

## **Listening to the Heart of God's Greatest Missionary**

### **Acts 20:17-38**

**Introduction:** Last words are meant to be lasting words. They come from the heart and provide a picture of what is most important to us. Paul has called the elders from the church at Ephesus to travel 20 miles south to Miletus to meet with him. He had spent 3 years (v. 31) doing missionary work in the city, winning people to Christ and planting churches. In verse 25 he informs these brothers that he knows this will be the last time he will ever see them. In that light, the words of this missionary/evangelist/church planter/theologian take on added weight and significance. To ensure that the mission in Ephesus and the province of Asia survives and thrives, Paul delivers an address that highlights 10 essentials of faithful and lasting missionary work that are as relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they were in the 1<sup>st</sup>. Paul is incredibly autobiographical in these verses. This is a “soul sermon.” Let’s listen to the heart of God’s greatest missionary and see what we can learn.

#### **I. Live an exemplary life as you proclaim the gospel                      20:17-21**

- The Ephesian elders arrive at the request of Paul and gather to hear what he has to say (vs. 17-18). Paul knows as the leaders go, so goes the church.

- He immediately points to the lesson of his life and the example he set, “You know how I lived.” Note there was a consistency to his example:

- “the whole time”
- “from the first day I set foot”

What he was at the beginning he remained until the end! His life and his teaching were never in doubt.

- His life, he says, can be summed up in 3 words: “Serving the Lord” (v. 19).

What characterized his service? 1) humility, 2) tears and 3) trials.

- Humility – God is king and I am servant. He tells me where to go and what to do and I willingly obey. No bargaining. No negotiation. No debate. I gladly yield my desires and will to His.
- Tears (cf. v. 31) – He knew these people and he sincerely loved them. They mattered to him.
- Trials – (2 Cor. 11:24-33; 2 Tim. 3:12).

- Paul notes further his missionary ministry was one he boldly engaged (“not shrinking back”). And it was one characterized by 1) declaring, 2) teaching and 3) testifying (vs. 20-21). It was public and private, big and small (v. 20). Some call this the “20/20” vision of missionary ministry. And, it was indiscriminate (Jews and Greeks) and gospel-centered (“repentance toward

God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,” v. 21). A whole gospel for the whole world. This is what people saw when they looked at Paul.

- Robert Coleman: “The ultimate goal of Jesus for his disciples was that his life be reproduced in them, and through them into the lives of others” (*Master Plan of Evangelism*, 173). This was Jesus’ goal. It was Paul’s goal too.

## **II. Trust in the providence of God wherever He leads                    20:22-23**

- Paul looked back in verses 17-21. Now he looks forward in verses 22-23.
- As he considers his future he is certain:
  - 1) It is completely in the hands of the Holy Spirit (v. 22).
  - 2) He has no idea in terms of the details what is going to happen (v. 22).
  - 3) The Spirit has let him know (v. 23) that his course (race, v. 24) will involve “in every city” both “imprisonment and afflictions (*NIV*, “hardships”).
- Ministry has been tough in the past and it will be tough in the future. Count on it. This is God’s missionary promise to his apostle.
- And, note and don’t miss this. Paul is content not to know the details and the specifics! God has been faithful to me and I will remain faithful to him come what may.

- Some may tell us to put away from our minds the high cost of following Jesus. Paul says, “not on your life.” Knowing that the Spirit ordains it, I embrace it knowing “I can do all things thru Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).
- Adoniram Judson: “If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite mercy and love, I could not have survived my [many] sufferings” (*EGT*, 284).

### **III. Don't live a wasted life**

**20:24**

- This may be the most important verse in this passage. In many ways it serves as the missionary motto or manifesto.
- Prison and suffering is in my future and it doesn't matter. “I do not account my life 1) of any value to me or 2) precious to me.” My life is not what matters. Faithfulness to Christ is what matters. I only want one thing: “to finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” There is only one other place where Paul talks like this and that is in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. There is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved his appearing.”

