

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH FAITHFUL LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Acts 20:17-38

INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul, in our passage this morning, has gathered together the elders, the leaders of the church in Ephesus, in the port city of Miletus during a brief stop on his journey to Jerusalem. After gathering them together he delivers a speech to them that is aimed at preparing them to lead the church of Ephesus on their own. He tells them that this is the last time that he will ever see them (v.25) and so this speech is his final words to them. He does not plan on ever returning to this part of the world again. In this speech he seeks to tell and to remind them of the work they are to do and the motivations they are to have in that work. We know that this church in Ephesus is the leading and most influential church in the entire Roman province of Asia. Therefore, Paul, in instructing these elders is not only instructing them, but through them all the leaders of all the churches in Asia.

Also, when we remember that Luke intends his book of Acts to be read by the whole church down through the centuries we also understand that this speech of Paul's is not only for Ephesus or the church that existed in Asia in 59 A.D. but for the entire church of Jesus throughout the centuries, including our church. The point of God's inspiring Luke to include this speech in Acts is to show that the health and vitality of local churches is dependent on the quality and quantity of qualified and gifted leaders in each church. Thus the spiritual maturity and safety of each Christian is directly related to the quality of the leaders of the local churches in which Christians live. This passage only applies directly to the pastors and elders in each local church as Paul is addressing only the elders from the church in Ephesus. However, it also applies in a less direct way to small group leaders and to parents as they exercise the functions of teaching and shepherding smaller gatherings of the church. So should I dismiss everyone who is not a pastor or elder or small group leader or parent? No, because everyone in the church needs to know what God expects of your leaders not only so that you will pick men as elders and pastors who meet the criteria but also so that you will gladly receive the work of your pastors and elders. Your spiritual well being depends upon, by God's command, the leadership you are being given in the local church of which you are a part. Thus it is in your own self interest that you pay attention to these instructions so that you will receive all the benefits God intends to give to you through our leaders.

MAIN POINT

God intends for local churches to flourish through leaders who...

I. Pursue Christ passionately (vv.18-19, 22-24)

Everything that Paul does and does not do is because Jesus Christ is his treasure, his life. I want you to see the various ways that he shows in this speech that his chief motive in life, in all he does is his delight in Christ and passion to see him enjoyed and admired and respected by others. He begins his address to the Ephesian elders by reminding them that they know by firsthand experience how he lived among them the entire three years he was in Asia (v. 18). He does not call attention to his behavior in order to boast or promote himself but he is clearly seeking to set himself before them as an example. "You know how I lived among you and so this is how you must live in the church God has called you to serve."

The first thing they know is that he was a slave of Jesus. That phrase at the beginning of v. 19 literally means just that, "serving as a slave to Jesus." This language has a long history in the Bible. In the OT the slave or servant of God is the one who takes refuge in him, who trusts him, who worships him, who is delighted with his love. In short, those who serve God are first those who are served by God. The servant of God is the person who has discovered that God himself is the treasure of life, the source of all security and happiness. Thus the slave of Jesus orders his or her life in accord with the wishes of the one he or she loves and depends upon. Paul

continues to use the language of slavery in v. 22 when he says he is going to Jerusalem constrained or bound by the Spirit. The word translated “constrained” is a word most often used to describe people being imprisoned or bound with chains. Paul must go to Jerusalem because the HS has chained him to this course of action. To not go would be to disobey the Spirit of Jesus and this is not something he can do because he does not want to be free from Jesus, he wants to be a slave of Jesus because Jesus is so delightful to him.

He doesn't know what the final outcome of his trip to Jerusalem will be but he does know, because the HS keeps telling him in every city, that when he gets to Jerusalem he will be bound by real chains in prison and he will be afflicted (vv.22-23). The HS has told Paul to go to Jerusalem and the HS has told him that when he gets there he is going to be arrested and tortured. We know from Paul's letters that his plan is to go to Jerusalem, deliver the financial gift he has collected from the Gentile churches and then go on to Spain by way of Rome. While he knows that he will be imprisoned and tortured in Jerusalem he doesn't know if he will be killed or how long he will be imprisoned. He doesn't know if he will get to Rome and then to Spain. Here is the question that must be answered at this point: why would a person go to a place where he knows for sure that he is going to be arrested and tortured and maybe even be killed? Especially, why would you do this when you know that there is so much more work to be done in other places? Jerusalem has the gospel. There is a church there already. There are apostles headquartered there. Why not simply send the gift with some of the men he is traveling with and go on to Rome and then to Spain? Why is Paul going into such certain suffering?

