

Sermon Title: “**Found Faithful in Christ**”

Series: *Learn, Live, Lead*

Speaker: Pastor Damian Mericka

Text: Acts 20:17-38

## Introduction

*“Stand firm, and you will win life.” -Luke 21:19*

We began this year with a look at what Kingdom endurance is. **Standing Firm** here means *Endurance* and is a very rich word embodying an **upward, consistent, contagious, and outward** motion that goes against the current. *It is swimming upstream after Jesus.* We saw this is the work the Spirit of God does in our lives, just as He did in Jesus’ - He leads us upward to higher ground and a higher life in Him.

We also looked at some of the outward challenges we face when going upward with the Spirit, including the spiritual forces of darkness which our on their way downward. As they are being cast out of God’s Kingdom, we are being brought in. This is the nature of our Spiritual Battle. Unlike the generations that came before Jesus since His Ascension the Spirit has now come upon us to take the battle to where it truly is at.

What does this look like lived out in or lives? Following Jesus as His Disciples.



*“Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.”*

**-Matthew 4:19**

This series is set to be a journey answering this question- *what does it mean to follow Jesus?* How do we today answer His invitation and see this journey with Him unfold as it did for the first-generation followers of Jesus? Together we will discover anew what it means to follow Jesus- *to be a disciple making disciples culture that **learns, lives, and leads!***

### **I. A Faithful Witness (Acts 20:17-21)**

*Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them:*

*“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.-Acts 20:17-21*

As we resume the journey alongside Paul and his ministry team, we find him focused on returning to Jerusalem in time for the Feast of Pentecost. Last week we saw the call for the Church to wake up and live for Jesus all the more as we see His Return approaching! Leaving the believers in Troas, Paul sets sail with Jerusalem as the destination. Arriving at Miletus, Paul sends for the Ephesian Elders.

Understand, this was a four-day journey one way- so **four days** the messenger went to Ephesus, and **four days** for the Elders to arrive in Miletus. How many of us would take an **eight-day** break from our lives to travel to be with a Spiritual father figure in our lives? But the leaders in Ephesus arrived none-the-less. Their time together would be one of the most intimate moments captured by Luke in his work of Acts we are going through.

*How I lived among you.* In a day where we value a person's personal gifting, charisma, abilities- all too often we clamor to the next best model for growing our churches or strengthening our life in Christ. If Paul were alive today, truly he would be the most sought after speaker. Under his tenor we see Christianity come from a small, marginal sect in Palestine only to grow into an Empire wide phenomenon. Yet, if we look to Paul as a method to adopt, we would miss the truth of the matter altogether.

The success Paul experienced was due to his devotion to Jesus, in His Spirit. Paul pursued **learning** from Jesus, to be transformed into **living** like Jesus, resulting in his ability to **lead** others to Jesus. No gap existed between the Apostle Paul's teaching and manner of life he lived. He could truly say,

*"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* **-Galatians 2:20**

*The whole time.* I like how the King James Version translates this, *after what manner I have been with you at all seasons.* Each season of life is unique with challenge- yet Paul was the same in each regarding his pursuit of Jesus. It is to this model of living Paul directs the Ephesian Elders to look upon, for such a model will not be found in the Kingdoms of this world, but alone in the Kingdom of God through Christ.

**First, let's look at Paul's Character.**

**Serving.** In the Greek means a slave; sold out to with complete obedience. In all **humility** implies a low self-opinion; it is not about me! **With tears** meaning pleading through our speech and intercession in the Throne Room. Both **humility** and **tears** partner together and are the fruit of our relationship with God. The author of Hebrews writes,

*"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence."*  
**-Hebrews 5:7**

**Second, let's look at Paul's Labor.**

*With Trials.* In the Greek this means a *proving of one's fidelity, integrity, virtue, constancy.* I often tell my children; integrity is doing the right thing when no one is looking. In application, it's doing what is honoring to dad when he is not with you at school, or your friend's house, or in Sunday School when there are mints all over! What made such trials even harder for Paul is that it came from those he called family, friends, co-workers, etc. Oh, how often unbelievers take joy at the moral failure of those confessing love in Jesus! Consider David's own personal lament on this,

*“For it is not an enemy who taunts me-then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me- then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng.” -Psalm 55:12-14*

Despite this, Paul *did not shrink from declaring anything that was profitable*, meaning he did not pull back from his mission to proclaim the riches of Christ to believers in Ephesus. Not just privately in smaller settings such as homes, but in the corporate very public settings when Believers gathered in the Synagogue on the Sabbath or the following day as we saw last week. To say the early church was a house church movement is ignorant and wrong for there was clearly a *corporate and smaller setting for the training and equipping of the saints for the work of Gospel ministry!*

The message was that of *repentance* to God from sin toward Jesus Christ- without shame or sugar coating. Paul did not blur the line of the Law being inadequate to save for his Jewish audience any more than he showed that Jesus is not the same as the false gods of the Greeks nor is He to be worshiped after the manner of their former way of life. *You may come as you are to Jesus, but you cannot stay as you are if you encounter Him by faith and follow Him!*

## **II. A Faithful Ministry (Acts 20:22-27)**

*“And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 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. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” -Acts 20:22-27*

Constrained by the Spirit refers to not to the specific work of the Holy Spirit but Paul's own conscience or spirit bound for the work of Christ. *Constrained* means *bound*, which is a more faithful rendition of the Greek here. It is the same word used to describe the bound nature of a man and women in marriage. Paul had a heart for his Jewish brethren; the more he learned about Jesus the more He loved like Jesus and could think of nothing but his brethren coming to faith in Jesus.

