

SHOW THE WAY

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.



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Acts 20:17-38
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Acts 20:17-38

Have you ever gotten into a certain routine that maybe felt like a treadmill? You go about your days, your weeks, even your years, and maybe, finally, you wonder why it is you're doing what you're doing. Or maybe you question whether you should even be doing what you're doing. Or maybe you have the sense that you should be wondering about such questions, but well, maybe you'll get around to it someday.

Maybe today's the day because we're going to hear from someone who had certain priorities and had no problem telling a certain group of people what their priorities should be. The apostle Paul has much to say in Acts 20, but in the end, I'd like for us to evaluate our routines in light of three of his priorities.

This is Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. He instructs them both by way of personal example, mostly in verses 18 to 27, and exhortation, mostly in verses 28 to 35. Paul reminds the elders of what he did when he was with them, and he tells them what to do in his absence.

The passage has special significance to me. When I was first studying to be a pastor, I poured over it, believing that it would point me in the right direction. Through the years, I have returned to it, believing that it would redirect me if perchance I had wandered off course. In recent days, I have sought them out again, and they have shown the way. I have found these words to a reliable guide, and I commend them to you.

Being with them

Acts 20:17-21:

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 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, 19 serving the Lord with all humility

and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul was present with the Ephesian elders—literally, he was “with” them—from the time he arrived in their city until the time he left. Moreover, he was with them in a certain way: primarily, he was serving the Lord. For Paul, serving the Lord meant not only love for the Lord but also love for the elders, which manifested itself in “humility,” not dominance; “tears” on their behalf, not indifference; and willingness to endure “trials,” not eagerness to withdraw. Some might have shrunk from telling the elders what they needed to hear, not only because doing so could earn the wrath of persecutors but also because not everyone wants to hear the whole truth. Not Paul: he loved the Lord, and he loved them.

For Paul, love is not simply an attitude; it is also an action. How did Paul serve the Lord? What did he do because he loved the Ephesian elders? He imparted to them what was “profitable” in two ways, both declaring, or announcing, the truth and teaching the truth. Moreover, he did so in two kinds of places, in public—in the open air, in the synagogue, in the hall of Tyrannus—and in private homes. Furthermore, he imparted truth to two kinds of people, which together constitute all kinds of people: Jews and Gentiles.

What's so profitable that it inspires Paul to risk his life and to apply such a thoroughgoing approach? It's the Gospel message, which commands “repentance toward God” and “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Repentance means, first of all, a turning away from false hope, and in this case, it also involves a turning toward God, who inspires true hope. Turning toward God, then, is complete when one believes in, or gives his or her allegiance to, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bound by the Spirit

Acts 20:22-27:

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 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, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. 25 And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, 27 for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Paul says the Holy Spirit is doing two things: constraining him and testifying to him. The Spirit is constraining him—literally, the Spirit has bound him—so that he knows he has no choice but to go to Jerusalem. Luke doesn't say why the Spirit directed Paul to go to Jerusalem. He notes that Paul wanted to get to Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost, a Jewish feast (Acts 20:16). We know from Romans 15:23-25 and 1 Corinthians 16:4 that taking a collection for Jerusalem is a major reason for his trip.

The Spirit has not only “bound” Paul to go to Jerusalem but also literally testifies to him repeatedly that “bonds” and afflictions await him in Jerusalem. The Spirit binds him, in a divine way, so that he might be bound, in a human way. The Spirit is leading Paul into suffering. Paul has testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance and faith, and the Spirit has testified to him that he will be imprisoned and afflicted.

Paul has no problem with this. Why? Because his life doesn't matter to him. Whether he suffers or doesn't suffer—and even whether he lives or dies—doesn't matter to him. What matters to him is finishing his “course,” evidently the course that was divinely marked out for him, and the “ministry” that Jesus gave him. Paul knows that his course will take him to Jerusalem, and if imprisonment and afflictions await him in Jerusalem, and they serve his ministry, so be it. Like Jesus, Paul sets his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).

Paul's ministry is to “testify to the Gospel of the grace of God.” There's that word “testify” again. Paul knows what he's about.

