards to unfulfilled dreams, disappointing relationships, dissatisfaction with ideals we have about the way things ought to be in our family, health, children, church, whatever. Ultimately death will require a final surrender either to hope in Christ or a devastating despair. I think of the final words of Frank Sinatra as he was on the verge of death. He said, *I'm losing*. We can't lose what we don't view as ours in the first place.

This truth is presented in many places in Scripture. A very clear one is Acts 20:22-24. Here's the situation of the passage. The Apostle Paul is on his way to Jerusalem. You will notice this is late in the book of Acts in chapter 20. The final dramatic events are about to happen with his arrest in Jerusalem and eventual appearance before Caesar himself in Rome. On his way to Jerusalem, he wants some time with the leaders of the church at Ephesus but he doesn't want to go into Ephesus itself. That would entail too much time. So he sends for the elders of the church to meet him and gives them a final exhortation.

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was

severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. (Acts 20:18-21, NIV)

These verses are Paul's review of his ministry in Ephesus. His sincerity. His trials from the Jews. What strikes me here is the picture of a man sold out for the Lord. He says in verse 31 that he worked night and day with tears. Paul gave 100% to Christ and the Church. That is something worthy of admiration and aspiration.

Faith in the Uncertainty (Verse 22)

"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. (Verse 22)

Why would the Spirit tell him to go without telling him what would happen? That hardly seems fair. I think we learn something about the nature of revelation even for an Apostle. They were given more than we are but they too, had to walk in faith. Paul knew God wanted him in Jerusalem but could Paul have even begun to realize all that lie ahead?

This is why the Apostle Paul and all of us have to apply faith to the uncertainty. If we knew what would happen to us, it wouldn't require any faith and God wouldn't be glorified by our unconditional trust of Him. It's one thing to trust God in uncertainty; what about when you know there is difficulty ahead?

Trust for the Difficulty (Verse 23)

I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

Paul didn't know details but he knew that it was going to be a rough time. God made it clear to him that prison and hardship laid ahead of him. Would you go somewhere if you knew it was going to be a personally devastating time? Why would anyone do that?

With a Loose Grip on Life (Verse 24)

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Paul makes a stunning statement here about what is valuable to him. He compares the value of his life to the value of fulfilling God's call on his life, *testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

No value ► His life

I don't believe Paul is saying that "life" made in the image of God isn't precious. Rather, I think he is referring to the personal management of his life toward his own personal goals or ambitions. That kind of me-centered living or self-gratification is NOT valuable to him. It didn't mean much to him, particularly in comparison with something that is ultimate for him. Paul realized it's not about him...Or we could say, it's not about us. It's not about me.

Ultimate value ► Complete the gospel mission

"Finishing the race" is a Pauline illustration of completing the task, completely obeying, and persevering to the end. Okay. Completing what? What's the big deal for Paul? *Testifying to the gospel of God's grace...* that's flowery language for the mission of the church which is, as Jesus told us in Matthew 28:19-20, to make disciples... baptize them... teach them to obey Jesus' teaching and doing this with the assurance that Jesus is with us in this mission, even to the end of the ages.

What is valuable? Self-management and control of my life? There's something more important: the gospel of Jesus Christ and the mission of sharing this good news with as many people as we can toward the goal of their salvation and the glorifying of God throughout the earth.

*My life is **not** precious to me.* This is biblical language for what I call "Living Life with a Loose Grip." We naturally want to do the opposite. We want to cling to our right to self-manage our lives. We are fine with God's will for our lives as long as God's will is the same as our will. But when God's will unfolds in our lives in directions we perceive may be different than what we have dreamed or wanted, we easily get upset, bitter, even angry at God. Or it drives us to even more psycho levels of control over the priorities in our lives. We grip tighter and tighter. "No, God, you can't have this!" We wrestle with God over our family, our dreams, our directions, our time and money. We grip tighter, lest God or anybody else, take control away. Sound like anyone you know? Sounds like me.

An easy way to tell how tightly we are gripping our lives is by how we react when God seems to take something away that we value. Health. A relationship. A job. Some dream. In those moments we find out who is really at the center; what is most valuable to us. Again, lyrics from the song, *Blessed be Your Name: You give and take away/You give and take away/My heart will choose to say/Lord blessed be your name.* That's a God centered, living-life-with-a-loose-grip song, taken from Job who lost everything.

Gripping tighter is the flesh's response but it is not the right one. Jesus points out the foolishness of living this way in Luke 9:23, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"* (Luke 9:23-25)

We can grip our lives and our futures as hard as we can but what eventually happens to every one of us? We are forced to give up our lives. No matter who we are and how much we have. I have told the story before of touring the Oliver mansion in South Bend. It was built by a railroad tycoon a century ago. Our tour guide was obviously very impressed with the wealth of this guy and his family. I decided to yank his chain a little and asked him, "When Mr. Oliver died, how much did he leave?"