Verse 24 gives the answer. **Read it.** Paul puts his life on one side of the scale and he puts Jesus and doing what Jesus has told him to do: testify to the gospel of God's grace, on the other side. When he places each of these things on the scale, loving Jesus and doing his work bangs down on the table, it outweighs staying alive. He is willing to pay any and every cost involved in doing the will of Jesus. Nothing matters more to him, nothing fills him with greater joy and delight than showing by word and deed that Jesus is the greatest and best of all persons. That is his goal: to testify to the gospel of God's grace in every place that Jesus directs him to go and right now, Jerusalem is the place he wants him to go. Like a witness on the stand in a trial his objective is to make crystal clear to all that God has graciously provided his Son as the savior of every believing sinner so that other sinners will join him in trusting and loving Jesus supremely. This is the campaign worker who loves his candidate and gives all his time and money to promoting his candidate. This is the knight who is willing to fight dragons and wicked kings and to travel across the world in order to free the princess and marry her. There is no cost he will not pay for the sake of his beloved. This is the Olympic athlete who disciplines himself in every way, working out constantly, forsaking all other commitments and relationships in the anticipation of winning the gold medal. This is the patriotic soldier who loves his country and his fellow soldiers who willingly runs through enemy fire to retrieve his wounded buddy and then signs up for another tour of duty. Nothing matters more to Paul than Jesus and his call upon his life. Paul's chief ambition, his highest motivation is showing off the greatness and glory of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ everywhere he calls him to go no matter what might be the personal cost to him.

Let me give you three reasons for why it is absolutely essential that those who lead the church must have Christ as the chief passion of their life. First, the church is supposed to be that community of people who have been brought through the gospel, by the Spirit to regard Jesus as the best and greatest of all persons because of who he is and what he has done. No one will ever lead others to Jesus who is not pursuing Jesus himself or herself. Jesus says this is a fact about leadership: “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.” Those who would lead people to Jesus must themselves be pursuing Jesus. Second, leaders who have anything but Jesus and making much of Jesus as the passion of their life are untrustworthy people. If a leader's chief passion is to build Christian families or to feed the poor or to fight immorality in the culture or reach the world for Jesus or build a big church then people become either a hindrance or a help to him. The leader who is nice to you so that you will join his church or his small group or help him feed the poor or reach the world for Jesus is not to be trusted. The leader who is nice to you so that you will listen to the gospel and thus find Jesus to be your joy is a leader to be trusted. Finally, a leader motivated by anything other than the beauty of Jesus will never persist in leading the church but will quit the work, even if he doesn't resign his position.

II. Teach the word of God persistently (vv. 20-21, 24-27, 32)

The work that Paul gave himself to as we saw in v. 24 was to testify to the gospel of God's grace. His ambition is that of the truthful witness who wants to make sure the jury knows the complete facts, the true truth of what has happened. In v. 20 he tells the elders that they know that he did "not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching in public and house to house." In v. 27 he says he did "not shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God." Thus Paul's passion is to persistently teach all the Scriptures to the people, because all the Scriptures are profitable. In v. 21 he uses the word "testify" again but here he is testifying to Jews and Greeks "of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus." In other words his preaching and teaching is not for the purpose of making people smarter sinners but for the purpose of calling people to forsake their sins and to obtain pardon for sins and the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus as their savior and redeemer and sanctifier. Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. While they are not the same thing, yet you cannot have one without the other. You cannot turn from sin without also trusting in Jesus and you cannot have faith in Jesus without turning from sin. They always go together.

Many years ago I was talking with a fellow Campus Crusade for Christ staff worker. We were talking about sharing the gospel with students and one of us asked, "What would you do if you were sharing the gospel with a student that had told you that he was having sexual relations with his girlfriend? Would you tell him that in order for him to trust Christ he would have to stop having sex with his girlfriend?" I said that if you knew he was sleeping with his girlfriend you would most definitely need to tell him that it was sin and that he must forsake sin if he is going to trust in Jesus. My fellow CCC worker said absolutely not. He would never tell the student he had to stop sleeping with his girlfriend because salvation is by grace through faith, not by works.

