

**OPENING:** In a 4x100 relay race, the hand-off is everything. If the baton drops, the race is lost, no matter how fast you run. In Acts 20, Paul's in the hand-off zone. He's run faithfully, and now he's passing the gospel baton to the Ephesian elders, knowing he won't see them again. We'll explore his charge in two main movements: his example and his hand-off. After these two ministry points, we will wrap it up with his farewell.

**Text:** Acts 20:17–38 **Title:** Passing the Baton

**MIT:** Paul, by God's grace, entrusted the gospel ministry to the Ephesian elders, urging them to follow his Christ-like example of sacrificial service, protect the church, and pass on the mission to the next generation.

**Proposal:** Since gospel ministry is God's work and is completely sustained by His grace, we must faithfully steward God's mission by following courageous examples like Jesus and Paul, protecting and building up the church by handing off ministry to others.

### **POINT 1 - Paul's Example: He Learned From Jesus (Acts 20:18–27)**

Gospel ministry requires us to follow Paul's example, rooted in Jesus' life, marked by love, courage, sacrifice, and truth. So, let's investigate the example Paul learned from Jesus and passes onto us?

*Sub-point 1: An Example of Courageous Love (vv. 18–23):* We get to see a side of Paul that we normally don't think about. Look at the heart of Paul while ministering to God's people. <sup>18</sup> When they came to him, he said to them, "You know, from the first day I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility, with tears, and during the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. <sup>20</sup> You know that I did not hesitate to proclaim anything to you that was profitable and to teach you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.

So while he was going through a barrage of plots against him from people who used to love him, he didn't complain or cry about it. He did weep, but it wasn't for his own behalf; it was for the people. Have you ever wondered why Paul was able to stay with God's people, teach them, and love them even though churches like Corinth, a church he planted who tried to run him off, and the Jews who once loved him as a Pharisee, was everything but nice to him? How was he able to so loving and courageous even though in verse 22-23 we see the pain and suffering that awaits him.

Look at <sup>22</sup> "And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, compelled by the Spirit, not knowing what I will encounter there, <sup>23</sup> except that in every town the Holy Spirit warns me that chains and afflictions are waiting for me. How? 3 reasons: 1) He followed the Holy Spirit's leading, 2) he knew he was walking in the footsteps of Jesus (Luke 9:51 suffering awaits), and 3) Because he saw people the way Jesus saw them. Not by what they did or didn't do to him or for him, but by what they were going through and suffering from.

Let me use Dietrich Bonhoeffer's quote to help explain this concept a little more, he said "We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer." Let me illustrate this...

**ILLUSTRATION:** I was a children/youth pastor at a church in New Orleans. Once, I had this kid who was new. He came with his grandma, and I knew very little about him. Throughout the lesson on the life of Jesus he became a serious distraction and distracting the other kids. He was exhibiting anger and outbursts and being very disrespectful to me. I had enough and made an example out of him by raising my voice and sending him outside then had someone take over my class while I dealt with him. When I confronted this kid in anger, tears started pouring out of his eyes. Come to find out. He never knew his dad and his mom, who was his whole world, just died a few days back and at the funeral someone told him, "Jesus took your momma home." Imagine the thoughts of a 10-year-old boy, who is hearing about this Jesus guy who took his whole world away from him. I felt small. It broke my heart. If I'd known, I would have approached him differently.

APPLICATION: This is why we don't primarily judge people by their actions or words but by the pain & suffering they endure. Jesus and Paul saw people this way, which is why Jesus could pray, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

TRANSITION: Through that boy's pain, God taught me to see people's suffering and act accordingly, just as Jesus and Paul did. That kind of love not only shaped how Paul saw people but also fueled his willingness to sacrifice everything for God's truth. In verses 24–27, we see Paul's resolve to give his life for the gospel, no matter the cost.

*Sub-point 2: An Example of Sacrifice for God's Truth (vv. 24–27):* <sup>24</sup> But I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God's grace. <sup>25</sup> "And now I know that none of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will ever see me again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I declare to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, <sup>27</sup> because I did not avoid declaring to you the whole plan of God. (it wasn't out of fear, but love and compassion)

INTERPRETATION: Paul was willing to sacrifice his life for the spreading of God's truth. Man, most believers are afraid to even share the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection but Paul is willing to suffer and die for it.

But look at verse 26-27 again. Notice he was willing to sacrifice his life, but he was unwilling to sacrifice God's truth. The language he uses here would have been very alarming and pressing into the hearts of the elders. This comes from the charge God gave to Ezekiel, in Ezekiel 33, as He reestablishing him as a watchman. I'm paraphrasing here, but God told Ezekiel that He was bringing destruction and if someone died after being warned then Ezekiel was in the clear but if Ezekiel failed to give them the truth of the coming destruction and that person died, then their blood would be on Ezekiel's hands and God would hold him responsible. This is why Paul was able to say in 26-27, "<sup>26</sup> Therefore I declare to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, <sup>27</sup> because I did not avoid declaring to you the whole plan of God."

ILLUSTRATION: Imagine Paul, surrounded by people who have tried to hurt him in many ways. Simply, because he shared the gospel of Jesus with them. How is it that Paul, surrounded by hostile crowds, still has an inclination to share Jesus even though it may cause them to hurt and reject him?

APPLICATION: Because he loved them and saw their fate if nobody intervened with the gospel (ILL: blind people walking toward the edge of a cliff. Listen, tackle them out of love, even if they get mad.)