Once again, Paul reminds the elders, this time based on the premise that he doesn't expect them to see him again, that he did not “shrink from declaring” to them the Gospel. In this light, he maintains that he is “innocent of the blood of all.” Now, in his absence, by implication, they have every incentive to carry on as ministers of the Gospel. Paul now calls the Gospel “the whole counsel of God” because it commands both repentance and faith.

Having reminded the elders of how he was with them, Paul now turns to exhortation.

Be watchful shepherds

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. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

Although the Holy Spirit has made the elders overseers of the flock, Paul instructs them first not to shepherd the flock but to “pay careful attention” to themselves. Their first task, as those entrusted with responsibility for others, is to be watchful concerning their own spiritual lives. Second, the elders are to pay careful attention to “all the flock,” not only to individuals in the flock but also to the flock as a whole, keeping in mind what's best for the community. Their calling could not be higher, in that the flock they are commissioned to shepherd was obtained with God's own blood—that is, the blood of his Son.

Paul is particularly concerned that his departure will leave an opening for “fierce wolves,” false teachers who are hungry for a following. Although Paul calls them fierce, they will employ subtle tactics, not necessarily contradicting the truth but twisting it to make it sound more appealing.

Having told the elders to “pay careful attention” both to themselves and to the flock, Paul now simply instructs them literally to “watch,” which involves attentiveness both to their spiritual lives and the spiritual lives of the flock but now also watchfulness for threats to the flock coming from false teachers who twist the truth. Again, how Paul was with them—ceaselessly admonishing “every one with tears”—is an example for them.

Although Paul warns the elders about threats to their well-being and the well-being of the church, he nevertheless has confidence that God will take care of them.

Commending them to God

Acts 20:32-35:

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. 33 I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. 34 You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. 35 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.’”

How can Paul leave these people he loves so much when he knows that fierce wolves will come in among them, not sparing the flock? First, because the Spirit is leading him, even constraining him, to leave, and second, because he believes in the power of God and the power of the “word of his grace”—that is, the Gospel. Paul entrusts them to God, who can care for them better than he can, especially by calling other shepherds. He also entrusts them to the Gospel, which he has communicated to them in multiple ways.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that the Gospel, the good news concerning the victory of God over evil, is “the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes”—in this case, for everyone who already believes (Romans 1:16). The Gospel can continue to do its work in Ephesus, strengthening the faith of men and women, especially by promising them, and eventually giving them, the “inheritance,” which is the new promised land: the new creation.

Finally, in contrast to fierce wolves who seek to “draw away the disciples after them,” Paul reminds the elders that he sought not to profit from people in any way. He worked to earn his keep and, in so doing, demonstrated for the elders the necessity of helping “the weak,” those who were unable to earn their keep. In this, he was putting into practice the words of Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”—words that are not recorded in the Gospels but which Paul was aware of nonetheless. [John observes, at the end of his Gospel, that Jesus did many things that were not recorded in his Gospel (John 21:25).]

All that remains, after Paul has said his piece, is the parting of ways.

Powerful bond

Acts 20:36-38:

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, 38 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.

The Gospel has formed a powerful bond of love between Paul and the elders so that when they have to part, and it appears as if they won’t see each other again, both Paul and the elders come undone.

Let’s evaluate our routines in light of three of Paul’s priorities.

Offer your life to God

We would do well to embrace Paul’s words in verse 24: “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself.” That is not to say, of course, that our lives have no value. It is to say that we should not consider them as being valuable to us. Our lives are valuable, even precious: they are valuable and precious to God. If that is true, the primary question then becomes not “What do I want to do with my life?” but “What does God want to do with my life?”

That may seem like a risky question—unless of course, God, as your creator and redeemer, knows you better than you know yourself and loves you more than you can possibly know. To ask God what he wants to do with your life instead of asking yourself what you want

to do with your life takes a burden off your shoulders. The emphasis, then, is not figuring your self out; the emphasis is offering your life to God.

If there is a specific “course” that God has for you, then you trust that he will mark it out for you. If there is a specific “ministry” that he has for you, then you trust that he will give it to you. If you don’t know the specific course or ministry, then you trust that you don’t need to know—not now, anyway.

