

February 2, 2014

# *A Gospel Centered Community*

## *Important Last Words*

**Acts 20:17 – 38**

After taking a few weeks to encourage and exhort us to prayer and fasting, we are back in the book of Acts this week. And we intend to finish our study in Acts by the first of March. And throughout the month of March we are again going topical with a short series that focuses on gospel centered marriage and family relationships and living. And then starting in April we begin a longer series that we are calling Seeing and Savoring the Gospel in the Old Testament. And we will be unpacking the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi to see what God is revealing to us about Jesus.

But today we are in the last part of chapter 20 in Acts where Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, anxious to get there by Pentecost, but he takes the time to stop in Miletus to spend some time with the leaders of the church in Ephesus. And what follows is essentially Paul's final words in person to the churches, particularly the churches in Asia, because Paul never returns there. And Paul makes it quite clear that he knows that he won't be back, he says that the Holy Spirit has told him that his future is going to be filled with prison and trouble – bonds and afflictions. And so what we have here are quite like someone's last words. Often when people are aware that this is their last time to see someone, they usually concentrate on the most important stuff.

And although these words were given to the leaders in the church, they are not just for them. Paul's message was a message to people in ministry, and if we understand what we've been called to in the church, we should understand that every saint in the church has been called to serve as a minister of the gospel in some respect in the church. Jesus told us that we are all called to make disciples and proclaim the good news of the gospel; Peter tells us that we are to minister to one another the manifold grace of God; Paul told the Corinthians that we should all abound in the work of the Lord; and to the Colossians he says that we should all be teaching and admonishing one another.

So what I want to pull from this message are some truths that Paul felt were of utmost importance for these men to hear. If this was going to be his last word to them – he didn't want to waste time on lesser issues.

### **Serve with humility, tears and trials – 20:17-19**

The first thing Paul has to say is about being a servant. *"You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord"*. The hallmark of people that really embrace the gospel is that they first consider themselves servants – not the servee. Too many people come to church with the idea that the church is there to serve them. There seems to be the attitude that with regards to church, by and large, that we are consumers – not investors. In a recent article in Outreach Magazine, Bobby Gruenewald wrote: *"The church has become a consumer good — something people shop for and evaluate based on what they and their family get out of it."* In fact, according to a recent survey, the number one reason people leave a church is because they feel they are not being served in some way.

Don't get me wrong. As members of the church we should expect a high level of care and concern from the leadership and other members. But what many have done is turn what was meant to be a life of investment into an expectation of entitlement. We've become consumers, not producers. In 1 Corinthians Paul describes church members not by what they receive from the church, but by what they give to the church. I could spend the rest of the sermon here, but I won't. We need to have a deep realization that God has called us to serve – not to be served.

So Paul says he was *serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews*. Being a servant of the Lord first of all means being **humble**. Humility is, first, a feeling toward God that He has absolute rights over your life—that He can do with you as He pleases and that He has absolute authority to tell you what is best for you—and that's just fine with you. It is a spirit of utter submissiveness to the Lord as Master. You are clay in the Potter's hands. Second, humility means feeling indebted to others because of how graciously God has treated you. It's the opposite of feeling that everybody owes you something—owes you a listening ear or owes you strokes or owes you time. Humility is not thinking poorly of yourself – it's not thinking of yourself very much at all. It is an other-centered focus.

I don't know specifically what Paul had in mind when he talks about serving with tears here; but he talks about tears again in verse 31: *"I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears."* Tears can come from physical pain or from heart-rending loss or from unbearable frustrations and discouragements or from intense yearning or from overwhelming joy. So in verse 31 his tears were the tears of intense yearning for the saints' faith and holiness. But he doesn't say here in verse 19 why he cried so often. What should we learn then? Paul's a crybaby? If that were true, tears wouldn't have too much meaning, and he wouldn't mention them as part of his credentials. No, I think what we should learn is that serving the Lord means getting so intensely involved in people's struggles that you cry over them. Serving the Lord in the church will mean tears, because it will mean getting involved in people's struggles for faith and hope and truth and holiness.

