

Title: Don't Waste the Recession

Text: 2 Corinthians 8.1-15

Theme: The test of affliction

Series: none

Prop Stmt The current recession is (amongst other things) a test to show us in what we really place our hope.

This morning, we are going to take a one week break from Exodus. I woke up very early on Wednesday morning thinking about this issue. I did not know if it was too much coffee the night before, or honestly, the Spirit of God pressing this matter upon me. I want to confess that right up front because I always bring conflicted motives with me to the sacred task of preaching. Your pastor is a sinner. I do not know how deep my sinful motives run. When I try to investigate them and search them out like the Psalmist, I am wearied with the endless pursuit of self-evaluation and then frustrated with the amount of time that I can spend focusing on myself. So, when I preach, I really do preach for your joy in God. I preach zealous for your faith to be found in Christ alone. I preach so that your faith in Christ will drive a profound and settled life of obedience to him so that you can experience and enjoy his pleasure, knowing that your joy and his pleasure all work in harmony for his fame. I preach with a deep desire to see you prize the glory of God above all things. But even as I preach for these things, there is lurking in my heart the desire for you, my people to have these things in your life so that all of these will reflect well on me. That is wicked. But I am a sinner who daily is in need of the grace of God and the interceding work of my Savior. So, when you say to me, as so many of you do, "Bob, we pray for you." I generally say, "Thank-you because I need that." What I ought to do is grab you by the shoulders and look at you deep in the eyes and beg of you to never, ever quit. I am in a war for the affections of my heart. And your prayers are part of the grace of God that brings perseverance.

I am particularly aware of this conflict of motives this morning because of the topic that I am addressing. So, if you think that I am preaching on this for selfish reasons, I know for a fact that there is truth to that and it grieves me. In fact, I have often shied away from this topic because of this internal conflict and that is not right. So, I have confessed that to God and have asked for that to be cleansed from my heart. But I also preach on this because it is needful for you and helpful for you and if taken to heart will be used by God to advance his glory in your joy. And that, my brothers and sisters is what truly matters.

On Tuesday afternoon I was speaking with a pastor friend about the climate of the church in the Detroit area. Our mutual concern was that believers, in their view of the economy, were looking like, sounding like, and believing just like the rest of the region. He suggested that we ought to have a conference for the region entitled: Don't Waste the Recession. Times of pressure simply reveal what is on the inside. We are people of the gospel. The gospel enables us to do what others cannot and that is take a hard, honest and humble look at what is on the inside and address those issues. It is perfectly natural to desire for the pressure to be taken away. But, if we go through the time of pressure and we have not learned anything from it, then we have wasted a great opportunity to have our hearts stretched and our affections for Christ raised to new levels.

Read Text:

I am not an economist, but I did stay at a Holiday Inn last night (not really). But, my outlook on the economy is not the real message. But our current economic climate is the occasion for some points that we need to really grapple with. Michigan led the way into this recession and will trail others in coming out. It is possible that we are at the beginning of a long road of recovery. But while that is good news on one level, my concern is not so much for the viability of the recovery and the unemployment rate, but for our hearts. What have we learned from this? If all that we learn is that we spent too much money, became too greedy, bought too much home with too little down, lived off of credit cards and that we need to learn to get our finances under control and not spend so much eating out, and buying clothes that we don't need, or a new car every two years, so that we can have some financial security, we will have wasted this recession. Even if all we learn is to work harder, be grateful for the jobs that we do have, not to take for granted the good times, then even as nice as those lessons are to be learned, we will have wasted the recession. Anyone without Christ can learn those lessons.

Over and over we see in the Scriptures, that God's method for teaching his children is to take them through situations where they are left with nothing to depend on but him. When we realize the truth about ourselves and that is, that we really have no resources that can provide us with what we really need, but that all of our needs are met in Christ, then we are rich. That is why it is so difficult to be materially rich and spiritually rich. When you are materially rich, you usually have a lot of things. Things give you a false sense of security. Things give you a false sense of identity. Things give you a false sense of superiority. I have seen this played out so many times. You think you own things and things end up owning you. The more you own, the more you have to maintain. Which is one of the reasons why people say, "The second happiest day in your life is when you buy a boat." The happiest day is when you sell it. If you have cars and a boat, and a cabin and a timeshare and snowmobiles and motorcycles, you have to keep them all working and you feel as if you have to use them. The more you have, the more it has you and controls you. Some of you spend way too much time on your stuff and you have no time for God. Some of you spend way too much money on your stuff and your stuff has your heart instead of the gospel. Some of you spend way too much money on your kids. You give them everything but parents whose hearts are hot for God. If losing overtime and hours means that these things have to be sold and your heart freed from stuff, and in that freedom, you finally get into the Word and cultivate a prayer life, then I say – bring it on! Don't waste the recession.

Psalm 119.71 – "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."

