

To Spend and Be Spent for Christ

Acts 20:17-24

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*The Lord's Day Evening
November 14, 2010*

If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Acts chapter 20, Acts chapter 20. And as you are doing so, I want to express my thankfulness to Josh and to Gina for the opportunity to be here for this incredible occasion, a true expression of God's goodness to have brought you through this last season and to see the way He has worked in your life, and to now, look to the future of what He has called and commissioned you to do and to have that be, tonight, signed and sealed in many ways. And we're looking at a passage tonight that I believe sets the tone for the beginning of a ministry as we look towards the end of one of God's greatest missionaries, if not the greatest — the apostle Paul.

As he nears the end of his ministry, he gives us a beautiful portrait tonight of what a faithful, leading servant of God is supposed to be about. And so before we read God's Word and we give our attention to it, let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

Our Father in heaven, what a joy it is to know that You abide with us at all times. Lord, You are always as close to us as the Spirit that abides within our hearts. And Lord, this means that on an occasion such as this, and in a worship service such as this, that we can rest in the truth of this fact, that the Lord Jesus Christ, right now, rules and reigns, and that He has, by His grace, chosen men for the purpose of going into the vineyard and laboring, going into the field and harvesting, and that Father, tonight, we celebrate one of Your great providences in setting aside yet another worker for the extension and the glory of Christ's name. Father, we pray that You would be pleased tonight as we look into Your Word, as we submit ourselves to Your instruction. And we ask Father, that You would guide us in the way of all truth. We pray it in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

We'll be looking tonight at Acts 20, verses 17 to 24. This is God's Word:

“Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus (that is, Paul) 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. 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.”

Amen, and thus far the reading of God's holy Word.

As the apostle Paul writes this section, as we have this testimony of the apostle Paul and his relationship to the church at Ephesus, we're peering into the church that he loved dearly, the church that he served for three years, faithfully. And as he makes his way to Jerusalem, I think anticipating Pentecost and probably the celebration that would ensue from the descending of the Holy Spirit, back in that not too distant memory at this point in the history of the church, he's going to pass through Miletus, only thirty miles away from Ephesus, the church that he served for nearly three years, and he's not going to get that close without having a final word to these elders. He knows that this is the last time that he's going to see them, and so in many ways, when we read this section of the book of Acts, we're gathering Paul's very testimony about his ministry to the church at Ephesus, and this is the memory that he wants them to walk away with, knowing that he will never see them face to face again. And he gives us, as is done throughout the book of Acts, a cameo portrait of the beauty of the church and the richness of Gospel ministry. And what we have here, by the very words of the apostle Paul, is a portrait of what a leading servant of God is to be about.

And that's why we're gathered here tonight — to be reminded of what it is to be a minister in the vineyard of God and to serve Him faithfully. What are the characteristics? What is the quality of the work? What are the challenges and the obstacles that one is going to face? And indeed, how is one going to overcome them? He gives us, I believe, six characteristics of faithful Gospel ministry. And we have about two minutes for each of them, so stay tuned!

The first is this — humility. Notice what he says in verse 19 — that he has “served the Lord with all humility.” As the apostle Paul goes to the church at Ephesus, he goes recounting to them of the situation and the circumstance that he found himself in when he was there — serving them with all sorts of trials and tribulations, and in many ways coming to the end of himself in the midst of his Gospel ministry there. You'll remember the attacks that were levied upon the apostle Paul from those who were the marketers in Ephesus who made the idols for the goddess Artemis and who ran Paul out on a line out of the city and the oppositions that he faced there. As Paul served in the midst of the church at

Ephesus, he was reminded of the fact that he was a mere man. He was reminded of the fact that, as a Gospel minister, one who goes forth into the field to sow the seed and to reap a harvest, that as he does so he goes as one who is abiding under the character of the providence of God, and apart from who God is and who God has made him to be, he has nothing. He has no creativity and ingenuity within himself. He has no power to save the souls that are before him. And he realizes that as he faces these sorts of oppositions, oppositions that every sower of the Gospel seed faces, that he realizes that he stands before a sovereign and holy God that he must begin a faithful ministry and recounts his ministry as one who despaired of his own capability. It was a ministry marked by humility.

