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A Fond Farewell

Acts 20:13-38

Intro: After his extensive ministry in Ephesus, Paul has made a final farewell tour of the churches in Macedonia and then in Greece and now he and his team are on their way to Jerusalem. Paul had planned to be in Jerusalem for Passover but a plot to murder him had been discovered in Corinth so the timetable for Passover was lost and a new one was set for Pentecost. Instead of sailing out of Corinth, Paul traveled overland to Philippi and sailed from there to Troas for a 7 day layover. While there, Luke provides a general account of a typical 1st Century worship service. In it we saw the Lord's people meeting on the Lord's Day to hear the Lord's message and observe the Lord's Supper. In the middle of all this, the congregation also experienced the Lord's power in a tangible way. After all the goodbyes were said, the ministry team continued on their journey.

13-17 – There are 50 days between Passover and Pentecost and Paul's trip from Philippi to Troas had already used up 12 of them. It took another 4 days to get to Miletus so Paul decided not to go to Ephesus. He knew it would be impossible for him to have a short visit there and he couldn't afford to lose anymore valuable time. But, even though he couldn't go to Ephesus, Paul still wanted to pour his heart into the leaders of the Ephesian church one last time. So, he invited the elders from Ephesus to come and meet with him in Miletus while they waited for the ship to off load cargo and take on more. Paul calls for them to travel the 30 miles from Ephesus to come for a special meeting.

Luke records at least 8 speeches given by the Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts. Of all these speeches, the one we have come to in **ch20** is unique as it's the only one that Paul delivers exclusively to Christians. Most of the time in Acts we see Paul the evangelist but here in **ch20** we get a good look at Paul the pastor and we discover what was important to him as a leader and shepherd of God's people. Of course, we see him in 2 different but very important lights. We see him in public at Troas, leading the worship of the church. Then we see him in a private setting as he meets with the Ephesian elders. This chapter is a treasure of insight into the person of Paul the Apostle. Since Paul is addressing believers, it's no surprise that there are

quite a few parallels in this with some of his later letters.

This passage is known as “Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders,” and it has 3 parts: Paul’s personal testimony, his specific charge to the elders, and his prayer on their behalf. Paul’s testimony is given in 18-24 and 33-35. It’s in 2 parts because it’s interrupted by his charge to the elders. This testimony is helpful because Paul, nearing the end of his ministry with these people, is looking back and pointing out, not in a boastful way but in an honest way, what he considered to have been the important aspects of his ministry, those that were blessed by God and those which he praised God for. These characteristics should be present in every believer’s life, minister or otherwise.

18-24 – In giving his personal testimony, Paul calls attention to himself as an example. This may seem odd to our modern Christian ears. We are taught from God’s Word to look to Jesus as our example to follow. But, we also must remember that in Paul’s day, the churches didn’t have the written record of Christ’s life and ministry, His teachings and exhortations. All that information about who Jesus is and what He is like would come much later. At this time, all believers had to go by were doctrines, principles and sermons from the OT that shed light on the person and work of Jesus Christ and the demonstration of this truth in the lives of those who carried the message of the gospel. Paul did not offer himself as an example instead of Jesus, but as an example as he followed Jesus (1 Cor 11:1).

The first thing Paul mentions is his humble approach to ministry (19). Humility is important for ministers because the opposite of humility is pride, and pride is a great danger for those in prominent positions of leadership. It’s a danger for anyone, but particularly so for those who stand up and preach the Word effectively. A minister has to learn early on how to deal with praise and actually grow in humility rather than in pride. This doesn’t mean they must always be talking about humility but it should be present in all aspects of their ministry, not just in their preaching.

At one of the Pastor’s Conferences in GA, a pastor from a Calvary Chapel in VA gave a presentation on the need for missions in the local church. He was sharing anecdotes from some of the experiences they had had in their mission efforts. Once, they had a small team visiting believers in Nepal. After dinner one evening, the pastor and a few of his guys got up to wash

the dishes. The Nepalese Christians were kind of taken aback by this because in their country, even with what little Christian presence there was, church leaders tended to be served by others. The American pastor assured them that they didn't come there to be served but to serve them and proceeded to do so. I don't know if it was a cultural expectation but it isn't a biblical expectation. Of course, we can't hang this sad cultural deficiency on the Nepalese believers – it's a problem in all areas of the church, even in or especially in Western Christianity.