- The bottom-line for the servant of God is clear: faithfulness is better than life. Faithfulness to Christ and the gospel is better than the attractions and stuff this world offers.
- John Piper puts this in the context of “going against the American dream and how an imagery antagonist might confront Paul in our day and his take on serving Jesus.” “But Paul, you’re getting old. How ‘bout a little cottage on the Aegean Sea? You’ve already done more in your ministry than most people could do in five lifetimes. It’s time to rest. Let the last 20 years of your life be travel and golf and puttering around. Let Timothy have a chance. He’s young. For goodness sake, don’t go to Jerusalem. Don’t go to Rome. And give up that crazy plan at your age to go to Spain. You could get yourself killed. It isn’t...American! It’s not the American dream of what to do with the last years of your life.

[Paul’s response:] Faithfulness is better than life! Better than leisure life in retirement, better than leisure life in the middle years, and better than leisure life in youth. Do you want to hear some of the definitions of “retire” from my Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary? “To withdraw from action or danger.” “To fall back.” “To go to bed.” “To march away from the enemy.” It may be the American dream, but it has no foundation in Scripture at all.”

(“Faithfulness is better than Life,” 4-9-89).

- I love the words of David Livingstone: “God had an only Son and he was a missionary. A poor, poor example of him I am. But in this work I now live. And, in this work, I wish to die.” (*EGT*, 49). Don’t live a wasted life.

#### **IV. Be faithful to the ministry God gives you**

**20:25-27**

- Paul writes these words with a heavy heart. He knows “that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again” (v. 25).
- This reality leads Paul to reflect for a moment upon his ministry in Asia. Having done so, he is able to declare or testify to two things: 1) “I am innocent of the blood of all of you” and 2) “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (cf. v. 20).
- I believe all of this ties together. Paul held back nothing that was profitable (v. 20) because he declared “the whole counsel of God.” And because he declared the whole counsel of God “in public and from house to house” (v. 20) “both to Jews and Greeks” (v. 21), he was innocent of the blood of all.
- We must not miss Paul’s point of conviction. It is possible to be guilty of the blood (the eternal loss of salvation) of another person. How? The answer is simple: we do not share the gospel and tell them the truth even though the Spirit leads us to and God gives us the opportunity. I suspect Paul had Ezekiel 33:7-9 in his mind when he said these words. There the

prophet says, “As for you, son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, give them a warning from me. If I say to the wicked ‘wicked one, you will surely die,’ but you do not speak out to warn him about his way, that wicked person will die for his iniquity, yet I will hold you responsible for his blood. But if you warn a wicked person to turn from his way and he doesn’t turn from it, he will die for his iniquity, but you will have rescued yourself.”

- Being faithful to the ministry requires at least 2 things: First, a courageous life to speak the truth. Second, sound doctrine that knows the truth.

Innocence of the blood of others requires us to know the truth and speak the truth. Both are necessary. Both are essential.

- Charles Spurgeon, “If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our bodies. If they perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees. Let no one go there unwarned and unprayed for” (*EGT*, 252).

#### **V. Protect the people of God from the wolves**

**20:28-31**

- Verse 28 contains the first imperative and direct exhortation Paul gives to the Ephesian elders. There is a second one in v. 31. “Pay careful attention” (v. 28). “Be alert” (v. 31).

- Paul calls us to vigilance both for ourselves and “all the flock” which the Holy Spirit has made us overseers (*episkopos*) to care (“shepherd,” *poimainein*) for the church of God” (v. 28).
- The cause or necessity of this charge is provided in verses 29-30: wolves! “Fierce wolves,” “savage wolves” (*CSB*) will come in” from the outside, but also from the inside, “from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw the disciples after them.” Jesus warned us of “ravenous wolves in sheeps clothing” (Matt. 7:15), calling them “false prophets.” So pay attention. Be alert. And, when you spot a wolf “kill it.” Take it out. It is up to no good and it will not “spare the flock.”
- Paul warned the Ephesians 1) for 3 years, 2) night and day, 3) admonishing with tears (v. 31). The issue is serious! It is deadly so. This is why those who go to the mission field and plant churches must be both missionary and theologian. They must be an expert in wolfology! Christ obtained the church “with his own blood” (v. 28). What is precious to our God must be precious to us.
- C.S. Lewis is right: “There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.” (*EGT*, 191). So pay attention. Be alert. Wolves are on the prowl.

