

Acts 20: 17-38 // Paul's Example, Command, and Legacy

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 20, verse 13 to 38. We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard.

! He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mytilene. The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Chios.

The day after that, we crossed over to Samos and on the following day arrived at Myletus. Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible by the day of Pentecost.

From Myletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them, You know how I lived the whole time I was with you. From the first day I came into the province of Asia, I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but I have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

[1 : 15] And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me. My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task that the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

Now, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you, for I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you, night and day with tears.

[2 : 27] Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.

You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak.

Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself said, it is more blessed to give than to receive. When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.

What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship. This is the word of the Lord. St. Silas, good evening.

Great to be with you. My name is Tim and it's a real privilege to open up God's word. So let's pray as we come to meet God in Scripture. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks.

[3 : 35] You haven't left us by ourselves to work out for ourselves who you are. But you've told us in your word. And so we pray that as we come to this discussion of Ephesus tonight in Acts 20, that you would speak to us by your spirit and we celebrate this day.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen. In 2013, I was living in Dundee and I was working just across the river in a little village called Newport at a church.

And the church ran a coffee shop in the town. And so you could obviously come to the coffee shop and get a cup of coffee and do that sort of thing. But it also functioned as the church office through the week.

So if you needed to pick up anything from church or drop off anything to church through the week, you did it through the coffee shop. And there was one time where a collection was being made for some charitable need across various churches in the area.

And I was only aware of this because one Monday I was in the coffee shop. And there was a guy who walked in. He was probably about 70.

[4 : 46] He was one of those guys who just carries himself with the feeling that whatever he is doing at any one point of time is the most important thing in the community. And he walked into the coffee shop and he asked the volunteer on the other side of the counter if she could hand him the funds that had been collected at church the previous day for this thing that he was collecting for because he was pooling all the funds from around these various churches.

And the volunteer behind the desk said that my boss had not yet been down to bring those funds from church to the coffee shop and he might get to it a little bit later.

And this man, his face went red and his nostrils flared. And he said, well, if the minister's not doing this, well, what is he doing?

This is his job. He stormed out to move on to the next church. I remember thinking to myself at that time, what a nightmare that person would be to have in your church.

Imagine thinking that the most important thing that the minister has to do on a Monday morning is to be at your beck and call with loose change. Now, I hope we can agree that's probably not the most important thing that a minister has to do in his job.

[6 : 08] But what is a minister's job? Acts 20 is all about this. If you've been at church this morning, we were hearing similar things from 1 Timothy 3.

The passages go together quite nicely. But in Acts 20, Paul has been on a little Mediterranean cruise, right, in the first bit of our reading today, because he's heading to Jerusalem.

He's keen to get to Jerusalem. He doesn't want to get caught up with the church dynamics and politics in Ephesus. So he doesn't go to Ephesus, but he really wants to talk to the elders from Ephesus. And so he agrees that they will come to him at Miletus.

He's worried about the church in Ephesus. He can see that there are tough times coming, and so he wants to speak with the elders. He wants to give direction to them.

And he knows you'll almost definitely never see them again. And verses 18 to 35 spell out that direction that Paul gives. It's one long speech that he gives to those elders.

[7 : 09] And so this is a chapter that's particularly of interest for those who are serving in ministry, because it tells us what's our job. But it's also really helpful for those who are being ministered to, because this chapter gives an answer to the question, what is the ministry that you need to receive?

What is the ministry that you need as you're a member of a church? A lot of thought is given, rightly, like we were looking at this morning, a lot of thought is given to who should be invited into gospel ministry.

It's really important to get that right. But just as important as who is invited into gospel ministry, is the charge to those who have been doing it for a little while.

To those who are perhaps a little bit jaded, a little bit tired. How ought those who are in ministry continue? And that's where Acts 20 is.

Those who are in ministry are to learn, it becomes clear, from Paul's example. They're to learn from Paul's command. And they're to learn from Paul's legacy.

[8 : 28] The three things that we're going to look at tonight as we answer this question, what is the ministry that you need to receive? First up, Paul's example. If Acts chapter 20 has found its way to be closed, open it back up, because that's where it's going to be helpful for us to have our eyes.

We're going to look at verse 18. When the elders have arrived from Ephesus to Miletus to meet Paul, he said to them, you know how I lived the whole time I was with you.

From the first day I came into the province of Asia, I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.

You know I've not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house. There's a number of different words that Paul uses here to describe the realm of activity which we might call telling people about Jesus.

Verse 20, he preached. Also verse 20, he taught. And then verse 21, he declared. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

[9 : 47] If there is a thing that the people around Asia and around Ephesus need from preachers and from ministers, it is the need for all people to respond to the gospel.

To speak about Jesus and never call people to repent and follow him is like a knock-knock joke without the punchline. It's a guy proposing to his girlfriend but forgetting to ask the question. It's a sales pitch with no offer. It's a diagnosis without the cure. It's like running a Greggs and not stocking steak bakes. Like what's the point? Right?

