

Church for all People

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, St. Paul's. It's great to connect in with you again, even if it is once again on the live stream. We are, I think I've lost count. We're Groundhog Day, I think nine weeks into this lockdown. And over the course of this time, our connection really has been a digital connection. Although there was a great joy yesterday when my family and I, we went for a walk and we ran into another St. Paul's family yesterday. It was just a joy to see faces in such close proximity. This season that we're in is an awkward and a difficult season, and yet it's also a season that we can get comfortable with as well. This technology that we have utilizing over these weeks are an enormous blessing for us to be able to stay connected in some way. And yet this is not the future of the church. Some are arguing this could be the future of the church, this blessing that we're in. And I want to argue it's not the future of the church. It's not a substitution for the church. In fact, in her sobering book,

Alone Together, Sherry Turkle from Massachusetts Institute of Technology writes, Digital connections may offer the illusion of companionship, but without the demands of friendship.

Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other, alone together. That's a great description of our digital age. And the danger of thinking that checking into a live stream once a week is in fact church, that I've done church, or that in fact this could be the future of the church. I'm convinced that like nothing else in our culture, the church has got something very significant to offer our society, and right now offer our society, and beyond this lockdown. This passage that we are launching into today, in Acts 20, says a lot about the significance of the church, the church who we are at St. Paul's, and increasingly church that we seek to be at St. Paul's. So having been separated and locked down for eight, nine weeks, or whatever it's been, and there'll be another month or more before we gathered together again. It could be, in fact, just before Christmas. This message, I think, today is a really helpful message as a reminder message, as a refocusing message, as a let me check my priorities message. What we have here in Acts 20 is truth, change lies because of truth, and the deep relationships that truth can form amongst us. So let's jump into Acts 20 and see that in action. If you've got the St. Paul's app, it'd be great if you could open up there, and you'll notice that I've got three points. I want to highlight three characteristics of the church for all people. And you'll notice that those three headings are three of our seven core values here at

St. Paul's. Bible-saturated, humble authenticity, and treasuring Jesus together. So let's jump straight into this. This is a passage that is often used as a job description for ministers. That is, Paul is addressing the elders of the Ephesian church here. However, what is particularly, particularly crucial at this point in Acts, in the development of Acts, is that this passage in Acts 20 is the only speech in the whole of Acts that's given directly to Christians. So this is not just a message for church leaders, although it's got something quite significant about that and what gospel ministry looks like, but it's a message for all of us, all Christians. So let's jump straight in. Paul spent three years building the church at Ephesus. In verses 18 to 24, he summarizes his ministry to the church, and we read part of that summary in verses 20 and 21, and they kind of want to focus on this one just for a bit. You know that I've 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. So Paul says here,

I have preached and I have taught in Ephesus. That is the essence of the church's purpose in the world captivated right there. That is what the church has, the Christian church has, it has a body of content that must be communicated. Our purpose is to convey truth to the world. Paul has preached and he has taught and he has propagated and defended and guarded a body of truth for three years in Ephesus.

[5 : 36] And this is the job that he now hands down to the elders at Ephesus. And not just to them, but to the church down through the centuries. So this is important. This is really crucial.

The reason why it's crucial is that if you want to know who I am, you can't just believe anything that you want about me if you want to know who I am. You know, if someone comes up to me and says, Steve, you know, you know, I just really like to think of you as a Colombian coffee merchant based out of Dubai who does salsa dancing as a hobby. I just, that's what I want to, I just envisage you as being that.

Now, I do like my coffee. I'd admit that. Salsa dancing, another thing altogether. And it is, it is a free country. And so you can believe that about me if you like, and no one's going to arrest you for that. But it's not the truth. It's not who I am. If you want to know someone, you need to know what is true about them. And what you know to be true about them is what they communicate to you about them. What is the evidence? And it's the same as God. You can't just believe anything you want about him if you want to know him. Let me go one step further and say, you need to know him if you want to know yourself. That's the difference. You can know anything you want about me, make up anything you like about me, but it will have very little impact on you. Not so with God.