## **VI. Trust the Word to do its work**

**20:32**



- Verse 32 flows naturally from verse 31. How do we detect and destroy the ravenous wolves? The Word of God! The “word of his grace” the “whole counsel of God” will expose the wolves every time. So know it and use it!
- The result? Two-fold: 1) it will build you up (it is profitable, v. 20) and 2) it will give you an “inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” To be built up is to be sanctified and to understand and enjoy the fullness of our salvation inheritance. Such an inheritance will take away the love of money (v. 33-34) and the love of the things of this world (v. 24).
- When describing the success of the Reformation, Martin Luther pointed to the Word of God. In a sermon preached on March 22, 1522, he says, “In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no one by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word, otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26-29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.... I did nothing; I let the Word do its work.”

## **VII. Serve with proper motivation**

**20:33-34**

- God is not only concerned that we do the right thing. He is also concerned we do the right thing with the right motivation. Paul declares boldly and without equivocation that money was not his motive. He coveted neither money nor clothes (v. 33). When called upon, he worked (he was often bi-vocational) to meet his own needs as well as the needs of others (v. 34).
- Piper is right, “The main point is that Paul did not want to get rich off anyone at Ephesus. Instead he wanted to meet people’s needs. He wanted to make people rich with Jesus Christ” (“I Entrust You to God and to the Word of His Grace,” 4-30-89). Paul was definitely interested in riches. Not his, but others.
- The words of David Brainerd are concise and right on target, “All my desire was the conversion of the heathen. ...I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went through, so that I could but gain souls to Christ. I declare, now I am dying, I would not have spent my life otherwise for the whole world.” (*EGT*, 179).

## **VIII. Be generous in giving and helping others**

**20:34-35**

- Missionaries do whatever is necessary to reach the people God sends them to. “Whatever it takes” is embedded in their ministry DNA. Paul was more than willing to work with his own hands “to minister to [his] necessities and to

those who were with [him]” (v. 34). This also allowed him to show visibility and concretely the importance of “working hard to help the weak” (the poor) (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 5:14).

- Paul’s missiological concern for the weak or poor is important. It is something he got from Jesus who said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” This saying of our Lord is not found in the gospels, but was obviously well known among His disciples.
- Believing it is more blessed to give than receive will cut clean the root of selfishness and greed. It gives the servant of God “a noble indifference to money” (Piper, “I Entrust You to God...”, 4-30-89). The needs of others becomes a greater concern than your own. This after all, was the heart of our Savior who said in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- David Livingstone: “Do not think me mad. It is not to make money that I believe a Christian should live. The noblest thing a man can do is, just humbly to receive, and then go amongst others and give” (*EGT*, 95).

## **IX. Pray with and for others**

**20:36**

- Paul concludes his address to the Ephesian elders. He has shared his heart and laid bare his soul. There is only one thing left that needs to be done: pray.

- Paul drops to his knees, the others joined him, and he “prayed with them all” (v. 36). Everything was committed to the Lord.
- A.B. Simpson says, “Prayer is the mighty engine that is to move the missionary work (*EGT*, 215).
- A.T. Pierson says, “Every step in the progress of missions is directly traceable to prayer (*EGT*, 219).
- James O. Fraser says, “Solid lasting missionary work is done on our knees” (*EGT*, 233).

#### **X. Do not be afraid to shed some tears**

**20:37-38**

- The prayers of Paul and the Elders were accompanied by “much weeping on the part of all” as well as “kisses” of brother affection (v. 37). Knowing they would never see him again was more than they could bare (v. 38). The men who gathered on this occasion had no shame in weeping before the Lord and with one another. John Piper says, “serving the Lord means getting so intensely involved in people’s struggles that you cry over them” (“Serving the Lord with Humility, Tears, and Trials, 4-2-89).
- Billy Graham: “Tears shed for self are tears of weakness, but tears shed for others are a sign of strength.”
- Tears, prayers and missions are wonderful companions in the eyes of God. We should join them together more often.

**Conclusion:** “I do not account my life of any value nor 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.”

- No wasted life here!
- What a way to live!
- What a way to end!
- Give me this life!
- Give me this end!