

The Task of the Gospel

Acts 20:17-38

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We are always needing to be praying for not just these men, but the men who serve as a part of our diaconate. And after the service, you're going to be hearing about what these brothers are committing themselves to in providing for those organizations and through you who are supporting women who find themselves with unplanned pregnancies in this community. So be praying for the diaconate and our elders, as we serve together to serve you.

But we would also ask you to be praying for those whom God might be calling and raising up to serve in this way in this congregation. It is not an easy task. It is not a task which we ought to run to with abandon. It is one that should be considered with solemnity, but also humility and joy, to serve the Lord in this way. So be praying, because we need more. Our body is growing, the needs are great, and we also want to be about the work of equipping you to minister to one another. Ministry does not begin with pastors and elders and deacons. The ministry begins with and through the Lord Jesus Christ through the giving of his Spirit in his church, through the gifts of all those who call on the name of Jesus Christ. Our role, our calling, is that by his grace we will seek to encourage you, equip you to minister to one another. Please be in prayer about all of these things.

It is by God's design, as I chuckled when I began to see how God would bring all of this together on this particular Sunday. I was laughing because of God's sense of humor and sovereignty, of how I could be preaching on a text about a farewell speech to Ephesian elders on a day where we are installing an elder and we're talking about the church.

So before I get to the text, I want to tell you, there are a number of ways in which this text can be preached. There is no way that I could do it justice in one sermon. So we'll be back at this passage sometime in the not-too-distant future. Having said that, there are two ways to preach this broadly. One is with a telescope, where we look at the details of the duties and office of elders and pastors. Another way of looking at it is more broadly, of seeing that this is not just the calling of elders. It's the calling of the church to be the church. My desire this morning is to do a mix of the two, because I believe it's there.

And so we're going to turn this morning to Acts chapter twenty. It is one of the most tender passages in all of the New Testament. It is only the second place in the Book of Acts where the word "gospel" is actually mentioned. It's referred to as evangelism, and certainly described, but here it's called "the gospel of grace." It's only the second time that it's used. And it is being given to the church through these who Paul is talking to.

Another thing that I want to remind you of is that there is no clear evidence to us that these elders, which are referred to in two ways in this passage. In the Greek, they're referred to as *episcopi*, which is translated as "bishop." They're also referred to as *presbyteroi*, which means "elders or pastors." And so these elders served in the house churches in Ephesus and in that area. There is no indication that they served just one elder to one house church. They served as a team. And herein lies another key aspect to our ministry here at Columbia Presbyterian Church, that these elders who are sitting here, and my role as pastor or the role of a pastor, is such that the teaching elder and ruling elder are the same, but there is difference in gifting. While there may be a training difference, the calling is the same. While there may be a gifting difference, the calling is the same. And so we serve together as a team, and that's what you will

see here. Paul is calling them to work as a team for the building up of Christ's church. So let's look together. Acts chapter twenty, verses seventeen to thirty-eight. Hear now the Word of God.

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 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; 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.’”

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.

This is -- I'll get that. The pulpit is rocking back and forth, and I am going to mess up my notes. There we go. Nothing broken, nothing harms. How's that? Ta-da. There we go. Shall we pray together?

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this tender part of your Word, that shows us the relationship that Paul had with this group of elders, his commitment to the mission of God, the gospel of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. So Lord, we pray, give us a vision of the Lord Jesus, the mission to which Paul was called, and how the church of Jesus Christ is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and his righteousness, that we might be dependent on him alone, lest we fall away and fall into error. Lord, keep us, by your Holy Spirit, and make us the church of Jesus Christ you desire us to be. We thank you and praise you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So this morning, you'll see in your outline, Paul has many actions, but there is a central theme around his action. We see here vividly the beauty of the relationship which is described here, the means by which Paul went about his ministry, and finally, a warning. Action, relationship, means, and warning.

Action. It's very clear, over and over and over again, that Paul, throughout this passage, says that he is committed to one thing and one thing alone. He says in verse twenty, the truth that he never hesitated or shrunk back from declaring was a truth which he always held, and this was the basis of all of his actions. And he says, "Declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house." That is the repentance toward God and a faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the basis for all his actions. It was nothing else. It was that Jesus Christ came to die on a cross, was raised on the third day, and that he is the Messiah who means to bring to himself a group of people whom he will call his body, the church of Jesus Christ. And this is what we are called to in repentance. That repentance has a couple of things. It has both a turning from sin, and then that repentance expressing itself positively by declaring faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

But he continues to unpack not just the basis of his actions, that is, the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is the content which he repeats, and that is the gospel of grace, which he says in verse twenty-four. He says, "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." Is Paul saying that his life has no content or value? Is he saying that he does not matter? Absolutely not. That is not what he is saying. He's saying that it is -- his life very much does have value, but it only has value because it is God who has created all things, it is God who is the Father of the gospel, it is God who sent his Son.

