

# World Wide Witness: Healthy Church Part 2

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Date: 18 November 2012

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Okay, so that's Acts 20, 13-38. It's on page 1117, 1117. Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders.

We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mytilene.

The next day we set sail from there and arrived at Chios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos and on the following day arrived at Miletus.

Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible by the day of Pentecost.

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them, You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.

[ 1 : 0 9 ]     I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

I only know that in every city that the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task that the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men, for I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

[ 2 : 3 8 ]     Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you, night and day, with tears.

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.

You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

When he said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again.

Then they accompanied him to the ship. I haven't got any sheets for taking notes this morning, but if you've got a new sheet, on the back of that there is a place.

[ 4 : 08 ] I'm not sure where the pens are. If anybody would like a pen to take notes, you can put your hand up. Shane will give them to you. If you want a pen, I encourage you to do so.

This is part two of a two-part talk. One was from two weeks ago when we looked at Paul's first visit to Ephesus. This is part two.

Church, the spread of Christianity around the world. We thank you for its record for us.

But we also recognise that this is not just mere history, but it is words written for us today that change us and transform us and show us what it is to be church and what it is to be your people and what it is to live as your people in this world.

So we pray that as we read and as we listen, that you would create us to be more and more the kind of church you want us to be, that we would be healthy in every way.

[ 5 : 51 ] And so we ask for your help in this. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, imagine that you have been given an audience with the church leaders of Ireland.

Jermud Martin, Bishop Neil, they're your audience. For one hour, you will get to say what you want to the bishops who lead our churches and congregations.

Most of the time, we're having to listen to the church and what they think we should be doing. But this time, on this occasion, they're going to be listening to you.

What would you like to say to the church leaders of our country? What would be the most important item on your agenda?

For example, what would you like to say to them about how the church conducts its finances? Or what would you like to say about how the church leaders live their lives?

[ 7 : 04 ] Or what their message is? Well, the Apostle Paul, perhaps the most influential leader in all of church history, responsible for writing almost two-thirds of the New Testament, a pioneer in seeing Christianity spread all over Europe, well, he has the opportunity to speak to the bishops of a very influential church in a very influential city.

Paul is on his way home after a five-year trip around Europe, that he's been travelling from one place to another, visiting all these local churches, and his desire that each of these churches would be healthy and would be strong.

He's not just about starting a church, but that each church would be healthy, and that each church would be everything that God calls the church to be. So in Acts 20, Paul makes his last and final visit to the bishops of Ephesus.

Look at verse 16. Paul had decided to set sail past Ephesus. If you could just flick the map up there.

Thank you. There we are. So Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, which is modern-day Turkey. For he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible by the day of Pentecost.

[ 8 : 41 ] So he's been travelling all around Europe. He's just been in Greece. He's on his way back to Jerusalem, which is south of Antioch, his home church. And from Miletus, verse 17, he stops there and he's sent to Ephesus for the elders, literally the bishops or the leaders of the church, because he has something really important that he wants to tell them.

And as he speaks to these leaders, he tackles three important issues that, if followed, will lead to a healthy church. He tells them three things.

He tells them what the church's message should be. He says how the church leader should behave and where the church finances should go.

So what the church's message should be, how the church leader should behave, and where the church finances should go. So first, what the church's message should be.

He starts by reminding them and telling them what his message was that he brought to the church. So in verse 20, he says, you know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly in gatherings just like this, and from house to house, which would have been privately in people's homes.

[ 10 : 07 ] Well, what did he preach? What did he have to tell them? What was the content of his message? Well, look down at verse 24. He says, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

His desire, his life's ambition, was to preach, to testify to the gospel of God's grace. This is the message that the church should be declaring, the gospel of God's grace.

Now, the gospel of grace simply means news about something that has been done for you. It's important we get this right.

It's news about something that has been done for us. Paul wasn't interested in the church giving people religious advice about how to be better citizens.

This is what makes the gospel of grace so unique. Every religion in the world gives people advice. They tell you what you must do, or what you must achieve if you're to have a better life.

[ 11 : 25 ] The gospel is in complete contrast to all of that. It is good news about a person who has achieved something for you. Well, what has been achieved for us?