God. If you want to know about yourself, you must know God as he is. You see, our modern world says that, well, you know, Steve, you're just a body. You're nothing more than a physical being. There's no soul. There's no spirit. You're just a physical being. And the Bible says, well, actually, you're much more complex than that. You are soul and body. Our modern world says that I'm a product of an evolutionary process. I am a product of biology. I'm a DNA, genes, culture, environment, all those kind of things. The Bible says, actually, it's even more complex than that because you are made in the image of a creator God. And the reality is both accounts of those, both accounts claim to be true, true, but they both can't be right. One form of truth actually has to be wrong.

We need to know the truth if we are to truly know who we are. You see, Christianity declares that the Bible's account of who we are and who God is, is true. The Bible, therefore, must be central to the church. It must be preached. It must be taught. It must be defended. It must be guarded.

[8 : 56] And Paul also modeled here how we should do this when he says to the elders, you know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you.

There's two things here. He says, without hesitation and what was helpful. Paul didn't, in other words, shrink back. He had no hesitation. He did not shrink back. He wasn't afraid. Biblical truth will always offend somebody somewhere.

But the Christian must lift up the message of the Bible and not shrink back from it when it offends. But it's also crucial that we must mix boldness with helpfulness. It's not just boldness. It's not just, you know, just coming out there and declaring the truth and I don't care what anyone's offended by it.

It's also a helpfulness. Notice how Paul speaks with helpfulness in verse 32. That is, truth is never something that we believe for its own sake.

Truth should never lead us to a position of pride where we communicate and we behave and we think that we are better than other people. Truth is a means to an end. Truth is food for your heart.

[10 : 38] It is food for your soul. It is food for your character. All lack of health in our hearts and our souls and our character is because truth is not dwelling in us richly. That is, the truth in that instance is not helpful. If we lack courage, if we lack love, if we lack joy, if we lack peace, hope, patience, it is because we are not dwelling on the truth and applying it to our lives. We're not driving it down in our hearts, into our being so that it transforms us from the inside out. How do we do that?

How do we drive it down? We do it together. Paul preaches and teaches without hesitation and helpfully, he says here both publicly, like I'm doing now, sort of publicly, like I'm doing now, but also from house to house is what he says. The truth is not just to be proclaimed and conveyed and protected and guarded like I might be doing right now, but also in small groups and in personal one-to-one relationships. Now, I want to push something really crucial here right now.

So if you'll just sort of flag it off, I want you to hear this one. Just turning up to a live stream once a week and listening to a sermon like this will never be enough truth for it to produce health in your soul and in your heart and in your life.

Once a week live stream will not be enough. Sometimes our sermons here at St. Paul's are okay.

Sometimes they are blisteringly good. Sometimes, eh, they miss the mark. But even if every single Sunday they were blisteringly good and you walked away with tears and you felt convicted and you spent an hour or so in prayer just applying it to you, it still wouldn't be enough.

[13 : 07] It still would not be enough. Where truth really gets applied in our lives, where it really gets driven down into our hearts is when we study, when we linger over, when we have conversations and accountability with others, when someone brings a word of truth to my life and helps me to see how it connects.

It takes close personal relationships, house to house. Now, I acknowledge there's restrictions at the moment, but take the point. Close personal relationships in Christian community where we discover the truth and we apply the truth in our lives.

A crucial part of that community we see here in this passage are leaders. Leaders who take us on the journey of truth, helping us discover the truth and keep us accountable to the truth.

Paul has a word here for the leaders in verse 28. 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 brought, bought with his own blood. In every church community, some people are appointed as shepherds.

[14 : 31] Shepherds are still sheep, but they have a responsibility to lead the sheep. They have an authority here as overseers of the flock. They oversee the flock by bringing the word of God to them.

