

“Give Me Faithfulness or Give Me Death”

Acts 20:17-38

September 21, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Of all the speeches and sermons recorded in the book of Acts, this is the only one addressed to a Christian audience. All the others are evangelistic sermons or legal defenses following the arrest of church leaders. But these words are addressed to the leaders of the church in Ephesus, where Paul had spent three years in ministry. He had been so successful in that ministry that the entire region of Asia had heard the word of God (19:10). Such was the fruitfulness of this ministry that it affected the commerce in Ephesus, leading to a major economic depression among all the craftsmen that worked in the area of idol-making. These craftsmen correctly identified the problem as the rise of Christianity, and a riot erupted as they attempted to seize the leaders of this Christian movement.

Paul leaves Ephesus after this riot and spends the winter in Corinth. His plan is to travel to Jerusalem with an offering for the poor Jewish Christians there, collected from the largely Gentile churches he had planted during his ministry. He is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem and doesn't want to take time to visit Ephesus on his way. But his boat puts in at Miletus, about 20 miles south of Ephesus, and he sends for the elders of Ephesus while he waits for the ship to resume its journey. They come, and he speaks to them as one who will never see them again, sharing his heart for ministry with them. What we have in this passage is an insight into how Paul ministered to people. This is very significant to us all, because to be follower of Jesus is to be engaged in ministry to people. While there are those such as pastors and missionaries who do it on a more full-time basis, all of Jesus' followers are called to minister to people. Paul shows us the way here.

Before we look in detail at the marks of effective ministry, I need to point out something of his deep commitment. Paul said, **“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”** (v. 24). To borrow and slightly alter some words from Patrick Henry, Paul was saying, “Give me faithfulness or give me death.” Faithfulness to his call to minister was more valuable to him than life itself, and certainly more valuable than comfort. My hope is that as we look at the heart of Paul's ministry to people, God will stir in your heart something of this same desire. Notice four marks of Paul's ministry.

I. Love of People

Love is a mark of all Christian ministry, one that existed abundantly in the life and ministry of Jesus himself. Ministry to people is not like taking your car in for some mechanical work. What I want in a car mechanic is competence and honesty. While it might be nice to have a car mechanic who loves me, it is not necessary. Love is not of the essence of being a car mechanic. If I had the choice between a car mechanic who hated me, but who was competent and honest, and one who loved me but really didn't know what he was doing, I would choose competence every time. But ministry is not like that. To minister effectively to people requires love for people. I can't tell you how many times I have seen youth volunteers whose cool factor is on the low end of the scale, but who love the youth to whom they minister. The result is effective ministry.

Paul had established such a ministry in Ephesus. This passage is full of indications of Paul's great love for those to whom he ministers. One of the marks of such love is transparency, and Paul says, **"You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time"** (v. 18). He was involved with people at a personal level, indicated by his ministry among them "from house to house" (v. 20). Like a parent who loves his or her children, he was willing to labor non-stop for them. He reminds them in verses 33-35 that he worked as a tentmaker so as not to be a financial burden upon them by asking for a salary. So he would work during working hours at his trade and then minister to them after hours. And he did this not for a short time, but for the entire three years he was there.

You may have noticed that this passage begins with tears and ends with tears. Paul says that the whole time he was with them he served **"the Lord with all humility and with tears"** (v. 19). And then as he is leaving them, there were tears once more. **"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"** (v. 37-38). Paul had loved them with tears, and they learned to love Paul back.

Paul loved them with tears. Paul wasn't the outside expert who had come in to set them straight by his keen insight and wealth of experience. He came in and gave his heart to these people of Ephesus. I'm sure there were tears both of joy and of sorrow. By nature, I am not a weeper. From the time I was a teenager until I became a pastor, I can't remember weeping a single time. But as the years pass since I became a pastor, I notice that I cry more and more. I shed more tears in a month now than I used to shed in a decade, tears both of joy and sorrow. I'm so thankful that God has given that to me.

I notice too that they returned Paul's love, weeping for him when they heard that they would see him no more in this life. There is a connection between valuing ministry more than life and having your heart knit together in love with others. The way ministry is viewed by so many in the church today is to see it like a week's vacation at a working ranch, like the movie *City Slicker*. I've never been on a vacation like that, but I would imagine that you could form some new

friendships that would result at least in adding some new names to your Christmas card list. But what if you and some friends sold everything you had and bought a ranch? And what if everyone moved to the ranch and you all became dependent on it for your livelihood? There would be a much deeper bond between you all in that case. That's the way ministry is. It's like the fellowship of the ring in Tolkien's books. Those who have left all to pursue the great quest have their hearts knit together in unique ways.

II. Suffering

I would imagine we would be hard-pressed to find anyone sitting here today who would disagree with the previous point about the importance of loving people in the way we do ministry. Love is universally endorsed. But its practice is not nearly as widespread. It is very easy to love others in concept but fail to do it in reality. The reason is that all people are at times hard to love, and to do so inevitably brings us into a situation of suffering. Ministry always involves suffering. We can see that in the shepherding image used in verse 28. **“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.”** Sheep are easy to love in concept but not in reality. Though they look so cuddly and sweet, I understand that the reality is quite different. John Stott, who lives on an island with lots of sheep, says that sheep “are dirty, subject to unpleasant pests, and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, ticks and worms. They are also unintelligent, wayward and obstinate.” (Stott, p. 328). The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says that “Sheep are not only dependent creatures; they are also singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering and unable to find their way to a sheepfold even when it is within sight” (p. 782). To love well will always involve suffering.

