

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

by Bayless Conley

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I want to talk to you today about three things in connection with others. I want to talk to you about our freedoms, our finances, and our faith in connection with others. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we just give You our undivided attention to the best of our ability. We just marshal all of our resources: spirit, soul, and body, and we lean out toward heaven. We say, "Lord, teach us. Open our eyes. Cause our ears to hear. Cause our hearts to understand." We pray that Jesus would be glorified through it all.

If you agree, say, "Amen." We're talking about others. I realize that there are people here today, and you're in the middle of a personal crisis. There's stuff going on in your world. You need to know God cares about you. He's concerned about you, and He wants to help you. I just think if you'll sort of keep your little antennas up and really endeavor to lean in and listen, you're going to maybe catch something bigger that you need in your life than just you. I think you'll find answers for your own personal situations as well because God is concerned regarding the smallest details of our lives. Let's talk about, first of all, our freedoms when it comes to others. I want to read to you from 1 Corinthians 10 from the Message Bible. Now, the Message, actually, is not a translation. It's what we call a paraphrase, meaning it translates thoughts, not just words.

The people who write a paraphrase will go to the original language and say, "Okay, I can translate that word for word. But if that were to be said in today's language, how would that be communicated?" You can think about it. We have so many things in our daily speech today that may not make sense to somebody 100 years from now or give that 500 years from now. I mean, if you say, "Hey, the cat's out of the bag." "What? A cat? Why'd you put it in a bag?" No, if I'm going to translate a thought, I'd say, "Well, it just means that something that was supposed to be kept secret has actually become known." Or, "Hey, just let your hair down." "What?" It means relax. Chill out. "It's raining cats and dogs." No, there's a deluge. It's raining hard. And there are things like that in Scripture as well. You can translate them word for word. I read multiple, multiple translations when I do that, but I also like to look at a paraphrase, and some of them are spot on. I mean, if I was just, let's say, it's still understood today, but this comes from a few centuries prior, but so-and-so kicked the bucket. Like, what does that mean? Imagine you take that down the road even further. Well, obviously, it means that someone died. Now, you understand that. I understand that, but somebody down the road may not, and so that thought may need to be translated into the language of the people. So, they go, "Oh, that's what's being said."

Now, I don't think you should live on a paraphrase, but I like the Message. I always compare it back to the original. I look at the translations that I use, but as I studied and meditated on the verses we're going to read today from the Message Bible, I just felt it really, really nailed it. We're going to read quite a few verses before we're done. I want to begin in 1 Corinthians 10:23–24. It says,

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

²³⁻²⁴ Looking at it one way, you could say, “Anything goes. Because of God’s immense generosity and grace, we don’t have to dissect and scrutinize every action to see if it will pass muster.” But the point is not to just get by. We want to live well, but our foremost efforts should be to help others live well.

It's not just, “How much can I get away with and still be a Christian? How far into the gray areas can I go and still be a believer?” That's not the point. The point is to live well, to live right, and then, beyond that, to help others live well. It's like a story I heard one time. There was stagecoach in the Old West. The driver had retired, so they put out an ad to get a new driver for the stagecoach. So, three applicants come. He's interviewing them and asks the first one, “Do you drive a stagecoach?” He says, “Yeah, I've driven a stagecoach. I drive wagons. I can do all that.” He says, “Okay, well, do you know Dead Man's Curb out on Canyon Road?” He says, “Oh yeah, I know it well.” He says, “How would you navigate that with our stagecoach?” He said, “Man, I can take the wheels of that stage to within two inches of the edge of the canyon there around Dead Man's Curb, no problem.” The guy said, “That's impressive.” So, he asked the next applicant, “What about you? How would you navigate that?” He said, “Hey, I can hang two wheels out over the edge going around that curve.” The guy said, “Well, that's really impressive.” He asked the third guy, “What about you?” He said, “I stay as far away from the edge as I can.” He said, “You're hired.”