That is, the word of the chief shepherd to the sheep. That is, they preach and they teach God's word. They bring the word of God and they apply it into our lives, corporately and individually.

Let me just go on a little bit of a side point to this, which I think is also quite helpful.

In our individualistic West, there are way too many people who identify themselves as Christian. And because they've got access to Christian bookshops, they prefer to do their own work of biblical interpretation and application and create their own faith journey.

That is, they prefer to do it by themselves. That is not God's design. It's not God's design.

[15 : 44] He gives us shepherds and he gives us each other. For truth to make a difference in our life, it must be disseminated within a Christian community.

It must be pushed into our hearts in community. And so if I might just plug here, if you've not joined a community group yet, right now is a brilliant season for you because I'm concerned the longer this goes on, the more individual our journey becomes.

Contact the church office, contact James Barnett, get into a community group now. Also, I want to ask, have you had the opportunity to share what God is teaching you in your engagement in God's word with someone else during this lockdown?

We continue to encourage, as I do here now, for you to pick up your Bible in personal devotional life and share it with someone else, what God is doing with you right now.

Why not, in fact, do that as a community group this week? Maybe just drop the study that you got planned and just share with one another what God is teaching you through his word.

[17 : 12] Secondly, what we see here about the sort of church you want to be is humbly authentic. The shepherd here is not just to bring the word of God to the flock.

Paul says that they must also live it out. The shepherd's life is to be on display that they themselves are under the chief shepherd, that they are being transformed.

By the word of God. Primarily, the shepherd leads with humility, compassion, passion, grace, integrity. In verse 24, we see Paul's own vision of his life since he met Jesus.

He says, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I might finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

So Paul sees here that he's given the task of testifying to God's grace because that is something that he has experienced in his own life. Something that transformed his own life.

[18 : 16] See, this is the Paul who once described himself as the chief of all sinners. a blasphemer, a persecutor of the Lord Jesus and his church.

He consented to the murder, to the beatings and the false imprisonment of Christians. And the gospel of God's grace helped him see that he was off the spectrum, more wicked and sinful than he could ever possibly imagine.

Paul, Paul, the religious man, was self-righteous. And the gospel helped him to see that in fact he was covered in shame and guilt.

The good news tells us the worst possible news about ourselves. Oh, but when we grasp that news, when we understand how sinful we are and we believe that reality, that truth and do what verse 21 says and turn to God and repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, that's the moment we receive the best possible news.

Because of what Jesus has done for us in dying on the cross, we have God's love, we have God's regard, God's life. And it's in no way subject to our own performance in life.

[19 : 45] In Jesus, God loves us as much right now as he will love us a billion years from now. And that means that in Jesus, finally, because of the security and the love that we have in Jesus, the acceptance we have in Jesus, finally, the mask can come off.

We don't need to pretend anymore. We don't need to hide our failings and our flaws. That's what the truth does for you in your life.

It transforms your character. We don't need to be anxious about people noticing that we are anxious. we don't need to pretend that we've got this lockdown all sorted.

Our social media posts can reveal that, in fact, I actually do have bad hair days. Not me, they're all the same, but we do have bad hair days.

Our Facebook posts can reveal to the world that I am just as ordinary as every other parent. My house is just as big of a mess.

[21 : 01] My kids actually don't have fun every single day. I'm not the parent who programs good things for them every day. This is so counter-cultural to the digital age in which we live and the culture that we live in in Sydney.

Our society values power, success, competence, strength, progress. Our culture values us being on top of everything.

We don't talk about the hard things. And so that means very rarely do we ever feel deep inside of us that we ever measure up.

we are always insecure. And you don't need to go much further than your Instagram account and your other social media to realise other people's lives always appear to be better than mine.

But in the gospel, in Jesus, we have the praise of the praiseworthy. Not the praise of a thousand Facebook friends, but the praise of the praiseworthy.

