

This morning, we are continuing through the New Testament book of Acts, the story of the early church. We are looking today at Acts 20:17-38, a passage where Paul meets with the leaders of the church of Ephesus as he is passing through on one of his missionary journeys. **This passage is unique in that it is the only speech in Acts given to a Christian audience.** It has a lot to tell us about the church and what kind of people God is looking for in His church.

*¹⁷ From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and **from house to house.** ²¹ **I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.** ²² "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the **gospel of God's grace.** ²⁵ "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. 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.** ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will **not spare the flock.** ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. ³² "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. ³³ I have not coveted anyone's **silver or gold or clothing.** ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" ³⁶ When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷ They all wept as they **embraced him and kissed him.** ³⁸ What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.*

Paul had spent 3 years in Ephesus, and now as he passed through the region he stopped to meet with the elders, the men who were leading the church. While this passage certainly has a lot to say to those who serve as elders in a church, this message is a challenge to all of us in how we live as Christians and as part of a church.

I see two main messages in Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders.

1) I have dedicated my life to serving God and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ

Look at how clear Paul is about his mission and focus in the first 6 verses:

¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. ²² "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Listen to Paul: I have a singular focus. God rescued me from a life that was passionate and focused but sincerely wrong. I was dedicated to God as I understood Him, but in the process I was working against Jesus and His people, persecuting, imprisoning, or killing anyone who called himself a follower of Jesus. But Jesus revealed himself to me, turned my life around, and enlisted me as part of His mission to rescue people from sin and death and Hell and to help bring them eternal life. And now that is what I have dedicated my life to. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

***2 Corinthians 5:17-21** -Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of **reconciliation**: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of **reconciliation**. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We*

implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Do you believe this??? If the gospel of true, then this mission of reconciling people to God matters more than anything else. No other cause, no other reason for living, can compare. Whatever persecution and prisons and hardships come my way, I am willing to give my life and even die for this cause, because it has eternal significance for everyone around me.

This concept reminded me of a powerful video by Penn Jillette of the Las Vegas illusionist duo Penn & Teller. Penn Jillette is a very smart, outspoken atheist, and it is not hard to find videos online of him ridiculing religious people for their beliefs and practices. In one video, however, he spoke briefly of an encounter he had with a gentleman after one of his shows. Let me share some of what he said:

He walked over to me and he said, "I was here at the show last night, I saw the show and I liked it." He was complimentary about my use of language and my honesty... he said nice stuff... and then he said "I brought this for you" and he gave me a pocket Gideon's Bible with the New Testament and Psalms... he said "I wrote in the front of this, and I wanted you to have it... I'm proselytizing... I want you to know I'm a businessman, I'm sane, I'm not crazy." And he looked me right in the eye, and it was really wonderful. I believe he knew that I was an atheist. But he was not defensive, and he looked me right in the eyes. And he was truly complimentary. It didn't seem in any way that it was empty flattery; he was kind, and nice, and sane, and looked me in the eye and talked to me, and then gave me this Bible. And I've always said, I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe there is a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever and you think "well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward." How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate someone to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believe that there is a truck bearing down on you, and you didn't believe it, there's a certain point at which I tackle you. And this is more important than that. This guy was a really good guy. He was polite and honest and sane and he cared enough about me to proselytize and give me a Bible which had written in it a little note to me and five phone numbers and an email address in case I want to get in touch. Now, I know there is no God,

and one polite person living his life right doesn't change that. But I'll tell you, he was a very, very, very good man, and that's really important, and with that kind of goodness, it's okay to have that deep of a disagreement. I still think religion does a lot of bad stuff, but that was a very good man."

Do you believe the gospel? Do you believe that Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again, and that by His death He has made a way to overcome sin and the grave, that He has made a way for people to be right with God, to be the men and women they were created to be? If so, then do not waste your life on trivial things that in the end do not matter. Give your life to something that matters eternally.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

2) I am zealously concerned about your well-being

Not only is he dedicated to God, but He is zealously, ardently, passionately concerned about the spiritual well-being of God's people.

²⁵ *"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. 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.** ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. ³² "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. ³³ I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"*

Look at what he says. I never stopped warning you. I have not hesitated to proclaim the whole will of God. I am innocent of the blood of all men – I have left

it all on the field, so to speak. Now I implore you to take responsibility for each other, like a shepherd vigilantly watching the sheep and guarding against the wolves.