Paul had learned this early on in his Christian experience. He had been humbled by God when he first met Him on the road to Damascus but then Paul humbled himself before God as he began to minister to Him. As a result, Paul knew he was no different from anyone else. He was just a sinner saved by grace. If he had gifts to use in ministry, they were gifts given to him by God. He applied this truth to himself in [1 Cor 4:7](#). It would make a great difference in the lives of many workers if they could only learn to think of their gifts like that.

The next thing Paul says about himself is that not only did he serve with humility, he did so with tears. This doesn't mean Paul was a "weepy" type of person, given to frequent outbursts of emotion. It merely means that he possessed a healthy dose of empathy - he learned to identify with those he ministered to. In Romans, we're exhorted to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep ([Rom 12:15](#)). Paul did this. If somebody was happy, he was happy with them because he was happy for them. If someone was hurt, Paul wept with them because he identified with them and could understand what they were going through, having experienced enough sorrow of his own. This probably had a lot to do with Paul's success in planting churches. The people he ministered to recognized there was something in Paul's nature that they did not see in the world around them.

Next, Paul declares his primary function as a Christian minister: to preach and teach the Bible. He says a quite a bit about his preaching because that's what he was mainly called to do. He did this publicly ([20](#)) (school of Tyrannus [[19:9](#)]), and privately - from house to house ([20](#)). While most, if not all, church met in homes, Paul was not above meeting with people individually and sharing the truth of God's Word. This is important because what happens on a one-on-one basis or in small groups is often of much greater significance on a personal level than what happens in large

meetings. Paul preached to everybody: Jews and Greeks (21a). The gospel is universal and Jesus Christ is a universal Savior so Paul spoke about Jesus to everyone – to those who would listen and to those who wouldn't.

Paul's preaching was consistently to the point (21b). Repentance means turning from sin. Faith in Jesus means believing in Him alone for salvation. That's pointed preaching, the only kind that does any good. Some preaching is so general and some references to sin are so indirect that hardly anyone is ever offended. If they can't be offended, then how can they turn from sin, since they haven't even recognized that they're guilty of it? Paul's preaching was pointed, and God blessed it. His preaching was also comprehensive (27). It wasn't just a simple gospel message but covered the whole counsel of God. Paul shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. You could say his goal in ministry was to build up whole Christians to carry the whole gospel to the whole world.

The next important aspect of Paul's ministry was that he had a proper set of priorities (22-24). Paul gives a similar testimony in Phil 3:13-14. This is an elaboration of what he says to these Ephesian elders. It shows that his priorities involved forgetting what was behind—the failures, temptations, weaknesses, even the achievements—and instead pressing forward to the things God still had planned for him, always having his eye on the prize that God had called him to in Jesus Christ. One reason why many believers aren't more effective in their Christian lives is that they don't have their priorities in order. Most value their lives far more than their witness or they value the praise of men far more than the approval of God.

25-31 – The 2nd part of Paul's speech is his charge to the elders. It is here that Paul has to break the bad news – they were never going to see him again, at least not on earth. This would have been a bombshell to these elders. These men would have had a close, loving and respectful relationship with Paul, having spent the better part of 3 years with him, hearing him preach and teach nearly every day. That amount of time and that kind of effective ministry builds bonds of fellowship and friendship that are enduring and not easily set aside. But, Paul had a calling on his life and these elders also had a calling and Paul now needs to establish their calling clearly in their hearts.

He says it in different ways, but basically it boils down to one thing: Keep

watch over the flock you've been given (28). Paul uses the word "overseer" (episkopos). Paul's not referring to certain order of clergy (bishop). He's saying that the elders of a church have a responsibility for the oversight of Christians in their area. He's saying, "If you've been elected or appointed to this responsible position in the church, then make sure you do the job for which you've been elected. Which is?"

1st) they're to keep watch over themselves meaning keep their lives upright and their relationships to God strong. The godly leader knows that effective leadership flows from a life, not just knowledge. 2nd) having done that, they're to look out for the flock. The image of a flock and its shepherd was important in the teaching of Jesus. He often spoke of Himself as the Shepherd. Paul is instructing them to imitate Jesus. Their job was to care for the sheep—not let them wander away, watch out for their health, defend them from enemies, etc. They were to do this because the flock was not theirs, it was God's. It's a flock Jesus purchased with His blood.

