

Sermons in Acts: Finish the Race

We come to the end of our series on sermons in Acts. Most of them, from Peter on the day of Pentecost, to Paul in Athens, have shown us some strategy for sharing the good news of Jesus and His resurrection. We've seen the heart of the gospel message preached over and over again: Jesus was the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. He did wonderful works of power and love, but was executed by the religious leaders of the Jews. However, God raised Him from death on the third day and those who were close to Him before His death were now witnesses of His resurrection. The promise that He now offers is forgiveness of sins for everyone who believes in Him, who puts their trust in Him.

We've seen that this good news is for Gentiles as well as for Jews and we've seen Paul introduce the gospel to a group of Greek philosophers in Athens by proclaiming that the true God who will judge the world wants to have relationship with us. But now, as we close this series, we will look at a different kind of message, one where Paul is addressing only Christians; in fact, he is speaking to the leaders, the elders, of the church in Ephesus.

Paul had decided against stopping at Ephesus this time because he didn't want to spend further time in the province of Asia. He was hurrying to get to Jerusalem, if possible, for the Festival of Pentecost. But when we landed at Miletus, he sent a message to the elders of the church at Ephesus, asking them to come down to meet him. When they arrived, he declared, "You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now I have done the Lord's work humbly -- yes, and with tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews." (Acts 20:16-19)

Doesn't this sound like a farewell speech already? It will become clear as Paul goes on that this is "good-bye", but right from the outset he makes this kind of summary statement: "The whole time I've been in your area I've done God's work humbly and I've endured the trials caused by the plots of the Jews." Paul's life ministry has been to impart to others a model of how to live the Christian life and, as he's gone around establishing new churches and choosing leaders for them, he's taught these people how to be imitators of Jesus, how to carry themselves in such a way that people will be drawn to Jesus through their lives. And here he begins his talk to the Ephesian elders by mentioning two of these life skills, these character qualities of the Christian: humility and endurance. We'll come back to these later.

Yet I never shrank from telling you the truth, either publicly or in your homes. I have had one message for Jews and Gentiles alike - the necessity of turning from sin and turning to God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. (20:20,21)

What gives a person 20/20 vision? Acts 20:20 should help us remember that: "I never shrank from telling you the truth." There are a number of reasons for not telling the truth, of course. One, we don't want to offend anyone or hurt their feelings. We want people to like us, so we tell them the lies they want to hear. Another reason for avoiding the truth is because the truth can cost us something. I read a classic example of this just over a week ago and it comes to us from a research project from the University of

California San Francisco. In the 1960's a growing number of studies were showing that sugar, not fat, was behind the growing number of heart attacks. The researcher went through the letters of two professors, both now dead, who had published a study claiming that sugar was not to blame, that it was dietary fat and cholesterol that were the real culprits. She found that the two professors had been paid the equivalent of \$48,000 in today's money by the sugar industry to come up with a review of hand-picked research and she also found a letter from one of the representatives of the sugar industry expressing his approval of the 'findings' that these two had come up with. "Let me assure you this is quite what we had in mind," he wrote. Fifty years later and after many studies into diet and heart disease, we now know that sugar is a major contributor, but, if we look at these two pictures and ask which is more dangerous to heart health, most of us will gravitate to the bacon. By the way, one of those professors went on to become the head of nutrition at the United States Department of Agriculture where, in 1977, he helped draft the fore-runner to the federal government's dietary guidelines.

Truth has been a casualty in our culture. Lies are the staple of politicians of all stripes, the necessary ammunition of the politically correct movement and the way some people can make a lot of money. If the U.S. or Canada were a nation that valued its heritage of Christian faith, we wouldn't see the same tolerance of blatant falsehoods. But we're now a society that values the survival of the fittest, the smartest, the richest, the most attractive. Integrity surprises people. A teller gave me too much change the other day and I told her and gave some of it back. She thanked me for being honest - as if that was unexpected. The overall shift in values from being rooted in Christian moral teaching to a more "survival of the fittest" mode means that it has become, and will become, more difficult to speak the truth, because the truth might be offensive, might be unpopular, or might be threatening to a particular industry or powerful individual. I don't know of any high profile person who says this kind of thing in a public or prominent way, but it just seems to be an obvious conclusion to make.