One of the most difficult things, Josh, one of the most difficult things, congregation, for a minister to keep in mind, is the fact that he abides under a sovereign and holy God and that he has no power within himself as a vessel to do the work that he's called to do. It's so hard to be reminded of that, and to work from a place of lowliness and a place of weakness and a place of radical dependence upon the grace of God for every step that you take, for every word that you say, for every person that you minister to. Paul ministered in humility.

I remember a quote from a friend of mine who recounted a sermon that he heard. These were his four laws of the spiritual life. You've heard of the four laws of the Campus Crusade for Christ? Well, he has his own four laws. The first was this — that there is a God. The second is — you are not Him. The third is — your tendency is to forget law one and two. That's your tendency. And his fourth law was — get it right. Get it right. We tend to substitute law two and law one. We begin to make ourselves the center of the universe. We begin to found our ministries upon pride. And as soon as we begin doing that we make ourselves inefficient for the work of the Spirit. Faithfulness begins with humility.

But secondly, it begins with love and sincerity. In many ways, this point comes from the whole tenor of these verses, verses 19 all the way down to verse 24. But you catch an intimacy in this passage that the apostle Paul loved the church at Ephesus. They were near and dear to his heart. He actually refers in verse 19 that “he pled with them with tears.” We can actually read further on in this chapter in verse 31 that “he admonished them with tears.” But we could read to the end of the chapter when Paul gets upon the ship and he's leaving and we see that they're embracing and they're crying and that they're kissing one another and they have a tight knit love and a sincerity that has been a part of the nature of Paul's work. As a minister of the Gospel understands his humility, and begins to take in the view of God as he looks into the lives of those in whom the Lord has made him a shepherd, the love of God and the sincerity of God and the compassion of God begins to ooze out of him towards those whom the Lord has put over him.

The beauty of this is that the love and sincerity of the apostle Paul cuts against

the showmanship that often comes with pastoral ministry that's lost its way, a pastoral ministry that has become a religious performance and has ceased becoming true love and sincerity. When a pastor forgets that he is preaching to those who will never die, that everyone in this room is made in the image of God, that everyone here is lost in sin and is in desperate need of God's grace and without His grace there is no hope for nobody here. That sense, in the heart of the pastor, is absolutely essential to Gospel ministry - the love and sincerity.

Thirdly we see that he's courageous; he's courageous. We see in verse 19 that he goes and he ministers in Ephesus with trials, that he goes knowing that imprisonment and affliction await him. He says that he does not shrink back from this. He does not pull back in declaring to them everything that they need to hear. He does not pull back from what he senses the Spirit is leading him to do. He goes straight forward into the work that he knows will require tremendous courage, tremendous courage. You get the sense that there's external attached from the culture — the tribulation that he experienced in Ephesus, that those who would attack the church from the outside, but you also get the attacks that come from inside the church — when you have to say hard things to the people that the Lord has entrusted to you as a shepherd. We're told in the book of Timothy that there comes a time when those sitting in the pews often listen for a word that will scratch the itching of their ears, but is not the word that will actually be profitable for them. And the shepherd is having to make a very difficult decision about what he says and what he doesn't say. And how he says it and how the Lord guides and how the Lord directs. He has to be courageous. It's tempting to compromise. It's tempting to move towards approval and approval ratings and job security rather than to say the things that the Spirit is leading to be said by the Word.

When you see these first three characteristics come together of humility and love and sincerity and courageousness, you realize you need all three of these in Gospel ministry. If you have humility without courage, your tendency is simply to compromise. If you have courage without humility, you tend to be self-insistent and selfish in your designs. You just want things to work out the way you've always planned them. But when you combine love and sincerity, humility and courage together, what you get is this soft strength, this sort of gentle power that comes from being emptied of all sufficiency of self filled with the completeness of the Spirit, and a boldness that says, even as we learned this morning from the passage, "I'm willing to go wherever God would send me. Even should my life be taken from me, I do it with joy." That's the call of these first three characteristics.

