

The example of the apostle

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Date: 20 May 2018

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[0 : 00] And Paul entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.

This continued for two years so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Continuing then at verse 23. About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen.

These gathered together with the workmen in similar trades and said, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

[1 : 24] But there is danger, not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.

When they heard this, they were enraged and were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel.

But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. And even some of the Aristarchs, who were friends of his, sent him to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre.

Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward, and Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defence to the crowd. But when they recognised that he was a Jew, for about two hours, they all cried out with one voice, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

[3 : 00] And when the town clerk had quietened the crowd, he said, Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky.

Saying then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.

If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are pro-councils. Let them bring charges against one another.

But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.

And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly. Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

[4 : 20] 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 towards 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 of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

[5 : 54] Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of 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 everyone 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.

[7 : 17] 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 the word he had spoken that they would not see his face again, and they accompanied him to the ship.

Now it's often said that the church is only ever one generation away from extinction. History is littered with examples of churches or ministries that were once well known or greatly used but which have since died or denied the gospel.

Martin Luther once famously said, the word of God is seldom retained in its purity in any one place beyond the period of 20 or at best 40 years. The people become accustomed to it, grow cold in their Christian love and regard God's gift of grace with indifference.

And so the question is, what will cause a church to remain faithful to the gospel in the second or third or fourth generation? What will ensure Grace Church Dulwich, for example, is still upholding biblical truth when our grandchildren are old?

God. The book of Acts charts the unstoppable advance of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth as it records the continued ministry of the risen Jesus through the apostles' testimony in the power of the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 58] We join the story in chapter 20 at a point where despite opposition, the apostle Paul has enjoyed great success in planting churches across the eastern Mediterranean.

But as he moves on to each new area, one cannot help but wonder what will happen to each church he's planted, whether they will survive without him, what would cause them to persevere?

And Acts chapter 20 gives us Paul's own answer to those questions as he addresses the leaders of the church where he seems to have spent more time than any other. the church in Ephesus.

We read about the founding of that church, didn't we, in chapter 19. We're going to spend the next two Sundays looking at this important and actually deeply emotional speech.

Acts contains a number of speeches from the apostles but this is unusual in that it's addressed not to non-Christians but to Christians and in fact to church leaders, elders.

[9 : 59] Paul knew that the ongoing health of a church depends on its leadership and the purpose that the speech seems to serve in the book of Acts is in helping us understand how the progress of the gospel which the book records will continue on into future generations.

What would the next generation need to do to ensure the church continue to prosper? You may know that last month Commonwealth leaders agreed that Prince Charles would succeed the Queen as head of the Commonwealth.

The Queen will one day hand over the baton of responsibility for the Commonwealth to her son. And here Paul is handing over the baton of responsibility for the Ephesian church to this group of elders he addresses.

And if you look down you'll notice that the speech can be divided into three sections. In verses 17 to 21 Paul reminds the Ephesian elders about the past and his ministry among them.

And then in verses 22 to 27 he looks on to the future and describes what awaits him. We'll be looking at those two sections today. And in light of those things his example in the past and his expectations about the future from verse 28 in the section we'll look at next week we get Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders about the present as he charges them to take over responsibility for the church.

[11:31] Well let's begin then by looking at verses 17 to 21 and Paul's example in the past. Verse 17 Now from Miletus Paul 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.

Back in verse 16 we learn that Paul was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem and so tight for time he makes a brief stopover in Miletus and sends for the leaders of the Ephesian church so that he might speak to them one last time.

It's worth noting that Paul must have been very dear to these church leaders it would have been a three day round trip for them from Ephesus to Miletus. Just imagine how it must have felt for these elders to know that this was the last time they'd ever see Paul or hear him speak again.

The man who'd nurtured and trained and taught them for three whole years if you look at verse 31 was now leaving their lives forever and entrusting to them the great responsibility of looking after a fledgling church.

[12:56] No wonder we learn in verses 37 and 38 that after Paul had finished speaking to them there was much weeping and great sorrow they wouldn't see him again. No wonder they accompanied him all the way to his ship in verse 38 to see him off.

No wonder Luke literally says in chapter 21 verse 1 that he and Paul had to tear themselves away from them before they could set sail. This is deeply moving stuff.

And we soon discover the reasons for this deep bond that existed between Paul and the Ephesian elders as Paul reminds them of his example among them in the past. And he draws attention to two particular things.

His integrity of life and of lip. So there's his integrity of life. Notice Paul is able to appeal to the way he lived the whole time he was with the Ephesians he says in verse 18.

His life had been one of consistency and integrity. He'd set them a godly example. It's very striking I think that as he reminds these leaders of his ministry among them he begins by mentioning his character.

