

Commitment
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Allen Power

Acts 20:18-32

Opening: Often romantic relationships come apart because of "commitment issues." What are some signs that someone may have a fear of commitment in romance? What traits or things in someone's history that might cause their fear of commitment?

God's design for marriage is a covenant for life with no escape clauses. Saying "I do" should mean we have decided and won't change our minds. If only more believed that! Part of the problem is we live in a world where we are overwhelmed with choices and options. Just trying to decide where to eat or what to watch on TV can cause "first world" decision fatigue. FOMO (fear of missing out) causes some to live in a constant state of indecision. The more options they have the more reluctant they are to commit.

One of the great things about freedom is though you've decided, you can change your mind. On the other hand, there are circumstances where we must commit. When we vote we are warned, "once you push this button your choices cannot be changed." There are roles where commitment is essential. Our society cannot function if first responders, E.R. doctors, and military personnel lose their commitment in the heat of the moment.

This morning our focus is on the decision to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord. I love the t-shirts we see in baptism that say: "I Have Decided." What a testimony! When we see that statement some of us think of an old hymn, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." Each stanza ends with the affirmation: "*No turning back, no turning back.*"

Those of us who believe in "eternal security" (Heb.10:23) believe if someone truly and sincerely decides to follow Jesus, there can be no "un-deciding." There can, however, be "backsliding" (moving away from Christ rather than toward Him.) Because we are saved sinners and the pressures to backslide are great, we risk re-writing that old hymn: "*I got real busy and so distracted*" or, "*It caused division with friends and family,*" perhaps, "*The ones I work with think I am crazy,*" "*I'm sliding back, I'm sliding back.*"

The point: Luke 9:62 tells us Jesus said, "*Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.*"ⁱ When we've decided to follow Him there must be no turning back. That decision requires surrender and commitment.

The apostle Paul was a great example of that. In his farewell speech to the Elders of the church in Ephesus Paul testified to his own commitment as an example to them, then he gave them instructions on the commitment they needed to make as church leaders. Let's see what he said about himself, about his desire for them, and how it applies to us. You might want to underline certain phrases as we look at the meaning of the text.

(NLT) — 18 When they arrived he declared, “You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now **19** I have done the Lord’s work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews.

- “*You know...*” Paul’s conduct and work had been an open book for them to see.
- Humility - Christ-followers (especially leaders) are to “*work humbly.*”
- Paul’s “many tears” referred both to the persecution he faced and his tender heart for God’s people and those who needed to know Christ.

20 I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. **21** I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

- Everywhere he could Paul fearlessly and consistently told people the “one message” they needed: “*repent from sin, turn to God, and have faith in Jesus.*”

22 “And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don’t know what awaits me, **23** except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead.

- As an Apostle, Paul didn’t set his own agenda. He was Holy Spirit-led.
- He followed the Spirit’s leading even when it meant pain and suffering.

24 But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

- Paul valued serving Christ and sharing the gospel more than life itself.

25 “And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. **26** I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it’s not my fault, **27** for I didn’t shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.

- Verse 26: We tell people about Jesus, but God (Father, Son, and Spirit) do the saving and those we tell bear the burden of their response.
- Verse 27: Paul reiterated he “didn’t shrink from declaring” God’s message.
- In verses 28-32 Paul shifted from his own testimony to challenging the Elders.

28 “So guard yourselves and God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders.

- “Guard yourselves” – Church leaders are held to a high standard (1 Tim. 3:1-10) so they must “guard” their lives and conduct.

- Paul wrote to Timothy: ¹⁶ Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you.ⁱⁱ (1 Timothy 4:16)
- “Guard the flock” – Shepherds don’t just watch the flock; they guard the flock.
- Peter wrote: ² Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. ³ Don’t lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example.ⁱⁱⁱ (1 Peter 5:2-3)
- The “flock” in Ephesus had some very real threats. Look at verses 29 & 30.

29 I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. **30** Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following.