The man said, "Millions."

I said, "Don't you mean he left everything?" I don't think he liked that very much.

We all give it up eventually. Jesus says, by denying ourselves now and purposing to give of ourselves to Christ NOW, it seems like we are losing our lives, but in reality the opposite is happening. We are actually saving our lives. How can this be? We're experiencing true life when we abandon ourselves to the Lord's will. Jesus says, *Give your life to God and he will give your life to you. Give your life to God and he will give your life to you.*

This is how Christians show that Jesus is worth more to us than even our own lives. The more we treasure Him, the more we are willing to **give up** for His sake. That sounds good in

principle, doesn't it? Why in the American church are there so few people who actually live this way?

...There is in the air an absolutely relentless message from every corner that "you should be comfortable, do yourself a favor, minimize your pain, maximize your pleasure, reward yourself; the one with the most toys wins." Hardly anybody is saying, nor can anybody conceive, the message that he who loses his life for My sake and the Gospel finds it. And so the message that the greatest life is the life of suffering, sacrifice and risk is almost inconceivable in the modern American church. (John Piper)

Let's be honest, we often don't live life with a loose grip, we live our lives with a *firm* grip. Letting go is simultaneously the most difficult and the most wonderful moment in life. It is freeing. Now what do I have to fear? My life is not my own, I am Christ's. Why would someone do this?

Fulfilling the Gospel Mission is the Ultimate Priority

If only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. (Verse 24)

Did you hear it? Finish the race and complete the task. What is the task? Testifying to the gospel of God's grace. Simply said, making as many disciples of Jesus as possible in my life. This is what Jesus told us to do in the Great Commission. Make disciples. Why does our church exist? To glorify God by making quality disciples of Jesus Christ.

What's your purpose? IF your purpose is anything less than glorifying God with your life and purposing to do all you can with all your time, talents, and treasure to make disciples, you are living for things that will not last and you'll have to give them up someday anyway.

We can glorify God in every dimension of life and God's gifts are to be enjoyed for sure. There's no false dichotomy here. What is here is a life purpose statement. Why am I here? Why is our church here? Do we exist for ourselves? Is it about me? No. It's about Him, His gospel, His glory, and the joy of making quality disciples of Jesus. Living my life with a loose grip means my life revolves around the priority of the mission. Not that there aren't other priorities, but they are valued in a lesser category.

Someone might ask at one of these family gatherings, "Why not just maintain the status quo? Be satisfied with what has been done." Let me answer that. Jesus is not done building His church. If He shows up between now and Wednesday, you make a great point. But until He's here, He's building His church; His purpose is to add disciples, and we are the vehicle through which He accomplishes that. We make no apology for wanting to make more disciples and better disciples to Christ's glory. This is the goal and we have this one life of opportunity to do it. We want to go for it. We hope you do too.

Listen to the words of these people who lived their lives with a loose grip:

1. Lottie Moon said, "Surely there is no greater joy than saving souls."
2. Sherwood Eddy said of Amy Carmichael, "Her life was the most fragrant, the most joyfully sacrificial that I have ever known."
3. Samuel Zwemer, after 50 years of labor, including the loss of two young children, said, "The sheer joy of it all comes back. Gladly would I do it all over again."
4. Both Hudson Taylor and David Livingstone, after years of very difficult hardship and loss, said, "I never made a sacrifice."

I know two missionaries who told me that when they went to Africa many years ago, the people gave them a lunch, pointed them in the right directions and sent them off. They labored for years only to have to flee for their lives. Their hospital and all their possessions were ransacked and they were never able to return. And they sat right here and I asked them if they would do it again. Their faces lit up and they said, "We would gladly do it again, it was wonderful."

We can hear these kinds of stories and think, *Those are the superstars, I'm just a normal person.* Here's what I want you to realize: living life with a loose grip is normal Christianity. As God takes control of our lives, our hands loosen on the temporal priorities and we think more and more about eternity. God reorients us and the life of Christ by the Holy Spirit is increasingly evident (Galatians 2:20). These aren't ethereal, mean nothing words. It's real.

If there's anything that argues for holding loosely to life it is that Jesus did. "*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*" (Luke 22:42) Our beautiful Savior held all the power of God in His hands yet allowed men to whip him, beat him, drive stakes through His hands and feet and hoist Him painfully on a cross. Why? The mission was more important than His life. He held onto it loosely and He gave it up for us.

I can think of no more important cultural value for our church to become what God wants it to be than this one. If this really permeated the mindset of our church, we have not begun to see what God could do. Time will tell. Each of us is the steward of our hearts. Where's yours? How tight are you gripping things that are passing away? Why not pray and ask God to loosen your grip? To open your hand? Sound scary? Friend, the most assuring truth in the world is that God loves us. Anything He would do or change in us flows from His love and therefore is for our good.

You give and take away/You give and take away/My heart will choose to say/Lord, blessed be your name! (Blessed Be Your Name)

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