What has been done? Well, look down at verse 25. Now, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.

Verse 27. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Now, we've got two phrases there. Verse 25, he talks about preaching the kingdom.

And in verse 27, he was proclaiming the whole will of God. Now, preaching the kingdom and proclaiming the whole will of God, they're not different to the gospel of grace.

They actually explain what the gospel of grace is. The gospel of grace is all about God's will to restore broken lives and renew this disordered world.

[ 12 : 30 ] It is God's plan to establish a new kingdom. A kingdom of peace and justice. A kingdom of joy and happiness. Of harmony and unity.

Where there's going to be no more rocket attacks from one side or another. Where no longer will a mother and a baby die. There will be the absence of all evil and suffering for all eternity.

It is God's will to establish this kind of kingdom. That's what the gospel of grace is all about. And the way that kingdom is established is not going to be through arms or fighting.

It's going to come through a person. Through God's Son, Jesus Christ. So look back at verse 21. He says there, well he says verse 20, that he didn't hesitate to preach anything that would be helpful, which was the gospel of grace.

And verse 21 he says, I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

[ 13 : 41 ] The gospel is all about what God has done for us, but it does require a response. The response is repentance and faith.

So he says to them, look, it's like, it doesn't matter whether we're Catholic or whether we're Protestant. It doesn't matter whether we're black or white, whether we are gay or straight.

This is the same message for all people, and the response to the same message is exactly the same. It's about repentance and faith in Christ. Repentance being turning away from our own way and turning to Jesus as King of your life.

And faith is all about our trust and our confidence in Jesus. In particular, faith in his death for us on the cross, so that when Jesus died, it was a death in place of us.

He was taking our guilt, our shame in place of us, so that we could be part of his kingdom. And his resurrection from the grave was a resurrection for you and for me.

[ 14 : 49 ] It was a resurrection that defeated death and destroyed evil so that we could be part of a kingdom where there would be no more death or suffering. It would no longer rule this world.

It would be the absence of evil and suffering. So the encouragement is that we would have faith in Christ who can bring about this eternal kingdom.

That's why the gospel of grace is good news. It's not just advice. It's all about Jesus who has done something for you.

And this is what the church's message should be. We're not telling people to live better lives. We're telling people about something that Jesus has done, that he's establishing a kingdom for us.

Now this was Paul's experience and it had completely transformed his life. So verse 22, he says to them, and now compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

[ 15 : 54 ] Now we know from reading through Acts that all sorts of things have happened to him. Verse 23, I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

He's already faced stoning to within an inch of his life. He's already been stripped and beaten. But because Paul believes this gospel, because he believes this message, because he's experienced it and it has so changed his life, look what he can say, verse 24, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I would be able to complete the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

He's saying to them, look, I would gladly die for you. I would put my life on the line for you. I'd give up my life for you so that people can hear this wonderful free offer of God's grace.

And why could he do this? Well, because he's already received everything through the gospel of grace. He already has the kingdom.

He has everything that he could ever possibly need so therefore he could put his life on the line so that other people could receive this grace. You see, the church only has one message and it is the message of the gospel of grace.

[ 17 : 19 ] God's will, God's plan to restore broken lives and renew this disordered world through his son, Jesus Christ, establishing an eternal kingdom.

So first he's saying to the church, make sure that your message is about the gospel of grace and nothing else. Well, first the message of the church is about God's grace.

Second, he tells them how the church leaders should behave. Now I have to pay close attention to this because I'm a church leader. Ralph, pay close attention, but it's for everybody.

Verse 28. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Literally, bishops or elders or leaders, elders. It's all interchangeable. We take elders. We don't call ourselves bishops, but it's the same thing.

[ 18 : 31 ] Now leadership in the church is not power over people, but it's protection for people. Look at the imagery that we have here.

It talks about, look, verse 28, be shepherds of the church of God. The church is seen as the flock. In other words, the people, people like you and me, were like sheep who need looked after and watched over.

And the leaders, well, they're the shepherds who have been given the responsibility by God to provide the protection that people need. But why is there such special care for the flock?