Therefore, the content is the gospel of grace, and it is his grace that enables him to see who he's really meant to be as a human being, not as one who draws attention to himself. Therefore, the content of his message is never about his ministry or who he is or his abilities or his weaknesses. It is about Christ and Christ alone. And so he says that this gospel of grace, which I have testified to you, is not just the basis -- it is the complete content, so much so that he wants the gospel of grace to always be at the center and for he himself to fade into the background, that any strength or any weaknesses, may they go only to one thing -- to declare Christ and the glory of his grace.

But that content also means the calling of repentance and faith. Everywhere he was faithful, in private and in public, whether Jew or Greek, saying choose today. Will you remain an alien nation from our Heavenly Father, or will you be brought near by his grace? And so he challenges them and invites them. He invites them by the grace of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, but he challenges them to repent, to turn, as we've seen over the previous chapters, turning from idolatry and of trusting in anything for identity except for Jesus Christ.

But he also says something else, when he declares a little bit later on, when he talks about how God has so worked by the blood of his own. The passage in verse twenty-eight reads this way in the translation that we have. He says that -- he says, "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." By meaning, not God the Father's own blood, but the blood of his own. Meaning, he has purchased -- and this has been the rock-solid content of all of his letters. Go read Romans. Go read Ephesians, or Galatians and Philippians -- that God has purchased for himself a people, his body, the church, by his own blood.

This is what the Jews ought to have been able to expect when they look back at Exodus. For God purchased for himself a nation through the blood of Passover, and then he washed them in rebirth by taking them through the Red Sea to bring them into the Promised Land. But what was imperfect, a covenant that could not bring about a change of heart, he has substituted now with a new covenant, that by his blood of Good Friday we are cleansed of our sins. That is pictured in the water -- not of the Red Sea, but of the washing of baptism. And then the victory of rebirth through resurrection of Jesus Christ being plunged to death on a cross, being buried, as it were, in a grave, and being raised on the third day. The content of Paul's message is the blood and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and this is what is the basis of his

actions, the content of his message, which he continually draws not only the Ephesian elders to -- he always calls the church to. There is nothing else.

But there is also the purpose. The purpose to which Paul's entire ministry, the purpose of his actions -- he tells us in various words throughout this passage, calling to repentance and faith, and turning to the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's purpose has not been about self-aggrandizement. HE says -- in fact, the whole passage works as what scholars call an *inclusio*. He begins the passage and begins this speech by saying, "You know, you remember, that as I've labored by my own hands in your midst, I have done nothing but make clear the gospel of Jesus Christ." And then the passage ends when he says, "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.'" He is constantly saying, my purpose was to give -- to give Christ, in word and in deed. This and these are Paul's actions and the reason for them.

So when he does this, after describing the actions, he then in such a beautiful way and tender way, throughout this passage, he talks about his relationship with them. They've traveled as Ephesian elders probably thirty miles by foot to come and see him in Miletus. So he says to them the words which hung very heavy in their hearts when he says, you will not see me face-to-face again, so pay attention. And what you see throughout this passage is that when Paul says, though I will not see you again, what is it he wants to leave them with? He wants to explore with them as he already has, as you can hear the word -- you can hear the emotion in his voice. Though I know we can't hear it, we can read it in what's described for us.

And what Luke is laying down here is that he is exhorting them because he so deeply loves them. He is in such deep relationship with them, that these are the last words that he will say to them face-to-face. He's now spent three years with them. They have faced trial together. They have faced suffering together. They have faced plenty together. They've worshipped together. They've learned together, sharpened one another together. They've been doing ministry together with the church of Jesus Christ. And out of that has been born deep relationship. And we can see, as he tells them at the end, "you yourselves know what I have done." And he says, "it is more blessed to receive than to give. 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." You see the deep love that Paul had for them, and the deep love that they had for him.

