

“Paul’s Parting Words”
Acts 20:17-38

Attention: As I thought about the message the Lord would have me bring to you this morning, I thought of some of the places in scripture where “last words” are recorded: David, Solomon, Jesus, Steven, Paul.

It was Paul’s parting words to the Ephesian church that struck a chord with me.

- Paul’s commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ led to the courage to confront obstacles boldly.

- But we often see Paul, and the Christ he proclaimed, only as courageously confronting conflict.

- What about when someone needed encouragement? Like the Savior he served, Paul could also be an encourager, or Comforter.

I’m asking you to look at the life of Paul, but it is more important to see the Spirit of Christ in him.

In Acts 20:17-38, we see Paul the spiritual Warrior as Comforter as he is on way back from his 3rd Missionary journey, and he encourages the leaders of the church at Ephesus. [show map]

In Paul we see reflected the Spirit of Christ in which God comforts all of us as Believers with words of Understanding, Warning and Blessing.

1. As Paul reviews his history with them, he comforts them with words of understanding. v. 17-21

A. God understands the unique role each member has in the church.

Paul concentrated on a small group of leaders: v. 17 "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church."

Paul knew that these key leaders needed special understanding. The H.S. knows your needs.

B. He speaks as one who understands the stresses of serving others. v. 18-19

Acts 20:18-19 (ESV) “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;”

I have tried to serve you in humility, but at times have been arrogant. Forgive me.

I have also loved being a pastor, but sometimes it has been “the hardest job you’ll ever

love". There are, at times, "tears and trials". We need to learn from them, & use the lessons for the future.

C. He understands the varieties of ministries to which God calls people. v. 20-21

"[You know] 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."

All scripture is profitable, but not all is popular. I've always asked God to help me not to shrink from speaking the truth when it was needed.

There are public and private ministries to different kinds of people, but the message of the gospel is the same: repentance and faith.

Someone has said, "A friend is one who knows you as you are, understands where you've been, accepts who you've become and still gently invites you to grow"

ILL: D.L. Moody was one of the greatest Christian evangelists who ever lived. He could hold a crowd in the palm of his hand, won thousands of converts to the faith, and established several religious institutions.

Yet he never displayed the pompous air of self-importance that so many famous evangelists did in that era. He was a tolerant, understanding man who rarely criticized. One of his famous sayings was, "Right now I'm having so much trouble with D.L. Moody that I don't have time to find fault with the other fellow."

On the basis of that single quotation, I know that D.L. Moody would have been a great friend. It would have been relaxing to be around him, for he would have understood that I'm working on my shortcomings. And by that very acceptance, he would have helped me to grow. "People have a way of becoming what you encourage them to be -- not what you nag them to be," someone said, and D.L. Moody was a great encourager.

Translation: Preachers need to comfort Christians with words of understanding, and Paul did this.

2. As Paul considers his future, he encourages the church to remain faithful at all costs. v. 22-27

A. Hardship is expected, but it is seen as an opportunity to put God's Grace on display.

v. 22-24 "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.”

Many of you have asked about my future ministry, and I have answered honestly that I know I will be doing ministry, but I don't know what it will look like. I am still President of Peniel Bible Conference. I may do guest preaching or interim ministry, or hospital chaplaincy. We do, for the present, plan to continue the Couples Bible Study and the Thursday Men's Bible Study.

For the present, I will be finishing completing moving out of 313 Pearl St. and my office here at Bethany. I foolishly told folks I plan to be out by the 31st, but did not ask for any time off to work on it. We hope to have a second Moving Day January 10th.

Whatever the future holds, I know there will be joys and sorrows. As they say, “getting older is not for sissies”, and God does not promise an easy life of service to him, but a joyous and rewarding one.

ILL: One day when the Raiders were in Oakland, a reporter visited their locker room to talk to Ken Stabler. Stabler really wasn't known as an intellectual, but he was a good quarterback. This newspaperman read him some English prose:

"I would rather be ashes than dust.

I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than that it should be stifled by dry rot.

I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy, impermanent planet.

The proper function of man is to live, not to exist.

I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I'll use my time."

After reading this to the quarterback, the reporter asked, "What does this mean to you?"

Stabler immediately replied, "Throw deep."

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Whatever lies ahead for you as a church, “Throw deep”. Hardship is an opportunity to display God's Grace.

At the end of his life, Paul wrote to the pastor of the Ephesian church what I hope to be able to say one day: 2 Timothy 4:7-8 (ESV) “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

B. There is comfort in Paul's encouragement to leaders to teach all the Truth God has revealed.
v. 25-27

"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."