The point is not to see how far we can get out and still be Christian. I don't want to get out on the edge with my freedoms and just keep pushing the envelope. I want to live in a safe zone. We want to help others live well. Now, the context of this, in much of the ancient world, and especially in Corinth, to who this was written to, they were having issues in the church over matters of conscience. In particular, much of the meat that was sold in the local markets had been offered to an idol or a pagan god. In fact, most generally, the choicest cuts of meat came from the pagan shrines. For some believers, it was no issue at all because they knew there's only one true God. All other gods are false. So, they didn't think twice about buying, cooking, and eating a steak that was offered to Zeus. Their conscience was free. Other believers looked at it differently and felt it was wrong. Now, it was a non-salvation issue. Paul basically told the ones with the freedom of conscience to do so. “Hey, don't flaunt your freedom. Don't make others feel inferior or pressure them to violate their own personal conscience in such matters.” He told those who felt it was wrong not to criticize those who had the freedom of conscience to do so. And don't try and make them conform to your narrower view. You need to walk in love in these kind of issues. He goes on. I'll begin reading in verse 25 now. He said,

²⁵⁻²⁸ With that as a base to work from, common sense can take you the rest of the way. Eat anything sold at the butcher shop, for instance; you don't have to run an “idolatry test” on every item. “The earth,” after all, “is God's, and everything in it.” That “everything” certainly includes the leg of lamb in the butcher shop. If a nonbeliever invites you to dinner and you feel like going, go ahead and enjoy yourself; eat everything placed before you. It would be both bad manners and bad spirituality to cross-examine your host on the ethical purity of each course as it is served. On the other hand, if he goes out of his way to tell you that this or that was sacrificed to god or goddess so-and-so, you should pass. Even though you may be indifferent as to where it came from, he isn't, and you don't want to send mixed messages to him about who you are worshiping. ²⁹⁻³⁰ But, except for these special cases, I'm not going to walk around on eggshells worrying about what small-minded people might say; I'm going to stride free and easy, knowing what our large-minded Master has already said. If I eat what is served to me, grateful to God for what is on the table, how can I worry about what someone will say? I thanked God for it and he blessed it! ³¹⁻³³ So eat your

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

meals heartily, not worrying about what others say about you—you're eating to God's glory, after all, not to please them. As a matter of fact, do everything that way, heartily and freely to God's glory. At the same time, don't be callous in your exercise of freedom, thoughtlessly stepping on the toes of those who aren't as free as you are. I try my best to be considerate of everyone's feelings in all these matters; I hope you will be, too.

Now, he mentions two things: "Whatever you do, whether it's eating meat or whatever, you need to do it heartily to God's glory." If you can't exercise the freedom that you're exercising, if you can't do what you're doing to God's glory, you shouldn't be doing it. If you can't say, "God, I'm doing this for Your glory." If you can't say that, you shouldn't be engaged in it. So, whatever you do, do it to God's glory. Then secondly, sometimes, in some company and in certain contexts, it is better to abstain from exercising the freedom you have for the sake of others, putting others first. Now, listen carefully. This is so important. This wisdom that Paul is admonishing us to exercise in such cases does not include things that the Scriptures clearly declare as sinful. There are some things that are very, very clear. The Bible says this is out of bounds. This is sinful. It might have to do with the expression of my sexuality.

There are some things that are out of bounds, and the Scripture declares are sinful when it comes to the expression of our sexuality. Or it might be drunkenness, or you're cheating someone, or stealing, or whatever it is. Certain things are sinful, as declared in the Scripture. Somebody says, "Well, look, my conscience says it's okay. So, you're wrong if you judge me or say anything about my actions." That's not what Paul is teaching here. When it comes to things in other places, the Scripture clearly says, "Hey, out of bounds, that's sinful. Those who practice such things won't inherit the kingdom of God." We should say something about those things. Somebody said, "Well, you're not walking in love. Jesus is about love, and my conscience says that I'm fine to do this." Not if the Scripture says that it's not fine. Are you following me? However, and this is a big however. However, on many issues, be they dietary, the freedom to drink wine, what day to worship on, what movies you watch, or what type of music you listen to, or getting a tattoo, in all of these things, people's conscience may vary greatly.