You know that you are learning his decrees when you are more concerned about your learning and obeying than you are about the affliction. God brings pressure to reveal to me the areas in which I need to grow. You know that you are starting to get his heart when your cry is not for the adversity to be taken away, but your cry is that you will not waste the adversity by failing to learn all that you can in the midst of it.

Hebrews 12.1-11

Sonship = Discipline (from love) = Holiness = Harvest of Righteousness

Do you really believe that holiness and reaping a harvest of righteousness, which I take to be the same as being totally satisfied in Christ, do you really believe that being satisfied in Christ is more precious than job security, or financial stability or physical health?

So, I ask you? What is more important to you; the recession or righteousness; getting the economy back, or being white hot for Christ; getting your finances in order or getting your heart in order? You see, in so many ways, our wealth has made us poor. With our wealth, we can purchase insurance. We have car insurance, home insurance, life insurance, nursing home insurance, health insurance, crop insurance, travel insurance and there is more. Insurance takes all of the risk out of life. Without risk, we don't need God. But here is what I am really trying to say in all of this. God wants for us to be absolutely dependent upon him, banking totally upon his grace, living moment-by-moment sustained by him and being provided for by him, working with gratitude and complete dependence upon him. Because, when we live with that sort of total reliance and find out that he is our sufficiency, then our joy and confidence is real because it cannot be purchased by stuff nor measured by dollars. I am zealous for your joy and am concerned that we miss this golden opportunity to downsize for the sake of the gospel and eliminate distractions for the sake of focus, and simplify schedules so instead of going on so many trips, and doing so much shopping and eating out, we realize that there are gospel priorities and needs in the church that are going unmet while we waste those resources. Don't waste the recession.

Maybe we are coming out of the recession. It really doesn't matter if we are or aren't, but let's take this as a mid-term exam in order to see how we are doing.

1) **How has this affliction increased your God-dependent joy?** (2)

In this letter to the believers in the city of Corinth, Paul is writing to them about an offering that he is collecting. So, he is addressing the issue of money, circumstances, stuff and joy. Most people assume that if you have more stuff, you have more happiness. But, Paul is pointing out some people who really mess up that assumption. The believers in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea) were in extreme poverty, while the believers in Corinth were often characterized by wealth. Now, if you are collecting an offering, where would you think that most of the money would come from? But, that is not what was happening. Their response reveals their heart.

In this text, Paul connects the grace of God to the joy of the believers. The grace of God rested so mightily upon them that their circumstances, as severe as they were, did not steal their joy. Their severe trial and extreme poverty revealed to them and others what they did not have; which was wealth. But, their circumstances did reveal what they had – Christ! So, because they reveled in the grace of God, they had a joy that was not of this

world. Anyone can be happy when they have nice weather on vacation. It takes no grace to be happy on vacation. But, when you have joy in the midst of trials, then Christ is magnified. So, I ask you, how has this affliction increased your God-dependent joy?

For those of you who are working fewer hours, or for less pay, or not at all, have you thrown yourself at the mercy of God and opened wide yourself to his purposes and surgery upon your soul? Or have you grown bitter, and resentful at losing what you used to have? Don't waste the recession.

2) **How has this affliction increased your gospel-based generosity?** (2)

Look at verse 2. Paul is saying that in this severe trial, that the overflowing joy of these believers was brought together with their extreme poverty. What do you get when you combine overflowing joy and extreme poverty? The answer does not depend on how deep the poverty is, but on how deep the joy is. In this case, their joy was so rich that it overwhelmed their extreme poverty and the combination of the two resulted in rich generosity. In fact it welled up, it poured out, that is, it bubbled over with rich generosity. That is what I want. That is what I want for you and with you.

If you are thinking, I can't wait for this recession to get over because if I had more I would buy more, instead of thinking, if I had more I would give more, then you are wasting the recession. If you find that your heart has become harder and harder and your spirit toward needs has become stingy and harsh, then you are wasting the recession. In this passage, there are some contrasts that we see. We see the contrast of the Macedonian believers with others who are poor.

Affliction w/ grace = Joy = Giving
Affliction w/o grace = Bitterness = Hoarding

We also see the contrast of the poor Macedonian believers with the rich Corinthian believers.

Affliction w/grace = Joy = Giving
Prosperity w/o grace = Pride = Hoarding

So, what do you think? Who is really poor and who is really rich? I want you to be rich in generosity based on a gospel-driven joy.

This has been an issue that I have had to work on. I told my kids early on to save their money because they would have to buy their own cars. If they wanted to save money, they would have to earn money. I did not give out an allowance for breathing and taking up square footage. If they wanted to earn money, well, here was a lawnmower, and here was a neighborhood full of yards – get busy. And I think that was a good thing, but in teaching them self-reliance it is easy to worship self-reliance and to become so proud of self-reliance that when someone has a need, you then think, look, no one just gave things away to me, so, go get a job like the rest of us. Self-reliance, as good as that is, can

become an excuse to be stingy. There are times when generosity can be abused and helping someone can actually hurt them. However, in my own spirit I had to go back to the gospel and see how generous the heart of God was. I was convicted of how God looked for ways to give. And God made a way to give. God's gift was sacrificial. So, I have had to grow in this and still am. But, the result has been liberating and joy! How has this affliction increased your gospel-based generosity? Don't waste the recession.