But I want to say, it is not just the immediate relationship that that points us to. Yes, they had a good relationship, learning how to forgive one another and learn together. But what is very clear, though it's not explicit, it is so implicit throughout this entire instruction to these elders, is this -- the relationship that they've had together was never meant to be just about their relationship. It was meant to be a model of what their relationship ought to be with the church, and the relationship that the church and the members of the church ought to have with each other -- deep love and reciprocity of love with each other. Listen to the words he calls them to in terms of their leading. He says, "Be careful. Be watchful. Serve those who have needs. It is better to give than to receive. To make sure that you provide for those who have need, for the poor in your midst." What you hear is the very thing that had taken place inside of their relationship. They had cared for one another. They had loved one another. They had prayed for one another. They had sharpened one another. They had confronted and exhorted one another. He tells us that. I exhorted you day and night, always, about the gospel of Jesus Christ. So he's calling them to do the same to those who are in the church.

But, friends, I must tell you, this isn't just for elders. To the church of Jesus Christ as it is expressed here at Columbia Presbyterian Church, this isn't an elder's job alone. We ought to be modeling it for you and encouraging it in you and equipping you to do this with one another -- to love in the midst of brokenness and sin, to forgive even when our feelings aren't quite caught up with the desire to forgive or the need to forgive. The serving one another as each has need, oftentimes perhaps looking for the need

before the need is even expressed. Learning to pray together, to weep together, to suffer together, as in this last week many of you have already been doing. I have, along with our elders and session -- we are able to have a vantage point that oftentimes you're not aware of, as we get to hear the stories of you loving one another in the name of Jesus Christ. Continue to do that.

But now I want to say this to elders. This is something we've talked about, and I want to say this as accountability to the church of Jesus Christ, that is, we are called to serve here. We use all these fancy words in church government -- ruling elders, deacons, teaching elders. What does all of that mean? Ruling elders and teaching elders are poor words for what we're called to do. We are not called to rule alone. Let me suggest that even ruling is not the primary thing. Serving in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, being equipped with the gospel in word and deed, loving those who are part of this congregation, serving them, is what leadership is. It's not leaders serve. It's servants lead. There's a difference. And we get to -- we get to learn what it means to be in community, to serve other sheep, brothers, who've been bought with the absolute impossibly-to-gather the price of the blood of the righteous Son of the Living God.

But I say this to the congregation as I say this to my fellow elders -- isn't it hard? Right? Where we know that Jesus Christ has purchased by his blood sheep that he's brought into this local expression of Christ's church. How easy it is to begin treating each other with just complacency. We're just other human beings we have to deal with. And we forget what holy beings we've been made, what sanctified children of God we've been declared to be through the blood of our Savior. So the opportunity to hear this Word and to install an elder this morning is a new calling back to us, renewing every time, every Sunday, every session meeting, every diaconal meeting -- whatever the case may be -- to remind us that we serve here not by our pleasure but at his. That we serve here not for our own agenda, but for his mission. And we serve in all humility, because we've been purchased by the blood, and we get to serve those who have been purchased by the blood.

May God give us grace, for it is a very tall order to love those as we've been loved. But that is the relationship that is called for here -- to watch, to care, to serve, to provide, to equip, to love. It is such a weighty task. Who in the world would want to do it? None of us can do it. So, church, I beg you, please pray for your elders, because we need his grace. We need his forgiveness. We need your grace, and we need your forgiveness. Deep relationship.

But what is the means by which Paul does all of this? The passage is dripping with it. The means by which Paul does his ministry among these elders and among the churches is described first with humility and tears. He says, it's not about me, it is about Christ. I have exhorted you. I have declared to you the grace of Jesus even to the point of tears day and night, night and day, in the midst of suffering and trial. Humility. This is something that is so important to Paul, when he says in the Book of Philippians:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. [Philippians 3:7-11]

Paul says his means of ministry has been to make sure he is out of the center, that Christ may be magnified, even to the point of tears.

Secondly, the means has been dependence on the Holy Spirit. He talks about the Holy Spirit in verse twenty-eight: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." He talks about the leading of the Holy Spirit in keeping him there for three years. He talks about the ministry of the Holy Spirit that is testified to him wherever he goes, that difficulty and

challenges come his way. The ministry of the gospel of grace cannot be done to our calling without a healthy dependence on the Holy Spirit. And so the means of his ministry has been through the Holy Spirit.

Friends, we don't have time, but I would encourage me -- go, and if you ever read or if you are reading a letter of Paul, count the number of times he refers to the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, or the Holy Spirit. His letters are filled with dependence on the Holy Spirit, and the same is the case here. And he's saying to these elders as he's saying to the church -- only depending on the Holy Spirit are we able to worship, are we able to understand the Word, are we able to love one another.