So, the next time you are scared of getting rejected for sharing Jesus. Ask the person you want to share Jesus with, "What kind of person would I be if I said I know the way to everlasting life with God. No pain, no suffering, no death, no need for medicines, and never shared it with you or anybody else? Watch how their response to you changes. Can you see the difference? There is a difference in sharing Jesus out of fear and out of love.

TRANSITION: This is the ministry Paul learned from Jesus, and it is also the ministry Paul hand's off to the elders. This is Paul's hand-off, he is in the hand-off zone.

### **POINT 2 - Paul's Hand-off: Ministry Passed Onto The Elders (Acts 20:28–35)**

Paul has been protecting the church through the word of God, not brute force, and now he charges leadership with the same. A ministry of protection and a ministry that is bigger than money.

*Sub-point 1: The Ministry of Protection (vv. 28–31):* <sup>28</sup> Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the

flock. <sup>30</sup> Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.

INTERPRETATION: Who are these “savage wolves?” They are men who are only out for selfish gain. These are not wolves that are hiding and waiting, they are out in the open intentionally trying to destroy what God has built by putting their fame and fortunes first and distorting the word and doctrine. Willing to do and say anything, even if it’s contrary to God’s word, to lure and steal disciples for personal gain and glory. I got to tell you. As I look around at some churches today, I see this.

ILLUSTRATION: Pastor’s trying to win the affections of Jesus’ bride for personal gain.

TRANSITION: Paul warned the leaders to protect the church from such wolves and false teachers, trying to win the affections of Jesus’ bride and seduce her away from him. Paul understood that as a groomsman, not the groom, his time to build up and prepare the church/bride, was over and he was placing the bride into the hands of these elders and committing the elders to God almighty.

Paul isn’t passing on a paycheck or a platform for these guys. The ministry Paul passes onto them isn’t built on money, power, or applause; it’s built on God’s grace. And listen, church, grace gives, it doesn’t seek to take. Verses 32-35 reminds us that true ministry isn’t measured by what we get, but by what we give; for the good of the bride and the glory of the Groom.

*Sub-point 2: The Ministry Bigger Than Money (vv. 32–35):* <sup>32</sup> “And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those who are with me. <sup>35</sup> In every way I’ve shown you that it is necessary to help the weak by laboring like this and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, because he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

INTERPRETATION: Paul is not saying that those who are paid full-time in churches are wrong to get paid. Matter of fact, every believer is in full-time ministry: your jobs, your family, your neighbors, friends. Remember what Paul is fighting against; false teachers who only preach for personal gain, who are in it for money. They don’t care about the people, they only care about getting their money. So, Paul takes an approach to distance himself from those false teachers in order to reach people with the true gospel. He entered their workplace to show them the better way. Paul is showing them a ministry that doesn’t focus on money. It’s centered on Integrity and Grace and remember, grace gives.

ILLUSTRATION: Let me give you a recent example that teaches this grace principle found in verse 35, when he said, “...it is necessary to help the weak by laboring like this...it is more blessed to give than receive.”

ILL: On Monday morning I went to see Larry & Pat Walker for our Monday coffee and conversation. Larry was one of our elders. I say was because hours after our visit, Larry died in his bed. The next day, I sent a message to some youth about the situation and they went to go mow and weed eat Mrs. Pat’s lawn. Here is why I love what they did so much; they didn’t do it for money. They did it because they heard that someone in our church was grieving over the loss of her husband of over 60 years and that she has a mountain of decisions she has to make, and in the midst of grieving and an uncertain future, they simply wanted to take one thing off her plate. They don’t even fully understand the magnitude and the ripple effect this has had. It ministered to my heart. If you think God was pleased and accepted that as an acceptable sacrifice of ministry, say amen! Their act was a living sacrifice, pleasing to God, and it blessed both Mrs. Pat and our entire church.”

Church, listen, that’s a great example of ministry that is bigger than money. This is living out Jesus’s words, “it is better to give than to receive.”

APPLICATION: The gospel and ministry have been given to us by God Himself, it has come to us, to go through us. I am so thankful that we have believers from this church treating their workplace and homes as full-time ministry. (police force. Fire department. Hospital. Power company). Some of these places are very dark and need you to be a bright light for God's glory. He has planted you there. And you are blooming for His glory!

TRANSITION: We have moved from Paul's example, to Paul's hand-off, and we close with Paul's farewell and use it as a call to action.

### **CLOSING - Paul's Farewell (Acts 20:36-38)**

<sup>36</sup> After he said this, he knelt down and prayed with all of them.<sup>37</sup> There were many tears shed by everyone. They embraced Paul and kissed him,<sup>38</sup> grieving most of all over his statement that they would never see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Picture the scene on that Ephesian shore. Paul kneels in the sand, his voice trembling as he prays for the elders. Tears stream down their faces. They embrace him, knowing they'll never see him again (pause). In that moment, Paul isn't just saying goodbye, he's passing the gospel baton, trusting them to carry God's mission forward. And church, that baton has been passed through centuries of faithful runners, right into your hands today.

The race isn't over. Your coworker who's hurting, your neighbor who's searching, your kids who need to know Jesus, they're waiting for you to run your leg. So, here's your challenge: this week, find one person, a friend, a family member, someone you see every day, and pray with them. Ask God for courage to share Jesus. Then take one bold step: invite them to coffee, to dinner, to open the door for sharing your testimony and the gospel. Invite them to join you with God's people next Sunday.

I beg you, don't let the baton drop. Run with it, hand it off faithfully, and trust God to finish the race.

Have them stand, Hold hands, and then PRAY as a united body.