Paul agrees with me in v. 21. Repentance from sin and to God is always connected to faith in Jesus. You cannot be saved by repenting of your sins without also trusting in Jesus and you cannot be saved by trusting in Jesus while still living in and loving your sins. Permit me to use this little chair illustration to make this point. The chair I am sitting in represents all the things I am trusting in for life and happiness and security and salvation as a non-Christian. The young man who is sleeping with his girlfriend is trusting in her and the pleasures of her company for life and happiness and security. This other chair represents Jesus and all that he is and has done to save people from their sins. In order for me to trust in that chair, I must stop trusting in this chair. Standing up from this chair is repentance, sitting in this chair is faith. I repent of trusting in anything else but Jesus for life and I depend entirely upon Jesus to give me life. You cannot sit in both chairs at the same time. Either you are depending upon Christ to be your life and your happiness and your salvation or you are depending upon someone or something else.

You will notice in v. 25 he tells these men that his chief activity among them was going around proclaiming the kingdom. In vv. 26-27 he says he is not guilty of anyone's blood because he did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God. In v. 31 he says that he spent three years among them "warning" each one of them night and day with tears. Finally, in v. 32 he commends them to the word of God which is able to build them up and give them an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I want you to pay careful attention to that last verse. Paul commends, hands over these leaders to God and to the word of his grace. Notice that the word, which is the word they are commissioned to teach, is the instrument of their salvation. In other words, they need the same word they are giving to others. They are sinners who need saving as much as the people they lead. These men do not have any authority or wisdom in them because of who they are. Their entire authority derives only from this word. Therefore, if they stray in any part from this word, at that point they have no authority. The shepherds of the people of God live under the same word which they are to teach to the people.

There is simply no way to miss the fact that the main thing that leaders in the church are to do is to teach and preach the doctrines and truths that are contained in the Bible. But this also means that every Christian, every person who is joined to a local church aims to pay attention to those leaders God has appointed as they teach and preach and bear witness. Christians want to hear this good news, this word of God's grace, this message of

repentance to God and faith in Jesus. They want to learn it and live by it and so they eagerly come to those places where this word is being taught by those whom God has placed in the local church to teach.

III. Shepherd people compassionately (vv. 19-20, 28-31, 36-38)

The main command that Paul gives to these elders is contained in v. 28. He gives the same command in three ways. They are to keep watch over or pay careful attention to themselves and the entire flock; which means they are to shepherd the church that God purchased with his own blood (the verb “to care” in the ESV is the verb most often translated “to shepherd”) or in other words they are to act as the overseers that the HS has appointed them to be. I want to look first at why they should be shepherds and second I want to consider how they are to be shepherds. First of all they are to shepherd a particular local church because the HS has joined them to it and made them overseers in it. Please note, to be an overseer is the same thing as being an elder is the same thing as being a shepherd, which is our word, pastor. How did the HS appoint these particular men as elders in the church in Ephesus? Most likely, based on what we’ve been told in other parts of Acts, they were identified as likely candidates by the congregation and then the apostle Paul appointed them or laid his hands upon them confirming God’s call. So Paul says, the reason that you should keep watch over/shepherd these people is because God the HS has commanded you, appointed you to do so. This also shows why we should listen to what the elders and other duly appointed leaders say, God has put them in this position. Second, leaders are to shepherd the church because the church belongs to God, it is his. You are not an officer in Rotary club or on the board of United Way, two good but manmade institutions. The church is the only organization on planet earth that belongs to God as his treasured possession. You should take this work very seriously because you have been assigned by God to take care of that which belongs to God. Third, you should shepherd these people because of what it cost God to purchase the church. He obtained the church by the cost of his own blood. That’s a really weird statement: God has blood? Obviously, Paul is setting forth the unity of the person of Christ. Jesus is fully human and thus has real human blood coursing through his veins but he is also fully God and thus his blood is God’s blood. It is by the shed blood of the God-man, Jesus, that God has purchased the church for himself. So if the death of Christ for sins means anything to you, then you pastors, elders, overseers, small group leaders and parents should be diligent to shepherd the flock God has assigned to you. Fourth, you should pay attention to the flock because there are wolves all around. There are false teachers on the outside of the church and there are false teachers inside the church. These false teachers are out to separate the sheep from the church so that they may devour them, that is take them to hell with them. Therefore, every elder/pastor, parent and other duly appointed leader must devote himself or herself to guarding the flock from marauding wolves.