But also, he says, the only means by which he can conduct his ministry is the teaching of the gospel. And he tells us here as he says, I have not sought to take anything from anyone. I've not coveted anyone's belongings. Rather, I've sought to provide for my own needs, so that the ministry of Jesus Christ may be the only thing to which I am beholden. And he says, in essence, unless we pay attention to this gospel which calls us to give things away, we'll be tempted to only gain more income for our own wealth. The antidote to selfish wealth-building is giving it away in the service of others and the mission of the kingdom of God. And so he says, this is the only means which I've sought to serve you -- by giving away.

Now, it's very tempting to look at these means, to look at the relationship, to look at his actions, and for me to say, well elders, well church of Jesus Christ, we need to be like Paul. But that's not what Paul would say. If we were in a preaching class in a seminary, he would look at me and go, are you crazy? It's not about Paul at all. In fact, it's what's behind it all. And what the commentators on this passage so quickly run to is what you begin to see through this narrative, what Paul is saying to these Ephesian elders -- yes, it's not just that Paul is saying don't pay attention to me, pay attention to the gospel -- no, what he is doing in his ministry, in his actions, in his relationships, in the means by which he is going about it -- he is demonstrating his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The only way that Paul is able to go about these actions, the only way he's able to see these relationships established and enriched, and the only way he can keep focused on the means of ministry, is because Jesus Christ came by his actions. God sent him who had no sin to be sin for us. He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but took the form of a servant. He came not to be served, but to serve. By his actions, Jesus constantly, in his actions, did what? Brought the attention to the glory of the will of the Heavenly Father. And he came to do the will of him who sent him, to die for those whom the Father has called to himself. And he would be the means through which that would happen. Jesus gave away his life, Jesus depended and had faith and trusted, if you will, in his relationship with the Heavenly Father. He trusted in the work, that God's will is greater than everything else. Not my will, but your will be done.

So what he's demonstrating is that the office of elder and, if you will, the calling of a Christian, is not about finding a model and modeling it. First and foremost, it's about receiving the Savior who is behind all of it, who was crushed for our iniquities, and by whose wounds we are healed. Put in the grave, and raised victorious. And everything we need for life and for godliness are a gift of him, by his Spirit, and through his Word. Paul would say -- and to every elder and deacon, and to every person who can hear my voice -- the only way to live the Christian life is to receive the life of Christ. And his grace and his Spirit will be the animating power of our lives.

But finally, there is the warning. This passage drips with warning. He says, there is going to be those who are going to come in after me like wolves, who are going to draw disciples away. We know that's what happens. Watering down the gospel, adding things to the gospel, making something else the central thing when the gospel is the only central thing. He says, not only will there be those who will come into the church to draw away disciples, be aware of them -- he says something even more difficult and challenging to here. Even, there may be some among you, brothers.

And in doing and saying these things, he is saying to them, be careful. "Be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears." Why? Because he

recognizes the power and the deceptiveness of our own human volition, of our own hearts to take places of leadership and to turn it into ruling over others; to take a place of ministry and to make it about ourselves; to take the walk of Jesus Christ by depending on our own strengths, our own gifts, and ask Jesus to join us in our mission and not the other way around; to water down the gospel so that everybody might accept it; to add things to the gospel so that somehow we can make it more exciting or more challenging or more inviting.

The problem oftentimes is not out there; it is the sinfulness and deceptiveness of our own hearts in here, which is why, over and over and over again, he calls us back to Golgatha and the empty grave, that unless by God's grace we stop and we say, Lord, unless you go before us, we cannot serve. We cannot walk, we cannot elder, we cannot pastor, unless you fill us, unless you guide us, and unless you give us wisdom that is far above ours. And, Lord, by your Spirit, remind us again and again that the place of our trust is in the God who loves, the God who was crushed, the God who was raised, and the Lord Jesus who is with us by his Spirit. May he do this in Anthony. May he do this in all of your elders. May he do this in all of your deacons. But, Lord Jesus have mercy. Come, Holy Spirit, do this in each of us, that the church of Jesus Christ may be built up for his glory and the magnification of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Come, Holy Spirit. Form us and make us, sanctify us, equip us to be the church of Jesus Christ that you've called us to be. Lord Jesus, as an elder in your church, I recognize along with my fellow elders that we forget this. But we thank you for the renewing power of your Holy Spirit, and the beauty and truth of your Word. May you equip us and renew us to serve you, and to serve this body. Father, I pray as well for the work of your Holy Spirit in the midst of all who call upon you, who are part of this body, to make us a people who are centered on Jesus Christ, the gospel of grace, empowered by the Spirit, guided by trusting in nothing else than Jesus Christ alone. Do this, we pray. In Jesus' name, whose name is above all names, we pray. Amen.