The same is true of the second statement that Paul makes in this little paragraph, that he has had one message to preach to Jew and Gentile alike - the necessity of turning from sin and turning to God. Sin has probably never been a really popular word in the English language. It's not the topic of polite conversation at a social gathering. It's not even the topic of conversation in most of our Bible studies and prayer groups. And we don't talk about "sin" in our society as a whole. People can be called bigots or haters or psychopaths or sociopaths, but you can't call someone a sinner because calling something sin means that there is a moral standard that everyone is accountable to - only when someone violates some accepted standard can their activity be called sin -- and a large chunk of our society has rejected God's standards. Things like the 10 commandments have been replaced in our culture by the "happiness commandment" -- as long as you're happy and not hurting anyone. Oh, never mind that last part - as long as you're happy, it's all good.

Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that he has not only preached that message, turn from sin, but has also taught the other side of it - "and turn to God". And, he has taught

the necessity of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We've seen this message all throughout the book of Acts, so I won't spend time on it this morning - just to say that I think we in the West especially, need to take seriously the call to live and act out of faith in Jesus rather than faith in government, faith in our bank account or faith in the abilities we have to survive or to get ahead. Faith was central to the message of Jesus, and to the teaching of the apostles. Looking to Jesus and trusting in His love and care are absolutely key to living the way God intends for us to live. He is our source, our hope, our Redeemer and we follow Him by faith, not by sight - that was Paul's message.

Now we return to Paul at Miletus:

And now I am going to Jerusalem, drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit, not knowing what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit has told me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus - the work of telling others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love. (20:22-24)

There's a whole sermon in each of those two verses. The first tells us a lot about the work of the Holy Spirit, that He draws our hearts towards the things He wants us to do, that we who know Him can't feel at peace if we're not doing the thing He's calling us to do, that He has the ability to open windows into the future for us, telling us what we need to prepare for, and that the Holy Spirit doesn't just give us an important word once and expect us to run with it -- He'll often tell us again and again, as He did with Paul in city after city. Those are important teachings on the Spirit's ministry in our lives, and I encourage you to reflect on that verse yourselves.

The second verse tells us what makes life valuable, what makes it worth living. "My life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus." Paul's life was worth living because He was doing what God had created and called and gifted him to do. A life that's spent in selfishness, rebellion against God's purposes or fear, is a life that falls short, way short, of its potential. Paul knew what God had called him for and found a life worth living in following the purpose he had been given - to tell others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love. Just think about the words Paul uses there. He could have said that his purpose was to tell others the gospel of Jesus, the good news of the resurrection and forgive-ness, but he describes it all as God's kindness and love.

In the next paragraph Paul tells them that none of these elders of the church in Ephesus will ever see him again and that he has been faithful in declaring all that God has for them. Then we pick it up in verse 28:

And now beware! Be sure that you feed and shepherd God's flock -- His church -- purchased with His blood -- over whom the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders. I know full well that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Even some of you will distort the truth in order to draw a following. Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you -- my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you. (20:28-31)

So there are dangers, both from outside the church and from within the church. Note the contrast between the ones who are described as wolves and the ones who are appointed by the Spirit to watch over the people. The wolves are looking out for themselves, seeking to gain a following, to swing people onto their side, and will make divisions and hurt some in order to draw others to themselves. The ones the Spirit calls give constant watch and care and weep for the people, love the people, give themselves night and day to the care of the people of God. Through the years I've seen lots of situations where someone has an idea, an agenda, for the direction of the church, but they don't love the people who are the church, and so their agenda becomes divisive and hurtful. We have to guard our own hearts and our own actions to prevent that. Now, back to Paul:

And now I entrust you to God and the word of His grace -- His message that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those He has set apart for Himself. (20:32)

This is an important verse because it tells us what will be vital for us to know for our own growth and the growth of the church: the key is the word of God's grace. It is not found in a word of legalism, or of condemnation, but is found in the core of the gospel. It is grace that sustains us, that strengthens us and that enables us to persevere on the road to God's glorious promises. Hear it again: "The word of His grace ... is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those He has set apart for Himself." Hold onto that - that's the message that we receive by faith and if we turn it into legalism and judgment we make the same mistake the believers in Galatia did that inspired Paul's epistle of grace and Christian freedom. You won't grow spiritually by trying harder or by doing more -- you grow spiritually by receiving God's grace and loving Him for it.