Any responsible person is going to take greater care of something that belongs to someone else. The dangers were real: wolves from outside the church would viciously attack the people of God and try to take down as many as they could. From inside the church, some will pervert the truth in order to gain a following for themselves. Their method would be to twist the truth and their motivation will be egotistical pride. The elders were to be overseers of the flock so that no one from outside the church or inside the church could damage the flock that Jesus died for. To do this effectively, they needed to approach their responsibility with the same heart of compassion Paul showed while there.

32-35 – The final thing Paul says about himself is that he labored without greed and that he demonstrated his concern for the Ephesians by working hard for his own upkeep and for that of others as well. Apparently, when Paul wasn't teaching at the school or preaching in the marketplace or visiting from house-to-house, he was working to support himself and those of his team. I'm sure they worked too. The point is, although Paul could have requested a weekly stipend from the church to help with the bills, it was more important for him to be an example for the elders in that fledgling church. Leaders must be more concerned with what they can give their flock than what the flock can give them. Paul wasn't too important to get his hands dirty (19:12).

36-38 – The final part of Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders is his prayer for them. We don’t have it recorded in so many words but if pressed, I’d say Paul’s prayer probably sounded a lot like what he said to them in **vs32**. Paul had given his all for 3 years to the believers in Ephesus and now, all that was left for him to do was to entrust them to God and the word of His grace. Paul knew there was trouble ahead for him and for the Ephesian church and Paul couldn’t do anything about that but he knew that God and His Word would see them all through. Paul had done all he could do now he must leave them in God’s hands to do what only God can do.

Paul did this by praying for them. Paul wasn’t a cold dispenser of doctrine, he was a warm, compassionate pastor who loved his people greatly and received great love from them. This scene in particular reveals the brokenness they all were experiencing over Paul’s departure. But, as sad as this parting was, Paul knew he wasn’t leaving them alone, just as he knew he would never be alone. He knew they had everything they needed for continued success in ministry in Ephesus and the region of Asia. God would, through His Word, build them up and give them a portion in the inheritance that belongs to all of God’s children. Paul was leaving them in very capable hands.

Did God hear this prayer? He heard it and answered it, because the church in Ephesus was strong and survived to be an effective witness in Asia for many years. In fact, some 30-40 years later, Jesus sent a letter to the church in Ephesus complimenting them on many things. Yes, they had some problems that were addressed but overall, they had followed Paul’s instructions and had lived up to their responsibilities as overseers and, with God’s help, had protected God’s flock from many dangers.

There is no place for pride in Christian ministry or in the Christian life, for that matter. There are a lot of successful ministries doing quite a lot of good work around the world. These efforts are constantly being pushed back against by the forces of spiritual darkness. But, the greatest danger to any ministry of Christian walk is the unfortunate belief that we actually had something to do with it. Jesus never allowed for the taking of credit by any of His disciples. In fact, it’s just the opposite (**Lk 17:10**).

No matter what we do for Jesus in this life, we’re at best, unprofitable

servants. This title accurately describes the sum total of all our efforts for the Lord. This is because it is the Lord that gives us the faith to believe; the opportunity and courage to serve; the wisdom to see it, the strength to do it and ultimately, it is the Lord that gives us the victory. Jesus rightly told us in [John 15:5](#) that, “without Me, you can do nothing...” There is no allowance for pride.

Whatever results from the ministry of Grace Chapel, whether we affect a multitude of lives or just a few, whatever comes of our presence here in Houma, there's 1 verse that should be declared over all of our efforts and successes – [Ps 118:23](#), “This was the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” If you are concerned with the context of that verse; it was written in reference to the stone that was rejected by the builders becoming the chief cornerstone. Jesus used this verse to describe His life and death as the glorious fulfillment of God's will and plan for salvation. If there was ever a person who deserved to take credit for His efforts for the Lord – it would be Jesus. But He refused to do it, instead giving all the glory to the Father. This was true in Jesus' life. It was true in Paul's life. It is true in the life of this church and it is also true in my life and yours.

Paul could rightly offer himself as an example to follow because he was following hard after Jesus. Can the same be said of us? Just like Paul, each of us can be good examples of how to live the Christian life. There is no good reason for us not to be. We are called to be living epistles, ([II Cor 3:2-3](#)) not just as an example to lost humanity but to the spiritual powers as well ([Eph 3:10](#)). Angelic beings are interested in and instructed by the lives of Christians. This is why the conduct of the church is so important: because angelic and demonic beings are looking on and God's desire is to teach them through us. ☺