The most important thing is that element of gospel preaching. Now it's not to say that every time you talk to someone about Jesus you need to have that element in the conversation, but if someone hears about Jesus a lot and they're never told that there's a need to turn to him in repentance, the most important thing is missing.

And Paul's example in preaching is centered around the need for people to turn away from their former lives and turn to God. It's repentance. And as they turn, to have faith in Jesus, trusting that he has indeed reconciled them with God.

[11 : 07] This Thursday coming is the third week of Hope Explored we've been running. We've had six, seven people who don't know Jesus who are doing that course.

This week they are invited to trust Jesus. And we do that because it is our conviction that those who have not responded to the gospel are in peril. It's a dangerous situation to be in.

And so this is Paul's example. He's preaching and he's telling people there's a need to turn to Jesus. What is more, this speaking happens in a variety of settings.

Paul did it publicly, with prepared statements, and carefully formed words, presumably. And he did it house to house. Informal chat.

It's not just during a sermon that a minister ought to be talking about Jesus. It's all the time. I remember my last church back in Sydney when I had just begun my job there.

[12 : 06] I was 23. I was green as anything. I was looking around, trying to learn how to do ministry from those around us. And there was, after a service, we'd put on an event for those who were new to church to come along and find out more.

And I was standing next to my boss, Pete, and we were with this woman. And we just sort of got chatting and Pete asked her, he said, what do you understand about the message of Christianity? And she said, well, I've always understood that people who do good go to heaven and people who don't, don't. And Pete looked at her and he said, just like this, he said, that is exactly wrong. Would you like to know what the Bible says? Welcome to evangelism in Australia. But she said, yes. And very clearly, he laid out, it is not good people who are Christians.

We are all sinners. The need is to know who Jesus is, that he has died for you and to trust him.

[13 : 16] And Kelly now loves her Lord Jesus. She's been serving in that church for 10 years. Wonderfully.

She needed a minister in that moment who was prepared to talk about Jesus boldly all the time. Now, as we hear about this, it's hard, isn't it, hearing the need to talk about Jesus.

But if you're not, Martin, Jonathan or I, it's probably a little bit easier because you're like, well, at least it's not our job. Or is it? 1 Corinthians 11 verse 1, Paul says, be imitators of me as I imitate Christ.

And that's not just to leaders, that's to the church. It's actually all of us who are to be talking about Jesus like this. perhaps especially when it's difficult.

Paul has some reflections on this passage on times that it was hard to be a preacher of the gospel where there was opposition. You know, it strikes me about all the prayers in the book of Acts, this book of the Bible where Christians are stoned to death, where they are imprisoned, where there are riots.

[14 : 34] You know what there is not one prayer for? Safety. You know what there are lots of prayers for?

Things like this. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. That is what we ought to be praying for our ministers and for ourselves.

Keep preaching is Paul's example to us. Paul's command, second point for tonight, is to keep watch.

Have a look at verse 28. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood. There are two main commands in the passage. Verse 28, keep watch. Verse 31, be on your guard. They're the same command.

[15:47] The elders are to watch their own lives and they are to watch the flock. And they're to watch the flock as shepherds.

And the shepherding language there is, yes, is to care for the flock, for the sheep, but the emphasis is on the way that shepherds protect the sheep from outside threats.

I'm not sure what image comes to mind for you when you think about shepherds. When I think about a Scottish shepherd, I imagine a man perhaps looking after a couple hundred sheep out in the cold and the wind and the rain, tartan hat on, watching his flock.

Australian shepherds are probably more likely to be looking after a sheep stationed with thousands of animals spread over the landmass the size of a small European country, herding them with a helicopter.

But what they have in common is that their job is less about cuddling cute lambs than it is about protecting the flock as a whole. The Old Testament talks about leaders like Moses and David shepherding the nation of Israel.

[17:09] It's a protective role. So the ministry that the Ephesians needed to receive, the ministry that we need to receive, is not primarily to have a pastor who drinks cups of tea in our living room, though that's nice when it happens and we're thankful for that.

And ministers will do that. But that's not really what's at the heart of shepherding in Acts 20. But it's to watch the flock for false teachers and other bad influencers who are going to pull sheep away from truth.

And those influences can come from inside the flock or from outside. And shepherds look after their sheep in our day and age because, well, they own the animals that they have purchased.

If the sheep are diseased or they die, well, then the shepherd bears the cost. The motivation for the church is that the sheep that ministers are looking after have been bought with Christ's blood.

Verse 28 is a doctrinal verse. the Holy Spirit is the one who has called the overseers to this task. The Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

[18:25] Be shepherds of the church of God. The Father is the one who owns this church. And the Son is the one whose blood was spilt to cleanse it, to redeem it, to make it his own.

Bad doctrine and bad teaching is a threat to the flock and so the elders keep watch by guarding against false teachers from inside and from outside the church. And Paul's been warning this will happen in Ephesus.

One Timothy will tell us of false teachers who are in Ephesus. the book of Revelation when Ephesus is mentioned, the church in Ephesus is mentioned talks about false teachers that they guarded against as well.

This is a prophetic insight from Paul as to what's going to happen in this city and in this church. And he gives the elders a two-fold fuel for the ministry that they're to exercise.