[22 : 18] We can be real with him, authentic. The gospel both brings us to our lowest point, but it also fills us up in a way that we never could be.

It changes us. And Paul reveals here the authentic gospel-shaped life in verse 18. You know how I lived the whole time I was with you.

I served the Lord with great humility and we tears, although I was severely tested by the plot of the Jews. In other words, what Paul says here, this truth of the gospel transformed my life.

life. And my life was on display and it revealed the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. All parts of his life were on display.

Humility, honesty, industry, hard work, meeting needs and generosity were just some of the characteristics of his life. life. If I can push this point a little bit further.

[23 : 28] If Christ-centered biblical saturation, if the truth of the gospel is something that we declare that we are as a church, that we hold to as a church, it must show itself in gospel transformation in life.

If it does not, we have missed the truth. Biblical truth must lead to authentic humility.

Or we need to go back and revisit the truth. This is so crucial for us as we reflect on God's agenda for the gospel to go out to the ends of the world as we go through Acts and mission month.

Paul often talked of his weakness and his hardship in ministry as he does here. Paul was often overwhelmed in ministry. He often had tears, but in Paul's weakness, others experienced the power of God at work.

A pastor, a preacher, a counselor, a friend, a youth leader, who is weak and not altogether, who is clearly humbled by the gospel, moved by the gospel, will authentically reveal a crucified savior to the world.

[25 : 05] a person who is trembling and feeling inadequate, but filled with love and humility will show a crucified savior to another better than a polished, altogether biblical and theological scholar.

Unless the gospel transforms our identity humility and humbles us, then and only then, then and only then, will people want to come into this community and embrace the truth.

Only then. Only then. if I may push it harder around the other way, I care very little about your grasp of the Bible if there's no transformation of life.

We want to be a church that doesn't shrink back from the truth, want to be a church that is sure about the truth, want to be a church that is growing in the truth, we're going to be a church that is so keen to proclaim the truth, and yet a church that is so humbled, so transformed of character that the skeptic, the doubter, the unbeliever will experience such grace and humility and warmth amongst us that the person who walks in with another idea is not going to experience them being shut down.

that's the church I want to be. So finally, I'm convinced that when we have a biblical truth that matches a real genuine change in character, development of humility in the individual, we will see deep relational ties.

[27 : 10] We will treasure Jesus together. one of the things that builds friendships and community is common beliefs and convictions. But you also can't have genuine friendships and community without humility and vulnerability and transparency and sharing of the real you, your real struggles, your real hurts.

No community can be built if everyone is just revealing the airbrushed versions of themselves. Multiple times people have asked me in the last number of weeks, say, how are you getting on?

My default thing is I'm okay. You know, a little hard but I'm okay. The reality is I am okay but it's significantly harder than that.

I have moments where I am deep. I've got moments where I'm feeling I'm languishing, that I'm unsure. I am struggling on so many days to concentrate on anything. This sermon took me most of last week to write.

That is highly unusual for me. This is a struggle we're in right now. And to be honest with you, I'm even finding it hard to pray.

[28 : 32] when we have truth and humility, then we have the ingredients of authentic deep relationships.

At the end of this chapter and the beginning of the next chapter, I think is quite moving. Have a look at verse 36 with me. When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

they all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. And then at the beginning of the next chapter, after we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea.

Now that is genuine, deep relationship. They had to tear themselves away from each other. people together. These are not acquaintances.

This is not Paul and his parish council. These are not associates here. They prayed, they wept, they embraced, they kissed, they had to tear each other from each other away from each other.

[29 : 40] This is deep relationship that is based on truth that has changed them all. The Ephesian elders are European, Paul is Middle Eastern and there is a unity here stronger than their own cultures.

Notice here that they knelt down and they prayed. What does that mean? We are together focusing on another. They have God in common.

C.S. Lewis writes in his book *The Four Loves* that friendship is not absorbed in the other person like a romantic love is.