I remember years ago, a minister who was well known here in Southern California, another pastor called him up and asked him this question, "Do you go to the beach?" He says, "Oh yeah, I go all the time." He says, "I surf. I love it." The other pastor said, "I wish I could go." He said, "Well, why can't you go to the beach?" He said, "Well, my denomination said it's wrong." He said, "Why would it be wrong to go to the beach?" He says, "French bikinis. Do you know how much flesh the girls show at the beach? It's just wrong to expose yourself to that." And his response was, "Look, I go, and I surf. I get exercise, and I enjoy God's creation. I fellowship with God when I'm out riding the waves, and I actually do it to the glory of God. I don't go to the beach to ogle the girls." Now, granted, if you're struggling with lust, a Southern California beach in the summertime is probably not the place for you. Now, speaking of the beach, I had a guy come and tell me one time—I was in a serious boating accident in 2014. They didn't expect me to live. I did. I had two friends on board. They were seriously hurt as well. I had a guy come tell me that it was God punishing me because I kill and eat fish. In his conscience, it was wrong to kill any of God's creatures, and it was only right to eat vegetables. So, he tried to put that off on me. Basically, everyone in every church in the whole world are wrong if they eat any kind of meat. If they eat fish or fowl, that's wrong. We're only supposed to eat vegetables. Now, I do think he had a leather belt and leather shoes on. But those are the kinds of issues Paul is dealing with.

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

There is a pastor who I knew. Listen, my illustrations mainly are going to revolve around ministry because that's a lot of the world I travel in. He pastored a great church and had an elder over at his house one night, an acquaintance of mine. The elder got to thumbing through the pastor's videos. Now, this is back in the early 80s, so VHS tapes. He had a VHS tape that he had rented from Blockbuster Video, and it wasn't Christian. The elder just blew a gasket over it. He actually had the 1980 hit movie, Superman, starring Christopher Reeve in his video collection. So, the elder called up all the other elders, called all the church leaders and literally made the pastor get up in front of the congregation, confess his misstep, and apologize to the congregation for having rented Superman. That elder actually went on to split the church over that issue. Somebody says, "Well, that's ridiculous." But people move in similar ways when it comes to those things. Listen to these verses from Romans 14, and I would encourage you to take time after today and spend some prayerful, slow-paced time digesting all of Romans 14. I want to read a few verses, beginning in verse 1. He says,

¹ Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently. ²⁻⁴ For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help. ⁵ Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience. ⁶⁻⁹ What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.

He mentioned what day to worship on. I have a friend. They have a great church. The doctrine is very similar to ours. They preach a great salvation message. They believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They pray for the sick. There is one thing we differ on, however. He believes that the day to have church on, the day to worship on, is Saturday, and that's the only day. I'm of the ilk, I think Sundays are just as good as Saturdays and Mondays are just as good as Sundays and Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays. I think all the days belong to God, but he's convinced Saturday's the day. But do you know what? He and I get along great. We're on the golf course. We just have great fellowship. We're out enjoying a meal, and he doesn't try to put off his view about what day to worship on me. I don't say, "Well, man, you're so bound up. You need to expand a little bit. You need some..." I don't. I don't hassle him about that. We just get along. We do our best to win souls and help people.

By contrast, and some of you remember me talking about this sometime back, I was on a long flight. I was tired. I was looking forward to getting something to eat and sleeping, but this person sat next to me who wanted to talk. They started asking a bunch of really probing questions.

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

I mean, within five minutes, they ferreted out where I lived, what I did for a living, and that I was a believer. The next question they asked was, "What day do you worship on?" At that time, we had Saturday and Sunday services. I said, "Well, we have services on Saturday." They had a huge smile on their face. I said, "And we have services on Sunday," that turned into a frown. Then, they laid into me, a complete stranger, for almost the entire flight about how wrong and how sinful that was. "How can you worship and it not be on Saturday? It's just so wrong." I never got to enjoy my meal. I never got to sleep. I mean, they were harsh and rude, like the whole world is wrong and all churches are wrong if they don't worship on this day. Paul addresses that here. He says, "Okay, you may not have the freedom someone else has. Don't try to make them conform to your narrower view."