Paul also mentions that **trials** were part of serving. You will have trials. Paul certainly did. In 1 Corinthians 15:32 Paul said, *"Humanly speaking I fought with beasts at Ephesus."* And he wasn't talking about lions and tigers and bears, oh no! Later on in this passage he says, *"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert..."* Paul said he had to fight with beasts in Ephesus. And he says that the Ephesians will have to fight with fierce wolves. The point is the same in both cases, and it's the same thing Jesus meant when he said, *"Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves"* Matthew 10:16 There are people who when they hear the absolute claims of Jesus Christ become so angry they are like animals. And the tragic thing is that here Paul says that these wolves will even come from among their own number! In other words some people in the church at Ephesus will become the enemies of truth and righteousness. They will speak perverse things about the message and the church and the leadership, and they will actively plot against you. But God will deal with them – you just need to know this will happen and keep alert, and keep serving.

#### **Declare the whole counsel of God – 20:20-21;20:26-27**

In verse 20 Paul says that he didn't shrink from declaring and teaching anything that was profitable for the church; and in 27 he says it again like this: *I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God*. Paul is saying the same thing in both places. What he meant by this is not that he had systematically taught through the Bible, he simply wouldn't have had time. But rather that he declared to them the burden of the whole of God's revelation, leaving nothing out that was of primary importance, never ducking the hard bits, helping believers to grasp the whole counsel of God that they themselves would become better equipped to read their Bibles intelligently, comprehensively. That is what we try and do here from the pulpit, and that is what we are called to do from the pew, so to speak.

I had a conversation with one of the young ladies at the coffee stand I tend to frequent this last Friday. It started out by her asking me about what I believed about God and before I could really answer she told me what she believed. And essentially she believed that if she tried to be a good person that God would accept her and bring her to heaven. She really had a mishmash of ideas and beliefs about God and karma and living by the golden rule. And then she asked me, on the basis of what she believed, if I thought she would go to heaven. I'm the wrong guy to ask this kind of question if you're looking for a favorable response,, and I looked her in the eye and said, 'No'. And then I went on to share the gospel with her, telling her that trying to be good and do good is just not good enough; that the only way to heaven and the only way to God is through believing in His Son and His work on the cross. Strangely enough she wasn't offended and she even thanked me for telling her.

Declaring the whole counsel of God is crucial because Paul makes this staggering statement: *"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you."* Why did he say that? What does that mean? I think you can see what he is talking about when you look at a couple parallel texts in Acts. In Acts in 18:6 the Jews reject Paul's message and he says, *Your blood be on your own heads.* In 13:46 the Jews reject Paul's message and he says, *You judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life.* So it must be that when your blood is on your own head, you forfeit eternal life, and it's your own fault. So what Paul is saying here says, ***"If any of you loses eternal life, it will not be my fault. It will be your own."*** The issue here is eternal life or eternal lostness.

**This tells us that it is possible for us to be guilty of another person's final lostness.** His claim here would otherwise be pointless. He 'I'm innocent of the blood of all of you'. Which means that there is a chance that he might have been guilty of someone's final lostness. One question comes to mind immediately if this is true: How can we be responsible for another person's not gaining eternal life? Luke describes Paul's second missionary journey like this: *"And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia."* Now, Asia is where Ephesus is. So on that missionary journey it was not the will of the Spirit for Paul to speak the word in Ephesus, even though they were not yet evangelized. I conclude that Paul would not have their blood on his head if any of them died without Christ at this time. Why? Because the Spirit was using Paul elsewhere and had not told him to go to Ephesus. No one of us is responsible for every city or neighborhood or people group. God leads people in different ways. So my conclusion is that when you have the opportunity to tell a person what they need to know in order to be saved, then their blood is on your head if you refuse to do it. In other words, ***we are guilty of another person's blood if we do not tell them what they need to know to be saved.*** So Paul can say, 'I am innocent of the blood of all of you' precisely because he had declared to them the whole counsel of God.

#### **Live well – Finish well – 20:24-25**

In verse 24 Paul says: *But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.* We need to understand that every believer has been given a mission from God. Not just elders and leaders; we have all been given a mission on earth – to glorify God in everything by loving God supremely and loving your neighbor as yourself. Everything you do should point to this. This is not just for all those Pauls out there, or really spiritual people. We have all been given a specific course to run and a general ministry to complete. The specifics will differ – some people are pilots or electricians or entrepreneurs or office workers or construction workers or teachers or pastors – that's our course. But the ministry given to each is the same – make disciples.