[14:10] The things he appeals to his humility tears and his trials which we'll come on to later and some of which we read about in our first reading in chapter 19 don't seem very impressive do they?

They sound even weak in our world obsessed with self and ego. And yet it shouldn't surprise us.

Elsewhere in the New Testament in the two passages which particularly outline the characteristics expected for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3 written to Timothy who of course was by then the leader of the Ephesian church and Titus 2 the emphasis is not so much on competence as character godliness not just giftedness.

Many churches that go off the rails do so because of pride and we would therefore do well to take heed of Paul's reminder here concerning his humility.

I guess the reason for his humility can be seen in the few words that come before us in verse 19 he served the Lord with all humility.

Paul remembered he was merely a servant and when we remember whom we're serving there can be no room for pride because we all fall far short of Jesus' standards.

[15:34] To boast of our gifts before Jesus would be like one of the guests at the royal wedding yesterday boasting about their second home in Clacton-on-Sea before the Queen. It would be ridiculous wouldn't it when the Queen owns multiple palaces and vast estates across the country.

Now we need to be careful at how we apply this speech in Acts 20 because while humility is of course important for us all the speech is not addressed to all Christians but to church leaders.

In fact in a sense the first application of these verses may be to give us confidence in the Apostle Paul. Perhaps in the few months since he'd left the Ephesian church people there had begun to question his authority over them or his commitment to them and so Paul is quick to remind the elders of how he'd cared for them.

He did love them. He was a genuine article. He did have authority as a true apostle and we're to recognize that today in a world where Paul still has many detractors.

But I think here in Acts 20 Paul isn't so much defending his own ministry as offering it as a blueprint for the Ephesian elders to follow as he passes on responsibility to them.

[16:52] And so while there may be secondary applications here for all of us to be humble as we serve the Lord in whatever ministries we're involved in first and foremost these verses show us what an elder or church leader is to be like as Paul hands over the baton to a new generation of leaders and urges them to follow his example.

It's a great thing therefore to pray for Simon and the leadership team here at Grace Church isn't it? Humility. Whenever the time eventually comes for Grace Church to appoint a new minister or if we ever move and are looking for a new church it would be very tempting to undervalue humility wouldn't it?

And to instead be dazzled by those who are impressive in a worldly sense who have some of those qualities that Athena behind me perhaps has very different from what Paul draws attention to here. But faithful gospel ministers are humble servants of the Lord. I love the story of the 18th century preacher George Whitefield.

Whitefield preached to more people some would argue with greater preaching gifts than anyone else in British history and was used mightily to bring about revival. And yet when asked whether he would see his contemporary John Wesley who disagreed with him on a number of issues in heaven Whitefield replied I expect I expect Mr. Wesley to be so close to the throne of God and eyes so far back that I do not expect to see him at all.

[18:25] You see far from having a high opinion of himself Whitefield was a man marked by humility. That's why despite being an Oxford graduate and a world famous preacher he was willing to associate with and preach to beggars slaves and criminals.

So Paul reminds us here of his humility but notice in verse 19 that it was accompanied also by tears. There was nothing cold or merely professional about Paul's ministry you see.

He'll speak again of his tears in verse 31. True ministry is characterized not by triumphalism but tears. It's hard work.

It requires emotional investment. It can be painful. One of my former bosses is one of the most outwardly unemotional people you could ever meet and yet on one occasion when speaking to a class of pupils at a school mission he broke down in tears when a boy started mocking Jesus. He simply couldn't bear to see Jesus being dishonored. Gospel ministry will sometimes bring great grief as people reject Christ or be marked by tears of love as we plead with them to turn from sin.

[19:46] It may also lead to tears of suffering as we'll see later. Paul's life was one of integrity. He loved those he served. But notice Paul's integrity wasn't limited simply to his life but also to lip as he preached the whole counsel of God to the Ephesian church hiding nothing from them.

Let's pick up his speech at verse 20. Paul reminds his hearers of 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 towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul wasn't content content to set an example to the Ephesians only with his life. He also discharged his responsibility to them with his lips.

You see preaching was at the very heart of Paul's ministry. That's obvious from the verbs here isn't it? Declare teach testify We get the same or similar verbs in verses 24, 25, 26 and 27.

In verse 24 Paul's task was to testify to the gospel. In verse 25 he has proclaimed the kingdom and declared the whole counsel of God in verse 27.

[21:12] And in verse 31 which we'll look at next week he reminds them that he never stopped admonishing them. He was never afraid to teach the negatives as well as the positives. preaching was central to Paul's ministry.