The chapter ends under a cloud of sadness. Paul urges the elders to work hard and to be generous, following his example and reminds them of Jesus' words, that it is more blessed to give than to receive -- contrary to popular opinion. When he finished speaking he knelt down and they prayed together and then there were the tearful farewells as they embraced each other and then accompanied him down to the ship. They were deeply saddened by Paul's statement that they would never see him again.

When we think of Paul and his "all-in" personality, we might think that he was too over the top for people, too aggressive, maybe putting others off with his zeal for the mission of the church. But here we see the real picture, that Paul was greatly loved and appreciated, that his presence was cherished and his example and witness to them had been life-giving for the Ephesian elders.

Now, let's look at some applications for ourselves. We started off with Paul's summary statement in which he described his ministry among the Ephesians with two words: humility and endurance.

"You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now I have done the Lord's work humbly -- yes, and with tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews."

Why is it important that we minister in humility?

1. Because we don't know everything that God knows. If someone on the Alpha Course were to ask us why God has allowed 9/11 or Trump vs. Clinton or the deaths of so many blacks from gunshots fired by white police officers in the U.S., we wouldn't actually know how to answer. We could throw out some ideas - but we don't really know. Some people think they know and they come across in a negative way, as arrogant and condemning. It's okay to say that you don't know, that it's all part of the evil that's in the world and we don't have access to the information about how long it will go on or how much of it we're being spared on a daily basis - we just don't know. That's a humble response.
2. Another reason humility is important is because it keeps us from putting ourselves above other people. Nothing puts up a barrier to relationship more than coming across as superior, as knowing more, as being a better person -- and it's all just a false front. I like how Alpha trains us to NOT be the person with all the answers, but to be a facilitator of discussion, to be someone who draws people out and asks for their opinion. That just shows respect and affirmation.
3. Humility is required of us because that's how Jesus came to earth and that's the kind of attitude that He modeled for us. If we're going to follow His example and show His character to others, it can only be done in humility.

The other thing Paul describes is "endurance" and he uses that word in connection with the opposition he faced from the Jews. They would often oppose him to his face in the cities where he preached, or they would come in after he was gone and start adding legalism to the grace Paul had taught there. So he has had to put up with a lot of opposition, a lot of antagonism, and we may very well face that as well. How do we cope?

1. We try not to take it personally. If we listen to the words people speak against Jesus, we recognize that they are not angry with us, and probably not angry with Jesus, but maybe have some anger or hurt with something that happened to them or to their family or friends that wasn't gracious, wasn't loving, wasn't right or good, but it happened in the church. We should extend a ton of grace to people who have been hurt by the actions of other Christians, even if those actions were right and even if the person's perspective on those actions is way out of whack. Hurt people need to find healing for that hurt if they are going to be open to the love that God has for them. We can help if we endure the anger, the pain, the complaints, the revisions of history, the just and unjust critiques of the church, the misinterpretations of God's character -- whatever it is. We just keep speaking the truth and make sure we do it in love.
2. We keep our eyes on the goal. The Bible talks about lots of evil things that will come into the church -- and Paul does in this passage! -- people will stir up divisions, there will be false teachings, the love of many will grow cold. In the midst of these challenges, we will need to endure, to hold on tight to the things we have come to know - that Jesus is alive, that He is always with His people, that His grace is sufficient for us in all circumstances, that we are loved by God, that His plans are always for our good. And we keep believing that His promise of eternal life is real.
3. On the small scale, we put up with the little things that we don't like, the things our brothers and sisters put us through. We endure the task of bearing with the pain of

life, especially as we help one another to carry their burdens and to deal with their struggles. There's a whole lot of enduring that goes on in the Christian life, including enduring the process of change that the Holy Spirit keeps leading us into.

To all these things, we add speaking the truth, in love, and holding onto the truth when it is challenged by others. One of the ways Paul did that was that he confronted sin, deliberate rebellion against God's commands, and called people to turn from sin and turn towards God. In the nicest, kindest, most loving way possible, we need to do the same, because in doing that, we are calling people out of darkness and into the light, into the truth, into a lifestyle of honoring God with our choices. No wonder we will need humility and no wonder we will need endurance. But it can be done and Paul's life and his final goodbyes to the Ephesian elders show that it can be done with great love and deep respect.