I have another friend. He's actually spoken in our pulpit a number of times. He believes that the Old Testament dietary laws, the kosher laws, are God's wisdom for us today as well. So, he will not eat pork, and he won't eat lobster because those things are not kosher according to the Pentateuch, the Old Testament teachings. But we don't have an issue. We go out to dinner, and I might order pulled pork. He doesn't care. But for him, and he doesn't try and put that off on his congregation, it's his own conviction. So, he doesn't violate that personal conviction, but he doesn't try and put it off on others. Again, I have another friend who led an incredibly influential and large ministry. He was into his wine. He loved to drink wine. I don't have an issue with that at all, but he flaunted it. I mean, it was like just kind of all the time. I remember I was doing a conference, and another friend was there. We're doing a conference, and we both had flown in from long distances. We were invited to a staff thing after one of the evenings. It was a staff potluck. I felt like I was at a high school party. There was very little food and there was alcohol on every single table. I mean, bottles and bottles and bottles and every, I mean, it was like daddy and mom are gone, and we raided the liquor cabinet.

My buddy has his two young teenage sons there. He says, "Bayless, I'm really not comfortable having my boys here." I said, "Well, let's go." I said, "We're both jet lagged. We flew in from a long way." I said, "I'll just go bow out and tell them we're going to go back to the hotel." So, I did, and we left. Shortly after that, one of the guys, one of the key staff members, actually resigned. I read the resignation letter. His main reason for resigning was, "I feel pressured all the time to start drinking. Like I don't have freedom in Christ if I don't drink." He said, "I just feel this pressure all the time. Like, 'Oh yeah, there's the staff member that's not free.'" Now, who knows, maybe he had real issues with that before he came to Christ. Some of us would understand. Maybe his daddy died of alcoholism. Maybe there was a history of abuse in his family tied to alcohol. You just don't know someone else's story. And so, he left. So, I took my friend out to dinner to talk to him. I said, "I don't have an issue with you having a glass of wine with dinner. Man, have two. I don't care. But you're pushing this thing, and it's like, 'You're bound up, and you're not free if you're not doing what we do.'" He immediately pushed back. He says, "Bayless, you're telling me that if you were out to dinner with somebody who was struggling with their weight, you wouldn't order dessert?" I thought about it for a minute. I said, "Yeah, actually I probably wouldn't if I thought it'd be an issue to them. No, I don't think I would." He said, "Come on." I said, "No, I wouldn't." I said, "I'm not going to hide the fact that I like cheesecake, but it's just not an issue for me. The other person needs to be considered."

So, the upshot of this is if it's not clearly spelled out as sinful in the Scriptures and you have freedom in your conscience to eat meat, worship on Sunday, watch a particular movie, listen to a particular type of music, enjoy a glass of wine, eat pork, or whatever, enjoy your liberty, but not in a context where you're going to cause someone with a weaker conscience to stumble. You need to walk in love and think about others. If your conscience tells you that a certain thing is wrong, such as having a Christmas tree in your house, going to the beach, eating meat, or

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

worshiping on Sunday, then don't violate your conscience, but realize that the conscience of others may differ on some of these issues. Walk in love. Don't condemn them, and try to make them conform to your view.

Now, I already think there's going to be five or six people who are going to rush up and want to argue with me as soon as church is done. So, you take some time and meditate on what the Holy Spirit said through the Apostle Paul, especially in Romans 14. Thank God for the freedom we have. And some people's conscience doesn't allow them to do some things that another person's conscience will. If it's not outlined as sinful, enjoy it, but put others first. Jesus, others, and you. If you can't do it for the glory of God, then don't do it. And don't be callous in your exercise of freedom. All right, we come to the second thing, and that's finances. I want to read to you from Genesis 12, beginning in verse 1 NIRV. It says,

¹ The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's family. Go to the land I will show you. ² I will make you into a great nation. And I will bless you. I will make your name great. You will be a blessing to others."

Everyone say, "Others." God says to Abram, "I'm going to bless you, and you're going to be a blessing to others." We're blessed. God wants to bless us, but He wants to bless others through us. Blessed to be a blessing to others. And let me give you, I do believe in prosperity, but let me give you my biblical definition of prosperity, and this is derived from my study of the Scriptures. Here's what I believe prosperity is, and I believe this is God's will for His children. Sufficient to meet all of your needs, with enough left over to help somebody else. That is prosperity. Sufficient to meet your needs, with sufficient left over, to be a blessing to someone else. Right away, this makes me think of the Macedonians who came to Christ. Literally the first European converts. The apostle Paul and his team tried to go to Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit wouldn't let them go. They tried to go into Asia, but the Holy Spirit wouldn't let them go there. Paul had a vision in the night of a man from Macedonia pleading, "Come to Macedonia and help us." So, they determined that God had called them to preach the gospel to those in Macedonia. That's the best help we can give human beings, is the help of the gospel. So, they went and ended up in the city of Philippi, named after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. A very strategic city that commanded the road between Europe and Asia. Apparently, there weren't many Jews in the city because it took 10 Jewish men to form a synagogue, and that was Paul's normal method of operation. He'd go into the synagogue, and from the Scriptures, he would preach Christ. But they didn't even have a synagogue, and when there weren't enough Jewish men to form a synagogue in a city, they would customarily meet by the riverside for prayer and Scripture reading.

