

Stewardship Series: Changing Lives
Part IV: Go the Distance to Ease the Pain
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Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
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Dedication Sunday

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."
-- 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, NIV

We are coming to the end of our Stewardship messages on *changing lives*. The first week we began with Paul talking about how his own life was changed and how he can find contentment in life no matter what he faces – “in plenty and in want.” (Phillippians 4:12, NIV) We then talked about a short man named Zacchaeus who found himself literally “up a tree”, but later found his way down when his life was changed through an encounter with Jesus – so much so that he changed the way he lived and gave away half of all he had. Then last week we talked about a poor widow who went “all in” by giving all she had – two small coins -- to support God’s work. Today we are circling back around to Paul, but we are not focusing on how Paul’s life was changed. Instead, we are looking at a request Paul was making of the church in Corinth to help change the lives of others.

Now the city of Corinth was something of a wild seaport, and this early church reflected some of that in the issues they had to deal with. They also thought fairly highly of themselves as they claimed to “excel in everything” from spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, to having special knowledge. (2

Corinthians 8:7. NIV) But Paul is asking them to finish taking up a special offering for the Jerusalem church – which was the “mother church” that had fallen on hard times. It was now made up of poor folks and was in need of help from some of the other churches. Paul reminds those in Corinth of the Macedonian churches who had already taken up this collection, even though they were facing their own trials and really did not have a lot to share. But Paul tells those in Corinth that these other churches “pleaded for the privilege of sharing” in this special offering.

He then goes on to talk about how Jesus modeled this same kind of generosity when he left the richness of heaven and came to earth in the form of a man -- in a sense becoming “poor” so that we could experience the richness of God’s grace. Paul is, hoping to inspire the folks at Corinth to give in a way that will change the lives and ease the pain of those who are struggling in the Jerusalem church. Apparently the believers in Corinth had started to take up this offering, but something happened and it fell by the wayside. So Paul says this, “Now finish the work . . .” (2 Corinthians 8:11a, NIV) In other words, *finish what you started*.

It is something we have all probably either heard or said – finish what you started. Whether it was a project for school, a task for work, or a drill we had to do on a sports team – we all need to finish what we started. I heard Georgia football coach Mark Richt say after a rough start to this season that what they teach their players is to “finish the drill” -- implying that in their early losses, the players weren’t doing that as well as they should and it was costing them games.

This idea of Paul’s to “finish the work” reminds me of a line from one of my favorite movies, *Field of Dreams*. You may remember the story. Kevin Costner starred as a corn farmer named “Ray” from Iowa who begins hearing voices. But this is not some kind of psychotic episode – though he thinks that at first – but an audible voice (to him) that conveys to him three special messages. And these messages change his life and the lives of others. At the start of the movie Ray says this: “Until I heard the voice, I had never done a crazy thing in my whole life.”

The first message comes to him while he is out in the corn field and it tells him, “Build it and he will come.” Ray is confused not only by the voice, but by what “it” is that he is supposed to build, and who “he” is. Over time Ray believes he is supposed to plow up some of his corn fields and build a baseball field so that baseball great “Shoeless” Joe Jackson (who has been long dead) can come back to play baseball again on his field. If you know the movie, you know that Ray builds the field and Joe Jackson does come back along with other members of that White Sox team.

But then Ray gets a second message: “Ease his pain.” Again Ray is confused about whose pain he is supposed to ease. But, in time he believes he is supposed to find a writer from the 60s named Terence Mann who has dropped out of sight. Ray tracks down this disillusioned recluse played by James Earl Jones. Ray convinces him to go to a Red Sox baseball game with him where they both hear the next message – “Go the distance.” They also see for a moment flashed on the scoreboard the name of “Moonlight” Graham – a ballplayer who never had a plate appearance in the major leagues.

Soon they are both off to Minnesota to find this player. They find that he has long died, but that he retired as a doctor. On their way back home to Iowa, they pick up a hitchhiker who turns out to be this same Dr. Graham who is now only an eighteen-year-old kid looking to play baseball somewhere.

So they take him back to the ballpark in Iowa and everyone who Ray has met finds their lives changed. Shoeless Joe Jackson gets to play baseball again. Moonlight Graham gets to bat against major leaguers and holds his own. And even Terence Mann, the burned out writer, finds a new joy in life and something to write about. And Ray was at the center of all of this. He took a chance, even to the point of risking his farm, to follow this mysterious voice and in the end lives were changed for the better.

But after all of this amazing stuff has taken place, Ray sees everyone else finding new meaning and purpose in life, but finally his frustration boils to the surface when he says, "What's in it for me?" Ray has *gone the distance* in order to *ease the pain* of others, but is that all there is to it?

Throughout the movie, another theme emerges -- Ray and his father did not get along. Ray's mother died when Ray was only three, so his father was left to raise Ray alone. His father started out as a minor league ballplayer -- a catcher -- but was never good enough to make it to the majors. He wanted Ray to be the player he never could, but when Ray was fourteen, he rebelled and got fed up with baseball and vowed never to play catch with his father again. When Ray turned seventeen, he said some harsh words to his father and headed off to college. He said he just could not figure out how to come home to his Dad, and the next time he came home was for his father's funeral. So for Ray, there was a lot of unresolved pain.

The scene from the movie we are about to watch takes place when Shoeless Joe Jackson tells Ray about easing pain and building this baseball field so that "he" will come. And what we are about to see is Ray's encounter with his own father when his father was just a young baseball player. (Show 1:34:45 -- 1:40 ". . . He Will Come")

For Ray, when he went the distance and gave, even to the point of doing something that seemed crazy in the eyes of the world, he not only eased the pain of others -- in the end he found out that his own pain was eased as well. He had the chance to reconcile with his father. In the scene his father asks if this is heaven, to which Ray says, "No, it's Iowa." But then his Dad says, "I could have sworn it was heaven. And Ray looks around at all that is taking place and says, "Maybe it is." I wonder if what felt like heaven to both of them was the experience of having their own pain eased and being able to make right those things in this life that were wrong and broken. And maybe, to echo the words of the Lord's Prayer -- heaven is where God's kingdom comes and God's will is done "on earth as it is in heaven." Maybe that's what's taking place here. I believe that we can begin experiencing a foretaste of heaven here and now, when we choose to do God's work and go the distance to ease the pain of others, by seeing lives changed through our giving.

So today we have the "privilege" -- to use Paul's word -- to go the distance and ease the pain of those around us through our commitment to give. It is how we can finish the work we started. It is our way of going "all in." When we do that, we find that not only will we make a difference and be part of God's work to change the lives of others-- we will find our own pain eased. And maybe, just maybe, we will even have a glimpse of heaven here on earth -- not in Iowa, but here in Johns Creek.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.