Well, look at the rest of verse 28. He says, be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. Jesus died for us.

He gave up his life for us. He gave up of his riches to enter into our poverty so that we could have his riches. So that we could belong to God.

[ 19 : 33 ] That means the people in the church, people like you and me, we're precious to God. We're his treasured possession. We're of unlimited and ultimate value.

And because we are so valuable, we need special care and attention. Now, when we think about shepherds and sheep, we need to get away from modern farming techniques.

The first century shepherd, well, he stayed with his sheep 24-7 out on the mountains all alone. By day, he would take the sheep off to new places where they could feed and down to streams where they could drink and get everything that they needed.

And then at night, he would bring them into a fold, maybe something made out of stone or something like that. They would be inside and he would literally sit at the entrance as a means of protecting them from all the wild animals that could get in at them.

He would put his life on the line. He would put himself between the sheep and the danger, willing to give up his life. So, verse 29, I know that after I leave, he said, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

[ 20 : 55 ] Even from your own number, people will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

Now, Paul was a good shepherd. He had been teaching them the true gospel of God's grace. But he's saying to them, guys, you need to be on your guard because there are going to be teachers who are going to come in and are going to be quite willing to distort the truth of the gospel for their own gain.

It's not it might happen. He says it will happen. Rather than the gospel bringing about all what Jesus has done for you, people are going to come in and they're going to distort the truth and they're going to tell you it's all about what you must do or something that you must achieve and what you have to work for.

And Jesus, at best, will just be reduced to a little bit of religious advice and not to be taken seriously. Those kind of people will come in and tell you that. The other people who might come in and lead people astray for their own gain are those that are connected as we refer to the health and wealth or the prosperity gospel.

We see it on television and they'll say something like this. Well, Jesus wants you to be wealthy. He wants you to be successful. He wants your children to have amazing careers.

[ 22 : 25 ] He doesn't want you to be sick. He doesn't want things to go wrong in your life. And if you would only believe, it's going to be put right. And by the way, just send us a few dollars or a few euro and we'll make sure that that happens.

That's a distortion of the gospel of grace. He says those teachers, look at verse 28 there, and 29 rather, they're like wolves that are going to come in and tear the sheep apart.

And we need to be aware of that, verse 31. So be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you, night and day, and with tears.

These things will happen and people will come in and distort the truth. Now while this is primarily addressed to leaders, the Bible makes it clear that we are all to care for one another.

In some ways, we're all to be shepherds of the sheep. And we do this in two ways. First of all, we are to keep our leaders accountable.

[ 23 : 47 ] Now in case you don't know who your leaders are, that's myself and Ralph. Keep your leaders accountable, that's your role. Because look at who the wolves might be, verse 30.

Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth. From within sight, not from outside.

Leaders, shepherds, people like me, people like Ralph, can become a wolf. Now I don't think we look very threatening, although, doesn't Ralph mean lover of wolves or something?

So we've got to be careful, Ralph. But we could be, we could be wolves, we're potential wolves. And the church needs to hold their leaders accountable to make sure that they're living in line with the gospel and that they're teaching what is the gospel.

people. So the church needs to pray for us to make sure that we keep the church together and keep the church in the right way.

[ 24 : 57 ] We're not superhuman. We're fragile people who make mistakes and get things wrong. And so we need the church to keep us accountable, to pray for us, to encourage us, to point out areas if we're not in line with the truth of the gospel.

So first, keep your leaders accountable. Second, care for our fellow sheep. The person that you are sitting next to or the one who is behind you is your responsibility.

And the way that we primarily care for each other, we can do it in all kinds of practical ways, but primarily the way we care for each other is to bring the gospel to each other, is to remind ourselves of everything that we have through Jesus Christ.

So we should all be people who are able to read with each other, pray for each other. And I encourage us all to be people who do that and we say it so often, whether you're meeting with somebody one-to-one, whether you're meeting in a small group or whatever you do, that primarily we are people who are bringing God's word, the truth of his gospel, into each other's lives, holding ourselves accountable and encouraging and supporting.

So first, keep your leaders accountable and second, care for your fellow sheep. So first, he reminds us what the church's message should be, that it's all about the gospel of grace.