Now where do you get humility, love and sincerity, and courage? You get them from being a Word-centered man. You get them from being a Word-centered man. Notice what the apostle Paul tells us in verse 20, that he 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 the Lord Jesus Christ." As the apostle Paul went to the church at Ephesus, he gathered in the Hall of Tyrannus and as he spoke, he spoke the

needs of the corporate body. He looked at a body like this and he said these things need to be said from the Word and this guidance needs to be given in the public sphere. But as he considered the needs of the corporate body, he also individually and personally went from house to house giving personal words of admonition and practical instruction from the Word, because not only are there needs corporately as a body, in terms of the culture of the church, but they're in each individual pew and in each individual heart, right now - particular pains, particular sin struggles, particular rejoicings that need to be engaged so that the praise of God can be given. The apostle Paul was a Word-centered man. Wherever he went, he opened the bread of life and he knew only to feed the people on that which he knew would nourish them. And he was indiscriminate about this. It was Jews and it was Greeks. He was impartial because he saw that the need was so great in the lives of all of the people that he saw, that the instruction of the Word needed to come in public and in private in a very personal manner. He was a Word-centered man.

But notice, fifthly, that he's a Spirit-led man. He's a Spirit-led man. It says in verse 22, "Now behold, I am going to Jerusalem constrained by the Spirit." One of the temptations in pastoral ministry is to be overly calculated. You can be overly calculated. You can be so precise and so planned that the sense of the wooing of the Spirit and where He has taken you has been squelched and oftentimes lost because even in our good and blessed five and ten year plans, which are good and right, the Lord often takes us to a Jerusalem where we know over that hill there's imprisonment, there's affliction, there is loss of public reputation, there is pain, there is difficulty, there is challenge, and so help me God, by the Spirit I must go there. And since even as you're headed to England, to a place where the Lord, we pray, would do a mighty work through you and would bring revival to that country, to listen to the promptings of the Spirit, even as we heard from a dear brother this morning, from his wife, who knew that the Bible should be given to the man with the gun who's life seems to be threatened — no, we need to turn around and we need to go give the Word of God to that man — be constrained only by the Spirit and by the Word of God. And let these be your guide. Let this be your rule for all faith and practice.

And notice sixthly and finally, that Paul is a single devoted man. He is only about one thing. Look at verse 24 — "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 Christ to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God." There's only one thing that you're called to do, Josh. There's only one thing. There is a one, single-minded focus to faithful ministry, that finishing the course that the ministry of Christ has given you to testify of the Gospel of the grace of God. There will be many who whisper in your ear about many other avenues and areas and influences that you can have, but there's one calling the apostle Paul says here. There's many things to distract you, but there's one calling that's said here. It's a single-minded devotion that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ would be praised in everything that I do in word and in life — a single-minded devotion.

Now I hope, as you're overhearing a discussion, you're saying, "I want that to be the nature of my life. For if a leading servant has been given this call, are not all servants of God given this call — humility of Spirit, love and sincerity for the brethren, a courageousness to reach across the fence to say hello to a neighbor that we've never spoken to that we know doesn't know the Lord and to look for the open doors through which the Gospel of Christ can be proclaimed, to be a people of the Book, that we would believe the Bible, that we would be sensitive to the way the Spirit is moving our hearts even if it's imprisonment and affliction that's ahead?" The only way that you will ever become the person that God has put here, for Josh as a minister, for any of us as servants of the Lord, is that this single-minded devotion of verse 24 will truly be true of us, that we would quite being distracted by the things of this world and that we would be willing to lay everything on the bottom line of the Gospel itself. And we understand that there is nothing of any greater value and so there's nothing that attracts us away from Him. What a tremendous call. What a tremendous call.

And Lord, by Lord's grace, Josh, may God give you, may God give all of us, the privilege and the blessing to see Him work mightily in ways that are far exceeding your abilities, that we would be able to see a gifted man like you and say, "Oh, those aren't gifts. That's the Spirit of God at work." May He be pleased to do that.

Father, You are the only One that we can come to for a request this great and a request this grand, that You would give to us the humility of Spirit, that You would give to us a love and sincerity of the brethren and all people, that You would give to us, Father, a courageousness to be able to walk the trail that You have given us to walk, regardless of what may come our way, that You would make of us a people that hardly know to speak without the words of God rolling off our tongue, that You would make us a people who are sensitive to the inclinations and the guiding of Your Spirit, and who would, from this day forth, be single-minded in their devotion to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, this is our request. It is Your heart. Grant it we pray, by grace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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