I want to draw your attention to three things Paul tells these elders about how they are to shepherd. These are in addition to the main thing shepherds do which is to feed the flock by the persistent teaching of God’s word. First, shepherding requires the shepherd keep watch over himself or herself first. Why is this? If you don’t keep watch over yourself you might become a wolf. Look at v. 30. Paul says that he expects some of these elders to become wolves. Thus, you need to watch your life and your doctrine for signs of wolfishness. Also, you shepherd by example as well as by proclamation. Therefore, you need to make sure that you are setting a good example of faithful Christian living so your people can see how they should live. Second, shepherding requires personal attention to individual sheep. Look at v. 20. Paul taught them publicly and from house to house. In v. 31 he tells them to remember how he warned “each one of them.” Paul spent time with individuals in order to teach and warn them. It is the duty of every parent and every person who is called by the HS to keep watch over the church of God that we give personal attention to individual people. Our duty is not done when we have preached or taught in public but we must also go to individuals and find out how they are doing personally. This also means that you, the members of the church must welcome the attention of your leaders. Finally, notice that twice Paul says that he does his work with tears. What does that mean? It means that Paul is not indifferent to how people respond to his work of shepherding. He loves the people and longs for them to be reconciled to God, to live in the freedom and joy of the gospel. God’s shepherds should weep over people who are not living in the freedom of Christ’s saving work. We are not to be indifferent to or angry or impatient with them. We are to weep over them like Jesus weeping over unrepentant Jerusalem or Paul weeping over

those who were enemies of the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18). Leaders care about people and what happens to them.

IV. Work hard believably (vv.32-35)

Paul, in his letters, regularly reminds the churches he founded that he did not ask for any financial help from them when he was with them. He does the same thing here with the Ephesian elders. In almost every letter where he reminds them of this fact he also tells them that he did this voluntarily. He asserts, repeatedly what he says in 1 Corinthians 9:14, "...the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel get their living from the gospel." So he is not telling these men that they should not be financially supported by the church. Rather he is telling them that they must work hard to care for the church and they must do their work for the right reasons. As he said in v. 31 when reminding them of his work, "he never stopped warning each one of them, night and day." His whole life was ordered by his work. Bearing witness to the gospel of God's grace isn't his job, it is his life. It takes hard work to shepherd the people of God, to teach the whole counsel of God, to be an overseer. Those who lead others will not indulge in the limitless opportunities for leisure and entertainment in our culture. They will discipline their use of time so that they can study God's word and spend time with people. What others can do, leaders do not do for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.

The people who pastors, elders, small group leaders and parents are to work hard to help are "the weak." Who are the weak? This word is used to describe at least five different categories of people in the NT. First, Paul uses it to refer to every human being in Romans 5:6. "You see at just the right time, when we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly." Every human being is completely powerless and helpless to save themselves because we all, by nature are ungodly. Thus, leaders are to work hard to help every sinner they know to be saved by Christ. Second, weak is used to describe people who are undergoing persecution and other kinds of suffering. Third, weak is used to describe those who are physically sick or injured. Fourth, weak is used to describe those who are financially and materially impoverished. Finally, weak is used to describe those whose faith is weak. Weak faith means that they believe that God forbids them from doing things that God does not forbid. For example Paul calls those who believe it is a sin to drink wine or to eat pork "weak in faith" in Romans 14. Leaders of local churches work hard to help every category of weak and vulnerable people who make up the church.

Paul is not only commanding that leaders work hard but that they do their work for the right reason. First he tells them, by his example, the wrong reason to do the work (v.33). They are not to engage in this work in order to get a paycheck or for the purpose of receiving the applause and appreciation of people. A desire for power and/or money cannot be the motivation of any leader in the church. Rather they are to work hard "remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself spoke, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" The "blessing" Jesus is talking about is not the good feeling that many people get when they help others. The right motivation for working hard is because you know that the Lord will reward you at the final resurrection for all your hard work in him and for him and his people. Leaders deny themselves many of this world's pleasures and give time and attention and effort to this work of shepherding God's people because they know that when Jesus returns they will be rewarded by him forever. Leaders believe in the resurrection of the dead and do their work trusting in that future reward, not a reward in the present. Heaven will be a happier experience for those who faithfully serve God's people trusting in the future reward, not the present appreciation of the people. The faithful shepherd of God's people is motivated to work hard by the promise of the future reward that Jesus will give to his faithful servants.

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