*“I am speaking the truth in Christ-I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit-that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” **Romans 9:1-3***

Even when the saints would gather and the Spirit would move with a prophetic word over Paul, it was that hardship through suffering awaited him in Jerusalem. Note dear saint, Jesus is not sparing Paul the trials that await him, but through the Spirit is encouraging Paul to be prepared in His strength for what lies ahead. For the Apostle to give his YES! to Jesus is inviting suffering and hardship.

So convinced of this was Paul, that he tells the Ephesian eldership that they will not see his face again. He then reaffirms his manner of sharing the Gospel- in transparency he held nothing back from them and both taught and demonstrated the truth he preached. ***Innocent of the blood of all***, here means *pure*. This word implies not that Paul or any of us are perfect, but that we are consistently moving in one direction- toward Jesus Christ! Paul was transparent in his life, learning and growing through the challenges he faced along with owning and repenting of any wrongdoing.

That everyone would see the difference Jesus made in his life is the witness he champions forward. ***Innocent of the blood of all*** echoes the sobering conversation between God and His prophet here,

*“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.” **Ezekiel 33:7-9***

### **III. A Faithful Charge (Acts 20:28-31)**

*“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 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 twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.” **Acts 20:28-31***

Now that Paul has affirmed both his message and example through his life, he reaffirms the need to continue in their own qualification as elders to the flock in Ephesus. More than popularity through anything in and of themselves, Paul focus' on their personal character in Christ. ***Pay careful attention to yourselves***, in the Greek means to *take heed, or be on guard*. It is to *bring near our own lives and those we are entrusted with* such as spouse, children, congregation.

Further it is the idea of bringing into the fold all the sheep for safe keeping, inspection, nourishment, etc.

***The Holy Spirit has made you overseers***, meaning the call to leadership again is not on the outward appearance in the eyes of the world what qualifies one, but on the calling and anointing of the Spirit of God who gifts the local gathering of Saints all that they need to be trained and equipped for the work of Gospel ministry. This was a lesson Israel as a Nation learned early on with their first king, and one the church stands to be reminded of today.

*“But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his (Saul’s) appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” **-1 Samuel 16:7***

*“Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” **-Ephesians 4:8-16***

All of us are sinners destined to endure the wrath of God in eternal damnation; yet God in His great love has rescued us from the clutches of hell. It is on this common foundation the blood of Christ washes us and makes us a part of His Body, gifted according to His good pleasure for the overall health and vitality of the local and catholic (universal) Body. In this equipping, as eldership, we have a solemn charge.

*“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” **-1 Timothy 4:16***

As Elder leadership, there is great need to be on the lookout for:

1) Threats from *without*. *Fierce wolves* is Paul taking Jesus’ words as truth to heart,

*“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.” **-Matthew 7:15-16***

**Note:** *The example of the sheep dog in the Warner Brothers cartoon with coyote.*

2) Threats from *within*. Even more dangerous is the apostasy from within, specifically leaders turning from the Truth in Christ and twisting what the Bible says to pursue and

achieve personal success and gain. I would argue that this is the greatest threat to the church today! Peter the Apostle would also warn,

*“As he (Paul) does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.” -2 Peter 3:16-17*

*Note: The example of the white board session / emergent church / popular leaders now gone.*

Oh, how willing we are to be led astray for the sake of popularity, acceptance, and security! Through tears the Apostle pled with the leadership to see the dangers he sees! **Admonish** means *to warn*- Pastor, why preach on such hard things all the time? Paul was with them for 3 years, and each message carried this tone of warning. As a parent, I get this all too well. We can prepare, plead, warn, use our own lives as examples, pray with tears alongside our children and for them- but ultimately, they must choose for themselves to give weight or take lightly our exhortation. As leaders in the church we must not fall short of such pleading- **keep sober in the watchtower, oh elders of Cornerstone and churches beyond who are listening to this message!**

#### **IV. A Faithful Farewell (Acts 20:32-38)**

*“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. 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. 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.’ 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.” -Acts 20:32-38*

Dad, what do you really want for Christmas? I looked at my daughter and said to see you healthy and happy in Christ. I always thought that growing up would be so boring as I opened gifts in childhood watching the adults have so few if any to open. Where is the fun in not getting things?! Now as an adult I understand, and it is in this maturity Paul appeals to those mature and leaders in Christ- *it is truly better to give of our selves all that we have received in Him for His Glory to those around us.*

There were times Paul said yes to the support of the churches he served; other times he said no. What was the qualifying reason? The maturity of the congregation and the community he was ministering in to. He would rather do without than have at the expense of someone's faith in Jesus. Paul was a genuine, impactful spiritual father to these men and the church at Ephesus.

This time of prayer was so intimate, for it was the reality of the enmity this world has against Jesus, His Kingdom and message, and us in Him. It is a reminder that this is not our home, and life here will be full of goodbye's. Yet a day comes when there will be no more goodbyes. Paul

knows he will be there. Paul longs to see each of them and those they lead arrive there, finishing the race as well.

May this be the direction each of our lives are moving in. None of us are perfect, yet we can be transparent. We own our mistakes, embrace His mercy and grace for ourselves, extending this to each other.

May we have a *faithful* witness in Christ to those around us.

May we have a *faithful* ministry in Christ to those around us.

May we embrace *faithfully* the charge given to us by Christ for ourselves and those around us.

May we love *faithfully* those we do life with all the way to the final farewell in this world.

*May we be found **faithful** in Christ!*