This has particular meaning for elders, who certainly are called to be shepherds and to take a special care for the people of the church. But I want to speak to all of you who consider this your church home or are considering it. **Take responsibility for each other's well-being. Look out for each other.**

I have many flaws, and one of those flaws is that I have a bent towards irresponsibility. I came to recognize that I could walk by the same broken thing for weeks until it finally dawned on me that it was my responsibility to do something about it. Now I have to walk through the house deliberately paying attention to what needs to be taken care of. And I have to do the same with the church – not living as if someone else will take care of these people, but realizing that it is my responsibility.

When we do elder training, one of the things I challenge people with is to walk into church seeing yourself as responsible for the people there. I don't know how most of you walk in, but I'm guessing it is something like this – find a close parking spot, find a place to sit, probably a similar place every week, somewhere with enough room for your family. Participate, sing, listen, maybe say hi to some people, eat some food, head home. **How would that be different if you were walking in with a sense of responsibility for the church?** What would it be like to heed Paul's words in Acts 20 and to watch out for each other, to take responsibility for each other on a Sunday morning?

If you are physically able, choose a parking spot that allows visitors or the elderly or those with small children to park closer

Arrive early, ready to greet, welcome, pray, or prepare your heart to meet with God

Welcome the stranger, letting them know you are glad they are here

Invite those who are alone to sit with you. Maybe even invite them to lunch afterwards.

Offer to pray with those who might need prayer

Pay attention to who is not there and reach out to let them know they were missed and to see how they are

Ask people about themselves and listen to their story

Invest your gifts by serving somewhere – how can I be a part of using my gifts to serve others

Invest your money in what God is doing here by giving tithes and offerings

Be a student of the Scripture and critically listen and evaluate what is shared

And that's just Sunday morning. Outside of Sunday, it means praying for and caring for the sick. Helping share meals with those in need. Visiting those who need a friend. Hosting a community group. Looking for people to encourage, to disciple, to befriend. Make sure you are on the directory and updating your information.

Do not just be a consumer. Take responsibility for each other's well-being. Listen to Jesus:

John 13:34-35 - *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

How will people know we belong to Jesus? By our love. And Paul's words:

1 Thessalonians 2:8 - *We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*

Have you seen how loneliness has become an epidemic? How the world does not look out for each other the way it did? How hard it is to find community? This is what the church is about. Yes, we are first and foremost about God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. But we are also about community, about belonging to a diverse family that loves each other, takes responsibility for each other, and looks out for each other through every season.

A couple comments on this. **Some of you are already taking on responsibility.** I am not telling you to do more. We are grateful for you. Do not do for others what they can do for themselves. God loves them more than you do. **Notice that Paul did not stay in Ephesus forever.** He stayed as the Lord led, and when the Spirit called him elsewhere, he entrusted their care to others and followed the Spirit.

Secondly, a lot has shifted in the church since COVID. Our church is at the same time bigger and smaller than ever before. Fewer people come in person on a Sunday, but we reach more people than ever before. Some of you are home for legitimate reasons. **But some of you need to be reminded that God's intention was not for you to experience church through a screen.** God's intention was that you would be a part of a living, breathing, body of Christ, family of God. That you

would be concerned for the spiritual well-being of your brothers and sisters, and that they would express their concern for you. That you would meet together, serve each other, build each other up. That you would be discipled, and disciple others. We have fewer people taking on more responsibility since COVID. God has so much more He wants to do through our church, but we need everyone. We are in danger of burning out the few who serve faithfully.

Acts 20 shows us that God's desire is that His church would be filled with men and women who are dedicated to serving God and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, giving their lives to that which matters eternally. And that we would be zealously concerned about each other's well-being, especially spiritual well-being.

This week has been an emotional week for me. My closest ministry friend resigned his position as pastor in response to a sizeable group of people in his church who felt that he was not the right man for the job. The honest truth is that I am not half the pastor that this man is. The only reason I am still standing here is because of the grace and mercy of my God, who has never treated me as my sins deserve, because of the grace and mercy of my wife, who has supported me every step of the way and laid down her life for me and for the gospel, and because of the grace and mercy of the elders and church members who have put up with me all these years. I am so grateful for God's grace and mercy that has allowed me to give my life to that which matters eternally. I love you all and pray that God would give me more of His heart and burden, that I might be like Paul in my dedication to your well-being.