In these verses, Paul puts together two statements that would appall many Christians today. He says first that the Holy Spirit was compelling him to go to Jerusalem (v. 22). But he also said that in every city he visited the Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardships awaited him when he got to Jerusalem (v. 23). In other words, the Holy Spirit was leading him to a place of suffering. There are those in our day who teach that God's job is to deliver us from all suffering and to lead us away from the place where we suffer. There seems to be a notion afoot these days that if I'm in God's will, I won't have to live a difficult, suffering-filled life. That's not what the Bible says. As a matter of fact, the Bible promises that we will suffer.

One of the problems we have in recruiting people for ministry in the church today is that we have an abundance of people who are willing to volunteer as helpers who essentially just show up and do what they're told to do, but very few who are willing to step up as leaders. I can sympathize with that, because on the few occasions when I can just be a helper, I like it a lot better. But when you

become a leader, the responsibility brings a great deal more suffering into one's life. You sometimes awaken at night thinking about that responsibility, and you are often confronted with the very uncomfortable position of not having either the people or financial resources you have planned for. Ministry leads to suffering. It always has and it always will.

III. Confidence in the Word

There is a third feature of ministry that I see in these verses. The central feature of ministry is to feed others with the word of God. The main thing a shepherd does is to lead the sheep to safe pasture, to the place where they can feed and grow. Notice what Paul believed about the place of the word of God in ministry to people. He says in verse 20, **“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable.”** He then goes on to explain in verse 21 what that profitable message was. He testified **“both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Paul believed that the thing that really helps people is repentance and faith. That simply describes the way we receive the gospel, the way God comes into our lives in power. Repentance means to turn from all the ways we trust ourselves, and faith means to trust in God instead of ourselves.

Paul reiterates the centrality of the word down in verse 32, where he commends the elders **“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.”** It is by grasping the grace of God that people are built up. That means that we change and become more Christlike not by being scolded to try harder but by being reminded of the favor of God toward us through Christ. The heart of ministry is not giving people good advice, but helping them connect with Jesus. How do you do that? You encourage them to remember the grace of God through this process of repentance and faith. Paul did this both **“in public and from house to house”** (v. 20). Not everyone is called to a public ministry of teaching the word. But I believe every Christian can do this in more personal settings. Both the public and private ministry of the word have their unique advantages. The public ministry, speaking to groups of people at a time, is best suited to declaring the good news of the gospel. The private ministry is well-suited to applying the gospel to our lives. It is often best done through asking questions. I can imagine Paul frequently asking questions like, “Are you trusting God in this area of your job?” “Are there anxieties you are battling with now?” “Do you need to repent of sin and receive the forgiveness of Christ in this area where you're feeling some guilt?”

IV. Trust in the Lord

Finally, ministry will require us to trust the Lord. Note just a couple of ways we see that in this passage. First, Paul says **“I am going to Jerusalem,**

constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there” (v. 22). Not knowing about tomorrow is always an opportunity to trust God. There is an inevitable risk involved in all ministry. Let’s say you want to begin a prayer group at work or school. There is the risk of not knowing how people will respond to your requests about this. Or take a couple of recent examples from our own church. You’re planning a play for the Junior High students of your church, and it’s never been done before. There is a boatload of unknowns you are facing. Will the students be able to pull it off? Will anyone come to the performance? How will we make a stage where there is no stage? Consider a second example. You’re planning an arts weekend, and that too has never been done before. How will the church respond? Will any artists come forward? Will anyone come? Will God use it for his good purposes? Ministry almost always requires that we move out and take these risks, not knowing what will happen, but trusting God. To trust God in these situations is very freeing, because it delivers us from the pressure of thinking we have to make things work. Most pessimists are very good at imagining what could go wrong. They wake up at night with deep anxieties about these things. But God doesn’t ask success of us. He asks faithfulness. We can entrust the results to him, and that trust in God frees us to take risks in ministry.

A second way I see Paul trusting God in ministry is in verse 32, where he commends the elders to the grace of God. Paul is about to leave, and he will have no control over them at all. He is like a parent dropping his son or daughter off at college and riding home in the car. You have no control in that situation. Yet the parent’s heart, of course, is full of love for his child and a desire that the child prosper in every way, especially spiritually. And the parent feels responsible. That is exactly our situation in ministry. We feel responsible, but have no control. That’s the way Paul was feeling here. What do you do in such a situation? You trust God and you appeal to the grace of God. One of the ways the ministry is such a blessing to those who minister is to remind us all the time that we are not in control. That reminder helps connect us to the grace of God.

CONCLUSION:

You may be getting the picture here that ministry to people is not the easiest thing you will ever do. It’s probably one of the hardest things you will ever do. Why bother? Paul tells us in the last phrase of verse 28, when he describes the church as that **“which he obtained with his own blood.”** Jesus died for the church. Though he owns everything in the universe, there is no possession more precious to him than the church. How do you measure what is of value to someone? By what they will pay to get it. Jesus has paid everything, because we are precious to him. And now he entrusts this possession to you and to me. May we minister faithfully!