[ 26 : 39 ] And second, he reminds us how the church leaders should behave. Third, he tells us where the church's finances should go.

Verse 32, Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Well, you say, what's that got to do with finances? I don't see anything about money there. Well, Paul knows that the church is never going to be generous. We are always going to be tight-fisted until we grasp and experience the word of grace.

So he says to us, verse 33, he says, I commit you, I put you into the care of God and to the word of his grace.

The word of grace is the gospel of grace that we've just been talking about. It's all that Jesus has done for us, everything that he has achieved for us. It gives us, look at the rest of verse 32, or it can build us up, strengthen us, and it will give you an inheritance, that eternal's place in his eternal kingdom among all those who are sanctified.

[ 28 : 03 ] So the gospel of grace gives us everything that we need for now and for all eternity. So this is what we are to live on as a church. In some ways, this is to be the diet of our church.

It is to be grace plus grace plus grace. We're constantly to be drinking and eating it in, committing ourselves to the grace of God. And the more we understand this word of grace, the more we allow it to change our lives, it will show us how rich we really are.

It will transform us into model givers. It will make us incredibly generous. Paul's own life was an example of this.

Look at verse 33. The grace of God had so affected Paul's life that he had become generous in giving.

Look at verse 33. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. He's saying, I'm not in this for the money. I'm not in this to get a bigger car or a bigger house.

[ 29 : 20 ] Verse 34. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. Look at my hands.

There's splinters in these hands. Look at the calluses from the tent making that I've done. I worked hard for you so that I could give the gospel of grace freely to you.

The grace had so gripped Paul's life that it had changed Paul into a generous giver. He was literally willing to give his life for them.

You see, if we learn and understand the word of grace and allow that to impact our lives, it will cause us likewise to be generous to those in need.

Look at verse 35. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak, literally those who are unable to help themselves.

[ 30 : 27 ] Remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said, it is more blessed to give than to receive. The weak in our society are the poor, the refugees, those who live in countries destroyed and broken by war and famine.

The weak are all around us within the community of this church family, in our wider community of Carragalline. Now, we have received so much through the Lord Jesus.

We have received grace upon grace. We have received his eternal kingdom so that we can generously give to those in need. Look at the end of verse 35.

He says, it is more blessed to give than to receive. Paul is getting to the end of his journey around Europe.

Five years he had travelled around and we know from the rest of scripture that one of the reasons why he went around those places was to take up a collection to be able to bring back to the church in Jerusalem that was going through a hard time and because of famine.

[ 31 : 44 ] And so I think the principle here for us is if we've received this amazing grace we too will give freely to those who are in desperate need.

We no longer have to be tight-fisted. We no longer need to be worried in terms of the future because we have received all that we need through Christ.

Christ. So Paul has this opportunity to speak to the leaders of this church an influential city in that part of Turkey and it's the same word and it's the same message that he speaks to the church today.

If we want to see a healthy church the church's message has to remain focused on the gospel of grace. the church leaders have to be about protection and care not power and control.

And the church's finances are to be directed towards the weak and the poor not the improvement of the church's lifestyle.

[ 32 : 56 ] This is what will lead to a healthy church and a healthy church that grasps these things will become a church that transforms their life and the community society and the nation all around us.

This is what will bring true life. This is what will bring lasting change. Let's pray together. Father, help us to be people who hear clearly what you are saying to us as a church.

please help us to be always talking about the grace of God's gospel.

Help us to keep that central. Help us to practice it. Help us to live it. Amen. We pray for the leaders of this church church, that we would be people who care well and protect the flock.

And we pray for ourselves that we would all be good shepherds to one another, taking responsibility responsibility to care for one another, and to be accountable to one another.

[ 34 : 39 ] Help us to see how much we have received, and to be generous in our giving to those who are weak.

We thank you for all that you are doing among us, and we pray that we would continually fall in line with what it is to be a healthy church.

Help us to take away the things that are unhealthy, and show us how we should be. And we pray that through us, you would continue your mission in this world and in this community, and that people will come to see the wonder of your kingdom, and the transformation that Christ alone can bring.

we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.