Even if you can see the course that God has marked out for you and you know the nature of the ministry that he has given you, much remains uncertain. Note that Paul, though bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, did not know what would happen to him there. Then again, if you believe that your life is valuable and to precious to God and not to you, it doesn’t matter to you what happens to you.

Your life isn’t valuable or precious to you; it’s valuable and precious to God. Offer yourself to him, and watch what he does.

‘What do you want to do with the life?’

Charlie Luce had wrapped up his career at General Electric. He had finished his long tenure as an elder of this church. He had lost his beloved wife Roberta to cancer after forty-two years of marriage. He suffered two strokes but, to his surprise, recovered. What do to? Charlie asked the Lord, “What do you want to do with the life?” It turned out, by the way, that Charlie had twenty more years to go. [I always wondered—but never asked him—why Charlie referred to his life as “the life.” Then, when I was studying Acts 20, I noticed that a literal translation of verse 24 would read, “But I do not account the life of any value nor as precious to myself. . . .” I don’t know whether Charlie got it from Paul, but when I read Paul, it made me think of Charlie.] Charlie discerned that the Lord wanted him to encourage younger men.

I was one of them. I was just starting out as a pastor here when Charlie invited me over to his house, served me lunch, and well, he encouraged me. Later, when I was particularly troubled, I called Charlie, and he set me straight.

In particular, Charlie encouraged Chi Wong, a member of our church. Charlie met with Chi twice a month for seven years, up until the time Charlie moved to South Carolina to be near family in his final years. “I was encouraged by how Charlie brought the Lord into everything and by his ability to think biblically about

each topic,” Chi says. “Most of all, though, I felt that he loved and cared for me and wanted to ‘walk alongside’ me in my journey.”

Four years ago, when Charlie was hospitalized, Chi was able to visit him for what Chi calls “a rich time of fellowship.”

Chi observes:

I have often wondered about God’s purposes in life events, only to see them later retrospectively as God’s appointed times. I believe that the Lord appointed the last meeting Charlie and I had in the hospital to allow us to reconnect just as a father and son would in the final days. I now have come to understand that the time Charlie had walked alongside me was an appointed time used by the Lord to demonstrate what Christian fatherhood looks like. I was not raised in a Christian family, but now having a family myself, and desiring to raise Christian children, I realize how precious those years were for my own preparation. I thank God for this and for Charlie’s life.

A few days after Chi’s visit, Charlie died. He was ninety-six. He spent the last twenty years of his life encouraging younger men, right up to the end. He finished his course and the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus.

All of our courses and ministries are different. If God has called you as a shepherd or an elder, then Paul’s words to the Ephesian elders, both by way of example and exhortation, will have more particular application. However, there is something here for everyone.

Pay attention to your life

Our first task, whatever our course or ministry, is not to proceed down the course or do the ministry. What is Paul’s first word of exhortation to the Ephesian elders? “Pay careful attention to yourselves” Our first task, as those entrusted with any responsibility, is to be watchful concerning our own spiritual lives. Your primary mission is not your mission. Your primary mission is to know God.

Many believers have become so consumed with their “responsibilities” that they have lost sight of their relationship with the Lord, forgetting that it is God’s love for them that motivates service to others: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The particular danger for those whose vocation is overtly “spiritual” (correctly understood, all vocations are spiritual) is that

they will substitute their “ministry” for their relationship with the Lord and even relate to the Lord through their ministry. More than one pastor, endeavoring to guard their flocks against the fierce wolves, didn’t notice the fierce wolves that were poised to pick them off.

One of the ways to be watchful concerning your spiritual life is to “pay careful attention” to what’s going on in your life and to your surroundings because God is making himself known to you through them. Writer Frederick Buechner observes:

If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.” (87).

If you pay attention to what’s going on in your life and to your surroundings, God will reveal himself to you, sometimes in obvious ways that take your breath away, more often in subtle, artistic ways that make you smile.

‘What book are you reading?’