So, they went and found a group of people. There weren't even any men there; it was just women. God opens one of the woman's hearts; her name is Lydia. She believes in Jesus Christ, and she is saved. She persuades Paul and his team to come stay at her home. Her household, her servants, and her family all get saved. They get baptized. Now, Lydia was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira. Just an interesting little side note: Paul wanted to go into Asia, but the Holy Spirit wouldn't let him. So, he comes to Philippi, and here's Lydia, a seller of purple. She's very wealthy. It's an incredibly lucrative business. They would get the purple dye from these mollusks in the rivers in Thyatira, which happened to be in Asia, right where Paul wanted to go. That was the only place they got the purple dye from. So, she has this huge business, dyeing Roman togas. They would do this even for royalty. She has a large house. So, now the gospel is going to be carried through her business contacts to the very place Paul was trying to go. God's always working a plan that's bigger than you are, my friend. No one can do it all. No one can be it all. We just need to find our part. So anyway, she gets saved. Shortly after that, they

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

cast a demon out of a demon-possessed girl who's sort of a fortune teller. We're not told she got saved, but it's likely she did and became part of that fledgling church there. Paul got in trouble for that because her masters realized their profit was gone. They can't hire this girl out to tell fortunes anymore, so they raise a ruckus.

Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown in prison. A Roman jailer would have been a grizzled ex-Roman soldier. He'd have seen a lot of carnage, a lot of bloodshed, and was very calloused. Someone says, "How do you know? Well, he knew that Paul and Silas had been railroaded. He knew that there were false charges, but what does he do? He takes them into the innermost prison, the dirtiest, foulest, smelliest, and darkest place of the prison, and chains their feet. Their feet are put fast on the stalks, and listen, you couldn't push a button and say, "Mr. Jailer, I need to use the bathroom." You just went where you were chained, and he doesn't care. Their backs have been laid open. They've been beaten savagely, and he could care less. Do you know what he does after he locks them in this dark dungeon? The guy goes to sleep. He doesn't care. He's unmoved by human suffering. The only thing that woke him up was an earthquake. When God sent the earthquake, he ran in, and there was an exchange between him and Paul. He gets saved, and the next thing we find is this calloused jailer lovingly washing their wounds. He says, "Come, I want you to meet my family. These are my kids. This is my wife. Let me make you something to eat." It changed him. Listen, Jesus turns the calloused into the caring. He turns thieves into givers. He turns murderers and terrorists like Saul of Tarsus into preachers like the apostle Paul, and if the Jesus that you found didn't change you, you probably got the wrong Jesus. Jesus changes people.

Imagine, just imagine how grateful they were. Here's Lydia. She's wealthy. She's well-traveled. She has everything that we think would make you happy in life. She has money. She has servants. She has a huge house. She probably had a house in Thyatira as well. She's seen different places, but there's an emptiness inside of her. Only when she hears the gospel preached is that emptiness filled. Finally, her restless heart finds rest in Jesus. Oh how grateful! And that little demon-possessed girl. Some of you here have no idea what it is to be held in the grip of dark forces. I know something about that because of the stuff I was involved in before I came to Christ. It is a terrible thing, and suddenly, she's set free. That darkness that would come over her, that thing that would squeeze her mind like a vice is gone. Oh, how grateful. And that jailer, his whole family got saved and baptized as well. They saw such a change in him. Oh my, how grateful they were. So, Paul establishes them as a little fledgling church. Then he leaves, and goes to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. He preaches the gospel, gets people saved, and establishes churches. Who paid for all that? That little group of believers in Philippi did. They believe that they have the great responsibility and privilege to send the gospel to others. Listen to what Paul writes to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11:7–9a NKJV.