He says friendship is focused on a common point of interest. The same thing awes them, attracts them, grips them, motivates them.

You start there at that foot and then you over time build in relationship with each other. These guys kneel and they pray to their common fixed point, Jesus.

[30 : 58] They are treasuring Jesus together and as they do that they've built this relationship, this deep connection. Let me just say that any two people, any two people who kneel to Jesus, who have experienced his grace, any two people can have that depth of relationship.

He who binds us together is greater than anything that separates us. This is reflected in the spread of the Christian faith across the globe over the past 2,000 years as I've said before earlier in this series.

The Christian faith is the most culturally and racially diverse religion by far of any other world religion. It changes peoples. It unites peoples like no other religion or philosophy of life.

That's so drastically different than the society in which we live. Most people hang out with people who are like them. Developing deep, relational, cross-cultural barriers is extremely difficult.

What is so unique about the gospel is that it exposes who you are. It changes you. It humbles you in such a way that you can build relationships with people who you would not normally be able to.

[32 : 33] Nothing else in this world has power to do that. Jesus Christ has destroyed the dividing barriers of his hostility and binds us together into deep unity.

Not just a truce between people. More than just getting along, deep, deep friendship. Now of course we must work at it.

We must choose to do it and keep looking to the gospel as we do it. What's remarkable about this passage, as many commentators will point out, is that in Luke chapter 9 we are told that Jesus resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. Jesus is the power here for us to build the church that we need to be. It's the gospel is the power for our friendships and our relationships with one another.

Jesus resolutely set his face to Jerusalem. What is remarkable in this passage is that Paul, likewise, will not be distracted from going to Jerusalem.

[33 : 46] Jerusalem. Paul is called to Jerusalem by the Holy Spirit and like Jesus he knows full well that he may die there.

Paul is clearly walking in the footsteps of his Saviour and yet the difference is he's not like Jesus.

Unlike Jesus, as Paul travels to Jerusalem, he is surrounded by friends every step of the way. Everywhere Paul goes on his way to Jerusalem, he has support, he has friends.

It's the opposite of Jesus. On the night of his arrest, the Lord Jesus was deeply distressed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

His friends were there. they were asleep. In the hour of he described of his greatest need, they were asleep and they could not even kneel and pray with him.

[35 : 00] Not even for 10 minutes. Jesus Christ was abandoned by his friends, but the ultimate blow came when he cries out from the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He was all alone. He felt a disconnection, a cosmic loneliness that we would never experience, the worst possible form of loneliness.

And he did that so that you and I could be friends, not just with God, but with each other. He took all the barriers away.

This kind of deep relationship with God and with each other is what every single one of us need. And right now we should be feeling that more and more in this lockdown.

yes, we can still have it to a degree, this friendship now. It's why I've got to say this digital church thing is such a blessing for us in this season, but I just need to push this point.

[36 : 17] This is nothing but an emergency measure. This is a stopgap measure. This is not the ultimate way forward. Face-to-face gathering as the people of God is so precious.

And you need it. You absolutely need it. In order to understand what you have in relationship with Christ. And yet we still have the opportunities to build those relationships now.

So can I ask, what is stopping you jumping straight on after this service into the morning tea over Zoom? I'm assuming you don't have anywhere else to go.

What's stopping that? Too busy? Or are you afraid? Does the gospel need to transform you in that part of your life?

Are you afraid? Afraid of a lack of privacy? Afraid for the real you to be known? Afraid of accountability?

[37 : 26] I just need to push it. Jesus died alone so that we can live together. And I'm going to say I'm missing you. I'm missing the togetherness.

We have something very significant to offer this world. We have truth. Truth. We have a gospel message of hope.

Gospel message of genuine transformation of life. life and a gospel message that draws us together into deep fellowship as we walk this journey together.

This is the church that we are at St. Paul's and this is the church that we will seek to build at St. Paul's. God bless you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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