Know that God has put you in this position. By his spirit he has. And know that God paid the ultimate price to win his church by his son.

[19:36] So keep watch, be on guard, that's the ministry that you need to receive. The thing about Acts 20 that I love but that is also extremely challenging to me as a minister is that you can get those first two points right but still get ministry wrong.

It's because of our third point for tonight. Because our third point for tonight is less about the message of ministry, preaching the gospel, and it's less about the tasks of ministry guarding the flock.

It's all about the tone of ministry. ministry. Final point for tonight, Paul's legacy. Keep loving.

All through this section we see that Paul is servant-hearted. Verse 20, he served with humility and tears. He wasn't in it for himself.

Verse 33, he says he did not covet silver or gold. Verse 34, he even supplied his own needs rather than being a burden to others.

[20 : 57] Verse 35, he worked hard because it was more blessed to give than to receive. Paul's not doing it for himself.

And if you're skeptical, because that is all Paul's words describing his own ministry, so if you're skeptical after hearing him talk about it, well then just look at the response he gets from the group. Because this speaks louder than words.

Have a look at verse 36. When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.

And what grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. And then they accompanied him to the ship. You only get that response if you have loved people like Jesus. And this is Paul's legacy to the Ephesian elders. They have watched the way that he has ministered and they are to live on with that legacy. You know, I'm far from a seasoned hat when it comes to ministry.

[22 : 13] I have been working in churches for over a decade. And as I've gone on, here is what I have found for me. It's a lot easier to do the first two things than the third.

And when that happens, when you're doing the first two but you're sort of not doing the third properly, you might still confront false teaching but it's more out of annoyance rather than concern for the false teacher or the flock.

You preach the same message but perhaps with a little less grace. And you can even look like you're loving people. It's easy enough to be kind to people but to love people, to genuinely love them, that's hard.

To genuinely love the 70-year-old man who berates my boss publicly, no part of me wants to do that. No part of me wants to love him.

But it's not supposed to come from me. Because it's not supposed to come from Paul. It doesn't come from Paul. What does he say in verse 24? I consider my life worth nothing to me.

[23 : 42] Because his worth is not in himself, his ministry is not from himself. His ministry is born out of what has happened to him. My only aim, the verse continues, is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

God's grace. Imagine you're in a courtroom and the prosecution's key witness steps up to the stand.

And the prosecutor says, did you see the accused leave the scene with the murder weapon? And the witness says, those are the facts as I understand them.

what's going to happen next in that trial? The defense attorney will press into that. You didn't exactly answer the question, did you see it?

Did you see that man with the murder weapon? Were you there? Did you experience this? And depending on how the witness answers will determine the validity of his witness, of his testimony.

[24 : 56] You see, when Paul says that the only aim for him in all of his life is testifying to the good news of God's grace, he is sharing what Jesus has done for him, that he is a witness of, that he lives with a daily knowledge of, but not just a head knowledge, a heart knowledge, that this has gripped him and this has transformed him and this has changed him, and this is what fuels him in ministry.

He ministers out of the overflow of that, and so it must be for the minister of the gospel. Because when my heart for Jesus goes cold, I can't testify to the good news of God's grace, not properly, not in that same way.

And the risk is that I become a minister who does the first two things but not the third. And in that situation it is the flock that suffers.

Because the flock is given the perception that Jesus is true but dry and lifeless. And Jesus is neither dry nor lifeless.

That is the good news of God's grace. Jesus is living. He is present. He is exciting.

[26 : 33] He is reality. And because he is all of those things, it means that when your minister is not what you need him to be, Christ is.

Christ is the one who will keep on preaching his message. Christ is the one who will protect his flock. And Christ is the one who will always love you perfectly.

He is the minister that you always need him to be. He loves 70-year-olds who berate my boss. He loves you.

God's blood. Because he died for you. You are the church of God which he bought with his own blood. And so it seems fitting at this point that we transition to communion together this evening in our service.

Because this meal is where we remember Christ's body being broken and his blood being poured out for his flock. God's love.

[27 : 48] This is a meal of looking backwards to the cross. And it's a meal of looking forwards to his return when he will gather up his flock and shepherd us for all eternity.

And if you've never come to Jesus before but as you've heard of his love for you tonight you want to say I want to trust that Jesus then why not come forward and take communion and may that be the moment where you turn in repentance and place your trust in him.

This is after all a meal for everyone who loves Jesus and trusts him as their Lord. Whether you've been doing that for decades and decades and decades or seconds.

Now you might not wish to come forward if you're not a Christian you're just visiting us tonight and you're watching on completely fine stay where you are there's no issue at all. Or if you are a Christian but you're out of fellowship with a brother or sister in Christ then it may be the right thing for you to remain seated or you can come forward and ask the person who is distributing bread to pray for you rather than hand you the bread.

That the stewards will come at the right time and invite your row forward. The wine is non-alcoholic and there's gluten-free bread that's available on request. Why don't we take a moment to reflect on what we've heard from Acts 20 and then we'll continue with communion.

[29 : 39] who's Thank you.