3) **How has this affliction increased your sacrificial giving?** (3)

Giving from what is left over, or giving out of what you do not need or giving what you do not want does not cost anything and has no heart in it. That is why Jesus said that the widow (Luke 21.1-4) who gave the two little mites, had given more than all of the wealthy people that day, because she gave out of her need and they gave out of their abundance.

This whole business of giving is such a sensitive issue because money is so close to our hearts. It is close to our hearts because money is power and influence. Money is a convenient substitute for God. Who needs God when you have money? Why pray when you can purchase? Since giving is so sensitive, especially when you, like these believers, reach deep into your needs and give, and you find out, that others who have the ability to give, don't, or give so little, it can be very difficult to not let that become a discouragement to you. I really think that Paul is trying to defend and protect the Macedonian believers who by their sacrificial giving have put their hearts right out in the street. And if the Corinthian believers who have the ability to do so much more, do not come through, it will very likely crush these believers. The affliction that the Macedonian believers were living through was the occasion for them to give even beyond their abilities. Brothers and sisters, don't waste this recession.

When this year started, I had no idea where we would be at this point. We have had families that have had to move and that is hard. We have had a number of people lose their jobs, others have their hours cut back and others have their wages reduced, some in very significant ways. At the same time, we have helped more people in more ways through the Fellowship Fund and that has been very good. But our offerings have been down and are down by almost 6%. All things considered, that is not too bad. And we have tightened our belts. And we did not hire a needed staff position early in the year and when Jerry left for Ukraine, we tried to absorb his responsibilities as well. We are stretched. In the mean time, even as some people have moved, others have come. Ministry has not slowed down here, in fact we can hardly keep up. Every month now, 600 children from the public schools in Roseville come here for religious education. We did not aggressively promote this, because we could only handle so many. We could probably have 800 if we really went after this. A couple of weeks ago, this program hit the local news stations and we feared that the controversy would create such a problem that it would be shut down. Many of you prayed for the school board meeting, and at that meeting, the attorney for the school board, the president of the school board, the superintendent of the schools and the assistant superintendent of the schools all spoke in strong support of this program and the school board went on record that night supporting

what we are doing legally and morally. They know that our culture is bankrupt. They see the lost-ness in the lives of so many and welcome our influence. I believe that we are called, like Esther to the kingdom for such a time as this. And this is not a time for retreat. This is not a time for recklessness, but this not a time to hide in the house until the storm goes by. There are churches in our area that need leadership and we could help them. There are more missionaries who need support in order to get to the fields and we need to partner with them. Cornerstone, I am grateful for what we have done and how we have persevered, but I am asking you, because I am zealous for your joy, to join me in doing more by giving up what does not matter in order to invest in what does. If your giving has been inconsistent, non-existent, stingy, or merely comfortable, let's do something radical together. If we go through this recession and like every thing else, we give less, it will surprise no one. But, let's do the unexpected. Let's take advantage of this opportunity to put on display to our children, to each other, to other believers and even to our community (and ultimately to God) that the people of God, even in a recession, which is not like anything these Macedonian believers endured, have an overflowing joy that produces rich generosity. Cornerstone is known for her theology and her friendliness. This is a time to be known, like Christ for our sacrificial giving. Let's not waste the recession.

4) **How has this affliction increased your love for other believers?** (4)

When you go through deep waters, your capacity to understand the needs of others is drastically increased. (2 Cor. 1) Several of you shared with me and my family upon hearing of the death of my sister, how your family had a similar story. You did not have to say anything more. We now shared the same language. Sorrow, struggle, affliction forges hearts. Do you not hear that from verse 4? This offering that Paul collected was for the believers in Jerusalem who were in poverty like conditions. These Macedonian believers were saying – we know! We have not only been there, we are still there. We are not out of the woods yet, but we are walking with you on the same road. Do you realize what this love of theirs did for the unity of the body of Christ that was threatened by a Jew/Gentile split? These Gentiles were giving out of their poverty to help alleviate the poverty of the Jews. Their affliction increased their love for others. Has this affliction increased your love for other believers? Don't waste the recession.

5) How has this affliction increased your fervor for Christ? (5)

6) How has this affliction helped you put the gospel on display? (9)

Concl. The greatest example of joy, generosity, giving, love, fervor and gospel in the midst of adversity is Christ. He became sin, who knew no sin, that we might be declared righteous. He became poor, though he was rich, so that we could become rich in grace. Do you really want to know the glories of Calvary? Do you really want to know Christ? Don't waste this recession. Talk this out in your family. Talk this out in your small group. Work this out with others. Let this adversity deepen your prayer life, your hunger for God's Word, your heart for the lost and may the things of this world grow strangely dim. Don't waste this recession.