⁷ Did I commit sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches, taking wages from them to minister to you. ⁹ And when I was present with you, and in need, I was a burden to no one, for what I lacked the brethren who came from Macedonia supplied.

Brought in from Macedonia. Who is that? It's the jailer, Lydia, and her household. Probably that little girl who had been held in the grip of demon powers. In fact, he writes the book of Philippians to those people. When I read it, I always think of them. Certainly, the church has grown because when the book of Philippians opens up, he addresses the bishops and deacons. So, the church has grown. When he writes in 2 Corinthians about the Macedonian churches, they're plural. So, they've established other fellowships. Listen to what he writes to them. Philippians 1:3–5 NLT.

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

³ Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. ⁴ Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, ⁵ for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now.

From the time you first heard it, that means from the day that God opened Lydia's heart on the riverside, and she said, "Come to my home," from that day. From the day the jailer got saved, from that day, from the first time they heard the gospel, they had been partners together with Paul in spreading the gospel. He writes to them in Philippians 4:15–17 NKJV.

¹⁵ Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. ¹⁶ For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account.

So, they've been giving consistently. They're supporting the preaching of the gospel in other places out of gratitude and the desire to see others come to Christ. Paul said, "It's not that I desire the gift, but I desire fruit that abounds to your account." Isn't that an interesting little phrase? Meaning all of the precious souls that are saved, these radical precious salvations, go to your account. The families who are changed as a result of those salvations, and it generally happens when one family member gets saved, a domino effect happens. Daddy gets saved. Mama gets saved. Kids get saved. It usually influences the whole family. People are healed. People are delivered. Marriages are restored. Churches are established. It all went to their account. On heaven's ledgers, they were credited, and they would be rewarded by God in this life and in the next. It's all fruit. Everything that happened, all of the great results of the preaching of the gospel, in heaven's books, went to their account because of their prayers, their support, and their material support. Paul said, "Hey, you sent aid to me once again in Thessalonica." Listen to the next thing he says in Philippians 4:18–19 NKJV.

¹⁸ Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

We love Philippians 4:19. "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ." But you can't divorce it from the setting. It doesn't work if you remove it from its context. You can't just take verse 19 and slap it over everything. These are people who were deeply grateful for Jesus having changed their life. Then, they had others on their mind, they supported the gospel work, and they did it consistently. They did it, Paul said, sacrificially, and it brought them into a realm of promised provision that God would supply all their need according to His riches in glory, which means not just according to your need, because then once the need is met, it's done. But according to riches in God's glory, there's overflow to help someone else. I have some other things to share about that, but I'm going to wrap this up right now very quickly. We're going to talk about a third area, and that's others when it comes to our faith. Do you know that only twice in the gospels did Jesus declare that someone had great faith, only twice? One thing in particular about those two individuals is that they had come to Jesus on behalf of someone else. Their faith was about others. It was about the Roman centurion who came for his servant. It was about the Syrophenician woman who had come for her demon-possessed daughter. Others. Listen to Colossians 4:12 ERV, Paul writes and says,

Freedoms, Finances, and Faith

¹² Epaphras, another servant of Jesus Christ from your group, sends his greetings. He constantly struggles for you in prayer. He prays that you will grow to be spiritually mature and have everything that God wants for you.

Epaphras is praying for others. I think you would be surprised to find out how much your life has been shaped by others. Some of you are here today because a grandma, a grandpa, or a parent struggled in prayer for you. They may be in heaven now, but their prayers are still having an impact and an effect in this world. Some of you know you're only here because of Mama's prayers or because of Grandpa's prayers. I was amazed to find out that in our personal family history, the Conley family tree—I wasn't surprised to find out that there were quite a few notorious outlaws. That didn't surprise me at all. But I was surprised to find out that there were some circuit-riding Methodist preachers. I think me standing here doing what I'm doing today in part is due to the prayers they prayed. I think they prayed for their children and all of their descendants that would be born. And those prayers are still having an impact in the world today.