Every night, I go to bed as a believer. Every morning, I wake up as an agnostic. My first thought in the morning usually has nothing to do with God. If all goes well, I manage to spend some time with the Lord in the morning. At some point, I usually ask him to make me watchful for him throughout the day. On occasion, he has answered my prayer right away.

If the weather cooperates, I’ll spend some time on my front porch in the morning, sometimes in a warm sweatshirt. Being outside helps me to be watchful. There’s so much to see and hear and feel and smell, especially at this time of year. Two weeks ago, I was sitting on my porch with my Bible in my hand when a couple walked by whom I had never seen before. (That’s another reason for sitting on the porch: people walk by.) They noticed me.

“What book are you reading?” the woman asked me.
“The Bible,” I answered.
“What passage?”
“Acts 20. I’m preaching it at my church in two weeks.”
“What church?”
“Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto.”

Well, she knew about PBC. She said that only recently she was giving thanks to God for someone from PBC who had helped her years ago. We chatted a little more; then they were on their way.

“Happy Easter,” I said.

“He is risen!” she said.

“He is risen indeed!” I answered.

God revealed himself to me that morning by giving me a little gift, a serendipitous connection with a sister in Christ to start my day. I walked back into the house, shaking my head and smiling, for once again, I saw my life “for the fathomless mystery that it is.”

Go to them

Whatever your course or ministry, it’s likely to involve people. In fact, you might want to make relationship with people a priority. Note that Paul was “with” the Ephesians “the whole time from the first day” that he arrived in Asia. Note also that as he was leaving, there was “much weeping on the part of all.” Paul formed deep relationships. He spoke, yes, especially concerning the Gospel, but he could only speak to them because he was with them.

Today, of course, we have all sorts of ways of being with people without actually being in their presence. But don’t underestimate the power of presence.

Before we invited Matt Mikalatos to preach in our *SENT* series, I watched his sermon on the Ethiopian eunuch on line. I thought, “Well, that was a nice sermon.” Then he came here and gave more or less the same sermon, and I thought, “That was awesome!” He was present with us, and for me, that made what he said more powerful. (By the way, Matt will be our speaker at the Fall Retreat, Sept. 29-Oct. 1 at Mission Springs in Scotts Valley).

Don’t get so absorbed in what you’re doing—your course, your ministry, whatever—that you forget about relating. In fact, why don’t you make sure that your course and your ministry include relating?

Ty Cobb was one of the greatest baseball players of all time. When he died, four hundred people attended his funeral but only three men he played with, even though he played for twenty-three years and even though he was only seventy-four when he died. Near the end of his life, Cobb said, “I think if I had my life to live over again, I’d do things a little different And if I had I believe I would have had more friends.”¹

On the other hand, Winnie-the-Pooh, that great philosopher of the forest, observed, “You can’t stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.”²

Visitation ministry

A particular group in this church, in the spirit of Paul (and Winnie-the-Pooh!), consider it their ministry to literally go to others. In fact, they go to others who can’t come to them. They make up the visitation ministry of this church, and they visit the home-bound, the sick, and the dying in homes, hospitals, and care facilities.

Several of them came to a recent elders’ meeting to give us a report. Sometimes elders’ meetings can get pretty heavy as we hear and pray about various heartaches and talk and pray through various challenging issues. These people, though, lit up the room with their stories and their joy, even though you might have thought they were involved in a somewhat depressing ministry. They could hardly stop talking about how much joy it gives them to be with the people they were visiting.

If you’re interested in being part of our visitation ministry, contact George Abraham.

Three priorities

After hearing from Paul, do you have the sense maybe that you’ve wandered off course—or maybe that you never even started down the right course? Has Paul shown you the way? Consider his priorities and whether they should also be your priorities:

Offer your life to God.

Pay attention to your life.

Go to them.

Endnotes

Buechner, Frederick. *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991.

¹ Connor, Anthony J. *Voices from Cooperstown: Baseball’s Hall of Famers Tell it Like it Was*. Galahad Books. 1988. 266.

² Milne, A.A. *Pooh’s Little Instruction Book*. New York: Dutton Publishing, 1995. 52.