I'm glad that I don't have to say Paul's first sentence, because I will not be far away, but none of us knows the length of our days, or how long it will be before the Lord returns.

But I think I can echo Paul's second sentence. I've tried to be faithful in preaching "the whole counsel of God", all that is in God's Word.

Today there is a great tendency to leave out the less popular parts of the Bible, like sin, hell and the sovereignty of God, but we are warned that we must one day give an account to Him.

There is comfort in knowing you have thoroughly taught all God has revealed.

Be sure to ask candidates for Bethany's next Pastor, "Are there any parts of the Bible you don't believe are true?" If the answer is "Yes", you are talking to someone who has made themselves the authority instead of the revealed Word of God.

trans: Preachers need to comfort Christians with words of understanding, and Paul did this, and as Paul considers his future, he encourages the church to remain faithful at all costs.

3. Finally, Paul warns the church of their future, but comforts them with words of blessing.

A. There is comfort in the warning that although false teachers will try to distort the gospel, God will use faithful servants to protect His church. (vv. 28-31)

1. Leadership in the church is from God. v. 28a "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers".

People don't make themselves Pastors. God makes people pastors. Ask candidates about their call to ministry. I've never known a man to last long in ministry without a clear one.

God called me to ministry with this verse: 1 Corinthians 9:16 (HCSB) "For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because an obligation is placed on me. And woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"

King Jehoshaphat appointed judges in the cities of Judah, and 2 Chronicles 19:6-7 (ESV) says

he “said to the judges, “Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes.”

2. Leadership is humbling because you are called, as v. 28b says, “to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

Christians belong to God, not the pastors, and they were purchased at a great price.

3. Leadership in the church can be dangerous. v. 29-31 "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.”

The greatest threat to the church does not come from outside it, but from within.

God calls church leaders to be alert, and to warn the church of the dangers. I hope I have done this.

ILL: Welch Evangelist Rowland Hill was once walking by a gravel pit outside of town when he saw three laborers caught in a landslide. He began calling for help so powerfully that his voice was heard in the village a mile away! No one questioned his urgent cry in that emergency, but many denounced him as a fanatic when he shouted enthusiastic hallelujahs in his messages, and raised his voice to warn sinners.

B. Paul then comforts the church with words of Blessing. v. 32-37. What protects builders from the dangers is the Grace of God.

v. 32 "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.”

If your safety rests in the idea you have earned God's protection, you are in trouble!
Our claim to God's blessing is Grace alone.

C. Churches are blessed when they follow Christ's example of generous giving.

v. 33-35 "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.’”

Paul was an example of selflessness. He was single, and supported himself as a tentmaker, but always defended his right to be supported by those to whom he ministered.

The operating principle is that all that we have belongs to God, and is to be used to His glory.

ESVSB “This saying from Jesus is not recorded in the Gospels—a reminder that Jesus did many things that are not recorded in Scripture (see John 21:25). This saying was no doubt passed on to Paul by those who heard Jesus teach.”

ILL: At one time at the City Temple in London, there was in the congregation a restaurateur named Emil Mettler, who was a close friend of Albert Schweitzer and a kind of agent for Schweitzer in Britain. Mettler would never allow a Christian worker to pay for a meal in his restaurant but once he did happen to open his cash register in the presence of a Secretary of the London Missionary Society. The Secretary was astonished to see among the bills and coins a six-inch nail. What was it doing there? Mettler explained, "I keep this nail with my money to remind me of the price that Christ paid for my salvation and of what I owe Him in return." [Topic: Remembrance, Index:2999-3002]

Be generous with your pastor, and get rid of him from time to time. In a blog for his church website, Pastor Eddie Webster, wrote after returning from a 90 day sabbatical, “Churches need to get rid of their pastors.

“I don’t mean fire them, bury them in concrete, or leave them in the woods to be eaten by wolves. Nor am I saying that churches don’t need shepherds to lead and teach. What I am saying is that church leaders need to take the initiative in sending their pastors away for a sabbatical every 5-7 years. Don’t wait on the pastor to ask. Most of the ones I’ve talked to are scared to talk to you about it.

“So, let me offer a pastor-sabbatical primer for churches.

First, why should you give him significant time away?

1. He is tired. He won’t tell you. Pastors are super-human, right? Able to manage, lead, teach, counsel, fix, preach without ever breaking a sweat. The truth is that the longterm grind of meetings (that often accomplish nothing), unrealistic expectations (from the congregation, the denomination, and themselves), and a calendar full of events, weddings, and funerals in addition to the pressure of preaching 48+ times/year is hard on the soul. A day or two off here and there won’t fix that kind of tired.