And once again I guess he reminds the Ephesian elders of this because he wanted his pattern of ministry to be a model for their ministry now he was leaving them. In his absence the Christian church wasn't to look for new apostles with fresh ideas or to modernise its teaching as sadly many

seek to do today or to shift the emphasis away from preaching to something else.

No Paul's priorities were to be theirs because Bible teaching, word ministry is sufficient to teach everything needed for the Christian life for every type of person.

You see did you notice the comprehensiveness of Paul's preaching ministry in these verses? Have a look at verse 20 once more. Paul's preaching was comprehensive.

It was comprehensive in its content. Paul didn't shrink from declaring anything that was profitable.

As he says in verse 27 he proclaimed the whole counsel of God to the Ephesians.

[22 : 53] He hadn't left out the unpopular bits or the parts of the Bible which were hard to understand or those that he thought people might reject. And his preaching was comprehensive in its scope too.

Notice he taught in public and from house to house. He'd taken every opportunity to teach each person in the Ephesian church, teaching them at church on Sunday and at growth group midweek. He'd applied God's word to individuals as well as in public. A reminder to us of the usefulness of being part of something like a growth group I guess. And then Paul's preaching was also comprehensive in its audience.

As he explains in verse 21 he preached to Jews and Greeks. So Paul taught the whole truth even when it was unpopular and cared for every individual even when it was inconvenient.

As John Stotters remarked on these verses, Paul shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. He taught the whole gospel to the whole city with his whole strength.

[24 : 03] The ministry of the word had been his priority because he understood it was sufficient to reach all God's people with all God's truth. God's faith.

And the application of all this for us is obvious I hope. You see the focus on preaching here at Grace Church and in other churches isn't simply a matter of the pastor's personal preference or personality type.

No word ministry is essential for any church to prosper. It lay at the heart of the baton that Paul passed on to the next generation of church leaders.

So I hope we rejoice when we hear sermons which don't shrink from telling us anything that is profitable even when they're hard for us to hear. And I hope we welcome it when members of the staff team at Grace Church want to visit us from house to house as it were to encourage us from God's word.

Let's also be those who pray for Grace Church to be a church where the whole counsel of God is proclaimed. I didn't watch much of the royal wedding yesterday but it's very easy isn't it when hearing a sermon to be swept up in what's said or the way it's said but not to notice what isn't said, what's left out.

[25 : 25] Whether it's the seriousness of sin or the reality of judgment or the sin bearing nature of Jesus' death or the cost of following him or the need for repentance that Paul mentions here in verse 21.

In fact it's striking that in summarising his message here Paul does so in terms of the need for repentance and faith. Again he was comprehensive.

He taught the need for Jesus to be our living Lord as well as our loving saviour in how we conduct ourselves. The Puritan preacher Matthew Henry once said some people do not like to hear much of repentance but I think it is so necessary that if I should die in the pulpit I would desire to die preaching repentance and if out of the pulpit I would desire to die practising it.

Indeed when Jesus himself later addresses the Ephesian church at the end of the New Testament in Revelation 2 his command to them was to repent. faithful gospel ministry lovingly calls people to turn from their sin even when it's unpopular.

So Paul demonstrated his integrity among the Ephesians in life and lip but having reminded them of his example in the past in verse 22 he then moves on to his future and that's our second main heading which we'll look at more briefly.

[26 : 57] Paul's expectations expectations for the future. Let me read from verse 22. And now behold I am going to Jerusalem constrained by the spirit not knowing what will happen 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 receive 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. Paul tells the Ephesian leaders that this was the last time they'd ever see him.

He'd done his job among them. As he puts it in verse 26 he was innocent of their blood. He'd shared the whole counsel of God with them. And I guess he tells them about his future because it was now time for them to take over.

The baton would now pass to them in his absence. And it seems he wants to impress on them two things about what lay in store for him. Two further hallmarks of faithful gospel work that future generations of leaders were to imitate.

First there's his expectation of suffering. There was much Paul didn't know about the future, about his future, but what he did know is it would involve suffering.

[28 : 34] Remember Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and as is implied here and becomes clear in the next chapter of Acts, Jerusalem would mean persecution for Paul. Look down at verse 23 again.

The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. Paul faced suffering, not just occasionally, but in every city.

His life was marked by hardships and persecution and trials. He's already mentioned that at the end of verse 19. And yet he didn't shirk from them.

You see, Paul wanted the church leaders in Ephesus to understand that faithful Christian ministry necessarily leads to suffering. The faithful pastor is as likely to experience imprisonment as ecclesiastical advancement, ridicule and mockery as well as applauds and praise when they preach faithfully.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian leader who was of course like Paul imprisoned and then tortured and executed by the Nazis once remarked that suffering is the badge of true discipleship.