When Jesus gave this commandment in Matthew – Go and make disciples – isn't it reasonable to assume that He had in mind the very thing that He did in His ministry? Didn't He make disciples? Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that our discipling would look very much like His? Investing prolonged, real-life, day-in and day-out intentional time with people to bring them to Christ and then help to grow them to maturity in Christ? Is that what we are doing? Is that what you are doing? If that is not what you're doing, you'd better take another look at your life. That is the only way to live well and finish well. Paul's whole life was bent toward this. His life only had meaning as he ran the course and finished the mission that Jesus gave him. Never forget why you're here and live like Jesus is more precious than life.

#### **Be filled with the word of His grace – 20:32**

*And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.* Paul knows that he won't be around to help them personally anymore – but He knows the power of God and the power of His word to build us and mature us and bring us into His marvelous inheritance. Let me give you the words of someone else who knew the power of the word of His grace, and the necessity of getting that word into our very being.

Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord—not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts.

It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord.

I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like the reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his *Pilgrim's Progress*...without continually making us feel and say, **"Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.** He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.

#### **Don't be greedy for money – 20:33-34**

*I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.* You cannot be a disciple of Christ and a coveter of money and possessions. Jesus, who devoted almost one-fourth of His words to talking about money and possessions and how to handle them, said *'You cannot serve two masters, for either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.'* Notice the contrast – hate one – love the other. Devoted to one and despise the other. Either you are devoted to God and serve Him and despise money – or – you love money and you serve it and hate God. There is no middle ground. Money and wealth are the greatest masters in our culture and you are either serving God or serving money – you can't do both.

#### **Be an example – 20:35**

Finally, Paul concludes with these words: *In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*" Our lives need to reflect the beauty of Christ to our people. The way you live your lives will influence the way people around you live their lives. A wise man once said that our lives can either serve as a warning or an example – strive to be a good example to those around you. The greatest testimony to the grace of God in the early church to the pagan world was their example of love. Tertullian, one of the early Church fathers, in writing about the Christian witness in those days, quoted those who opposed Christianity this way: **"Look," they say, "See how they love one another" (for they themselves hate one another); "and see how they are ready to die for each other" (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).**

The beloved apostle John wrote: *'Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone that love is born of God and knows God...'* **Because** God is love, and **because** we who have been born from above and partakers of the divine nature and in whose hearts the love of God has been poured out by the Holy Spirit – must necessarily have the same kind of love our heavenly Father has. That doesn't first of all mean that we have a warm feeling toward them – we do. But primarily it means that we are patient with the irritating, kind toward the mean, humble toward the arrogant, polite toward the rude. It means we bear the unbearable, believing that God will triumph, hope in the eternal, and endure to the end. It means that we put the word of God into action with those around us. It often means inconvenience – it often means trouble – it often means doing what we would rather not. But it always means laying down your life for those for whom Christ died.

Loving one another also means that we will have a love for the lost and a heart for missions. Dick Foth says that, **'Love is the accurate estimation and the adequate supply of your neighbor's need.'** And what is your neighbor's greatest need? To know Christ. **Love is helping people toward God.** That is the most loving thing you can do. Just as the most loving act in the history of the universe brought us from death to life, from hell to heaven, from eternal damnation to eternal joy.

*And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.*

*Our gracious God and heavenly Father,*

*We thank You this morning for all the blessing of the gospel that saved us from sin and wrath and brought us into communion with You. We acknowledge that we are not our own but we have been bought with the blood of Christ and live to serve Him. Help us we pray to serve You and serve others with humility and tears and through trials; not shrinking from declaring the whole counsel of God until the whole world is filled with the knowledge of God. Grant that we would live well and finish well the course and ministry You have given us. Let our souls be filled with the very word of God and may we eat right into it until we have taken it into our inmost parts. Free our hearts from the love of money and let our lives reflect the beauty of Christ in the world. May we delight ourselves in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*