2. He's not taking care of himself. Yes, your pastor "takes Friday off," but when Suzie stalker calls or emails, the pressure to answer is intense. Funerals don't work around days off (or vacations). Among my friends who are pastors, 50-70 hour work weeks are the norm. Every week. For years.

3. Your pastor has a hard time differentiating. The work of pastoring sometimes sucks us in and we forget that we are more than what we do or what we preach. We need space to remember all of who we are.

4. Your pastor will be a better pastor when he gets back. On September 5, I looked at my wife and said, "I've accomplished more in the past 60 days than I did in the last year before my sabbatical." And it was absolutely true. Here's what will happen: Your pastor will return with more energy, vision, and passion for ministry.

"If you are interested, here's how you can make this happen.

1. Approach your leadership about it. Make sure the [Leadership] has this on their radar. Talk about the importance of having a healthy pastor. I believe the health of a church's leadership will determine the health of a church. If your pastor is tired, burned out, or broken, it will impact the

health of the church and its ability to function effectively.

2. Work with the pastor. It's OK for the church to have some expectations for the sabbatical. Your pastor needs to spend time resting and renewing—and he gets to define how that's done. ...Maybe the church sends the pastor to a conference. Have open conversations about how God needs to work in your pastor's life during the time away.

3. Educate the members. You're going to have church members who say, "He's only been here three years," or "Pastor so-and-so never needed a sabbatical" or (and this is my favorite) "Doesn't he take a vacation every year?" Talk honestly with the membership about the need for a pastor with passion, vision, and energy.

4. Help the pastor with the details. Many church members think that church just magically happens every week. The truth is that there's a lot of grunt work that has to happen between Sundays. Help your pastor make sure that preachers are invited, visitation is covered, and all the weekly administrative stuff is ready.

"I can honestly say that my sabbatical saved my ministry. Without that significant time away I would not have made it another 3 or 4 years. I might not have made it another year. Even

though I knew I needed it, I had no concept of how tired and worn I really was.

“So, do your church and your pastor a favor. Get rid of him (for a little while). The Kingdom will prosper because of it.”

D. Christians are blessed when we practice the disciplines of Christian Prayer and Fellowship.

v. 36-38 (ESV) "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."

Whatever you do, do it with prayer.

Can you see how dear these Christians became to each other?

And you are dear to us as well. We will pray for God's blessing on this church.

Action: I'd like to conclude with something many of you may have seen on the internet. There are several versions; I've picked a favorite. It's called, "How to get rid of your Pastor", and I'm HAPPY to say that some of you have tried these on me over the past 28 years.

“If you ever want to get rid of your pastor, instead of looking for votes or choosing up sides, try one of these five ideas.

Idea No. 1: During the Sunday morning message, listen closely and take notes. Look your pastor straight in the eye, and occasionally nod your head and say, "Amen!" Begin to make serious efforts to apply the life lessons you learn from the sermons. In six months, he'll preach himself to death.

Idea No. 2: Pat your pastor on the back and brag on his good points two or three times a month. Make a bunch of phone calls to your friends and neighbors and tell them all the good things about your pastor. In a little while, so many more people will start coming to your church, you'll have to hire an associate pastor, and your senior pastor will be free to leave.

Idea No. 3: Next Sunday, in response to the sermon, go forward to the altar and rededicate your life to Christ. Then make an appointment with the pastor sometime next week. Ask him to give you some job you could do for the church, preferably some lost people you could go visit with a view to winning them to Christ. He'll likely die of heart failure on the spot.

Idea No. 4: Organize a ministry to call on the shut-ins and elderly members of the church, and encourage the pastor, as the early church did (see Acts 6:1-7), to devote more of his time to prayer, the

study of God's Word and sermon preparation. Tell him you'll take care of the widows if he'll take care of the preaching...

He'll think the whole congregation has gone completely crazy and start looking for another church immediately.

Idea No. 5: Get a whole bunch of the church members to unite in earnest intercessory prayer for the pastor, his ministry and his family. Organize prayer meetings in which you pray for the growth of the church and the blessing of the pastor. The pastor may become so effective in ministry that some larger church will gladly take him off your hands.

“One note of caution, however: if you try one of these methods, you may find that you don't want to get rid of your pastor after all.”

Have you heeded Christ's comforting words of Understanding, Warning and Comfort?

If you have, are you, like Paul, comforting others in the same way?

Have you received God's comfort?

Write down the name of someone who needs it that you can share it with this week.