[29 : 51] The tragedy of course is that when we get to the end of Paul's life in 2 Timothy, we find him telling Timothy that everyone in the province of Asia, which included Ephesus, had deserted him.

Only Luke is with me, he tells Timothy, as he writes a letter in which we discover that a less costly, this world focused gospel, had become popular in Ephesus.

Not all those Paul addressed at Miletus went on to follow his passion of ministry. And it poses us the question whether we as a church are ready to suffer and willing to support leaders who suffer for their faithfulness to Jesus.

Or are we more likely to get embarrassed if our leaders are unpopular in the local community because of the message they preach? It's no coincidence that the closing chapters of Acts mirror the closing chapters of Luke, the book we've been looking at recently on a Sunday.

Because just as Jesus resolutely set his face to Jerusalem knowing the suffering it would bring in Luke's gospel, so Paul does exactly the same here in Acts. Luke is telling us in his two volumes that this is normal Christian experience, especially for those in leadership.

[31 : 12] Jesus suffered. Paul suffered. Faithful Christian leaders will suffer also. So Paul knew suffering lay ahead.

But he also wants to impress on the Ephesian elders his ongoing single-mindedness in the face of it. Verse 24 again. 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. They're remarkable words, aren't they?

Imagine for a moment how it would affect your life to know only that prison and afflictions and indeed very probably death await it. Paul could so easily have given up on ministry or watered down his message or at the very least avoided Jerusalem.

But for Paul it didn't shake him that suffering lay ahead because as he says in verse 24 he didn't account his own life as of any value. And it didn't matter to him that he didn't know exactly what was ahead because he did know one thing, the only thing he needed to know, that he was in the middle of a race and had a task to complete before he could finish it.

[32 : 33] The task of testifying to the gospel of grace. That was his single minded focus, whatever the cost. Faithful Christian ministers are single minded.

I always find the account of the death of the 19th century criminal Charles Peace a rather sobering story. I wonder if you know it.

Charles Peace was a notorious offender in his day. He was eventually condemned to death for murder and burglary. As he was being led to the scaffold, the prison chaplain walked by his side and urged him to turn to Christ.

But as the chaplain spoke of Christ's power to save, the condemned man turned to him and snarled. Do you believe it? Do you believe it?

And then with obvious bitterness he said, if I believed that, I would crawl across England on broken glass on my hands and knees to tell men it was true. Now Charles Peace of course should have turned to Christ at that moment.

[33 : 39] But I guess in a sense he was right. The gospel minister who really believes the gospel will be single minded in a relentless desire to share that message, to testify to the wonderful gospel of grace.

That's the great task of a pastor. And if he fails to do so, it's a serious thing because look at verse 26. Paul was only innocent of the blood of the Ephesians because he'd faithfully discharged his duty to preach the whole counsel of God to them.

Hugh Latimer was one of the English reformers burned at the stake under Bloody Mary. Like Paul, his ministry was marked by both suffering and single mindedness. We had a royal wedding yesterday and on one occasion Latimer was summoned by Henry VIII to preach before the royal court.

At the time, Henry was engaged in an adulterous relationship with Jane Seymour, while still married to Anne Boleyn. And despite Henry's reputation for getting rid of his enemies, Latimer chose as his text before the king, Matthew chapter 14, verse 4, where John the Baptist tells King Herod in response to his adulterous relationship, it is not lawful for you to have that woman.

Henry was furious with Latimer and demanded that Latimer preach again the following Sunday so that he might retract his words. Latimer agreed to preach again, but as he entered the pulpit, he announced exactly the same passage and gave the same message, saying to himself audibly as he begun his sermon, take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully.

[35 : 27] He was a man who understood his obligation to declare the whole counsel of God to his hearers, whoever they were, whatever the cost.

He was determined, like Paul, to be innocent of the blood of all men, even Henry VIII. In every church I've been in, I've heard at one point or another Christians moan that their pastor is always banging on about evangelism or the need for repentance in the areas of the Christian life where the Bible conflicts with modern culture or that it focuses too much on people's spiritual needs at the expense of their felt needs.

But Acts 20 reminds us that we should actually be thankful to God when our leaders are like that. It's a sign of their love for us. I mean, what other kind of leader would we want than one who doesn't shrink from single-mindedly declaring the whole counsel of God to us?

So as he hands on the baton to them, Paul reminds the Ephesian elders of his example in the past and tells them his expectations for the future. His example was one of integrity in both life and lip and his future would involve single-mindedness amid suffering.

Such leaders may not look impressive, but if the church is to avoid extinction, they are vital in every generation. And next week we'll see why they are so necessary as Paul turns to exhort the Ephesian elders themselves.

[37 : 08] We'll see you next week to next week. ■■■ education in theThank Lumo Transcription
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