I had an acquaintance. I met him when I was in my late twenties. He was an old man when I met him, and his testimony was absolutely mesmerizing. He had had a hard life growing up and ended up being a hitman in the Chicago mob. He was the one who would collect gambling debts. If you didn't pay, he would take care of you. He killed quite a few people. He worked as a driver for John Dillinger, who robbed 24 banks during the Great Depression, I think four or five police armories and stole all the weapons out of the police armories. Well, he was a driver in many of those bank robberies. He also was a driver for Bonnie and Clyde, and a number of the robberies that they did. They were serial murderers as well as robbers. I think they killed, just in police officers, nine or ten policemen. He actually told me in detail how they would make their getaways. Fascinating. I don't have time to tell you right now. He spent the last few years of his life—he got saved, spent the last few years of his life preaching the gospel. And that's when I met him. He was sharing with me and a group of other people. He was telling his testimony, and he suddenly broke down and began to sob. He says, "Do you know why I'm here doing what I'm doing today?" He says, "Because my brother, who was a Christian all those years, wouldn't give up on me, and he prayed for me. I'm only here because of the prayers of my brother." His brother wouldn't let go of God and prayed for his salvation, even though it seemed almost impossible. Dear friend, do not underestimate the power of your prayers. They can influence the lives of others more than you know. God can open their eyes because you pray. They can be kept from danger because you pray. They can be strengthened against temptation because you pray. They can end up in the kingdom of God because you pray. Continue to call their names out before God and pray.

Listen, if you're here right now and you're not right with God, more than likely, somebody's been praying for you. They may not even know you. I'm sure there's a lot of other people like me. Sometimes, I'll just see someone in the market, and I'll go talk to strangers pretty regularly about Christ. But sometimes I'll pray for people I don't even know. I've seen them, and I'll spend a little while praying for them. I don't know their name. I don't know what they do. I've never spoken a word to them, but somehow, they just caught my attention as I was passing by. I think those prayers have an impact. Those prayers have an effect. I pray that God sends laborers across their pathway. They get saved and end up like Epaphras prayed, maturing in Christ and walking in everything that God has for them. Again, you may be here today, and you've never fully committed your life to Christ. It's the most important decision you'll ever make in your life. No one can make that decision for you.

You may have had a granddad who was a Baptist preacher, and that man could pray heaven down and preach every devil out of town. You knew there was something of God in his life, but

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you know what? You can't get in hanging on to the back of Granddad's shirt. You can't get into heaven. You have to make your own commitment to Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "He died on the cross for the sins of the world and paid our debt in full." Once the claims of God's eternal justice were satisfied, Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. And if we'll believe that and confess Him as the Lord of our life, the Bible says we'll be saved. Which thank God it is not about rules, regulations, rituals, and ceremonies. It's about relationship. It's about walking and talking with God. Just for a moment, bow your heads and close your eyes. If that's you today, and you haven't made your peace with God and you need to, I want to pray with you, my friend. If you knew you were to expel that final breath right now, it left your lungs, and you stepped out of your body into eternity, are you ready to meet God? While you're living, while you're breathing, you have the power of choice. But my friend, once you step out of your body, once you breathe out that final breath, you lose the power of choice forever as to where you will spend eternity. The power of free will is taken away from you in that regard. You will never have the choice again. We can only make that choice while we're here, here and now.

So, if you know God's dealing with your heart, if you're a prodigal son, it's time to come home, prodigal. Prodigal daughter, come home. The Father is not mad at you, but you need to come home. You know that living out there on the perimeter, the devil has plenty of traps set for you, and it gets easier and easier to stay away. You need to respond to God's tug while you feel it. If that's you and you're here, you say, "Pastor, I need to pray. I need to make my life right with God." I'm going to lead you in a simple prayer. I'll lead the whole congregation, but I'd like you to lift your hand right now just so I can see it, all across the auditorium. And just look at that as your heart's been reaching up to God, your hands doing the same thing. Thank you. I see those hands. Your hand being raised is just an outward reflection of what's happening in your heart. Just raise it high. Come on. God bless you. Just put a hand on your heart. Everybody, let's pray this. Tie your heart around the words and speak them to God. Say,

Oh God, I come to You now. With all of my heart, I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son.
I believe He died on the cross for my sins. I believe He was raised from the dead.
Jesus, I ask You right now, come into my life. Be my Lord and my savior. It's in Your name, I pray. Amen. Amen.

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