- Church leaders must guard the flock against false teachers (Jesus called them “wolves in sheep’s clothing in Matt 7:15). I don’t turn the teaching over to just anyone. Years ago I had to deal with this.
- I also don’t want to accidentally teach bad theology myself. Why study so much to teach? Because I fear feeding “poison” to the flock.

31 Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

- Let’s talk about Paul’s warning to “Watch out!”
- If I asked, how can we avoid “backsliding” in our commitment to Christ? We might give “Sunday School” answers like pray, read your Bible, come to church (all important.)
- Lifeway’s Bob Bunn points out those are “foundational”, but Paul said to “watch out” (be on guard) for things that could cause us to drift away from Christ.
- What are some things that might lure us into drifting (backsliding)?
- We never drift into obeying God, but we CAN drift AWAY from obedience to Him.
- Paul closed with an encouraging charge to these Ephesian church leaders.

32 “And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

- Peterson (The Message) paraphrased that verse: “Now I’m turning you over to God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make you into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need in this community of holy friends.”^{iv}
- Back to our original point. In addition to instructions and warnings for these Elders in Ephesus, Paul demonstrated his own commitment to Christ and called them to that same level of commitment.
- That call not only applies to church leaders but to all Christ-followers.
- When we have decided to follow Jesus there must be “no turning back.”

- *"I Have Decided to Follow Jesus...no turning back."*
- How that hymn came about is an interesting story.
- The hymn originated in India in the mid-19th century. It is based on the last words of a man named Nokseng, who belonged to the Garo tribe in that region.
- Nokseng and his family had converted to Christianity through the efforts of American Baptist missionaries. When the village leaders learned of their conversion, they demanded that Nokseng renounce his faith or face execution along with his family.
- Nokseng refused to deny Christ, even when his children were killed before his eyes. He reportedly said, *"I have decided to follow Jesus, and there is no turning back."* His wife was then killed, but he still refused to recant, saying, *"The world can be behind me, but the cross is still before me."*
- Finally, Nokseng himself was executed, with his last words being, *"Though no one is here to go with me, still I will follow Jesus."*
- What a picture of commitment to Christ! A missionary wrote down the words and eventually it became the hymn we know today.
- That is not the end of the story. *"...with their deaths, a miracle took place. The chief who had ordered the killings was moved by the faith of the man. He wondered, "Why should this man, his wife and two children die for a Man who lived in a far-away land on another continent some 2,000 years ago? There must be some remarkable power behind the family's faith, and I too want to taste that faith." In a spontaneous confession of faith, he declared, "I too belong to Jesus Christ!" When the crowd heard this from the mouth of their chief, the whole village accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior."*^v

So, What's the Takeaway?

- What should motivate us to be committed to Christ? Another old hymn came to mind:

*"I gave My life for thee,
My precious blood I shed,
That thou mightst ransomed be,
And quickened from the dead;
I gave, I gave My life for thee,
What hast thou done for Me?"*^{vi}

- Jesus gave His life so we can have eternal life with Him, not eternal death in hell.
- If a Christ-follower believes those words, we will want to be committed to Him.
- When we've decided to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord there must be no turning back. That requires both surrender and then commitment.
- Turning back doesn't mean losing our salvation, it means backsliding.
- Backsliding is simply moving away from Christ rather than toward Him. Growing cold toward the things of Christ, His word, and His church.
- It can mean sliding back into the old sinful behavior He died to forgive.

- Backsliding grieves God but because of His mercy and grace, like the father of the prodigal son, our Lord is waiting with open arms to welcome us back, clean us up, and restore our relationship.
- If we “have decided” let’s make it our aim to not “turn back” but to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”^{vii}

ⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Lk 9:62). Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (1 Ti 4:16). Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (1 Pe 5:2–3). Tyndale House Publishers.

^{iv} Peterson, E. H. (2005). [The Message: the Bible in contemporary language](#) (Ac 20:32). NavPress.

^v <https://www.revshirleymurphy.co.uk/post/the-true-story-behind-the-song-i-have-decided-to-follow-jesus>

^{vi} https://hymnary.org/text/i_gave_my_life_for_thee

^{vii} Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (2 Pe 3:18). Tyndale House Publishers.