

Stay The Course

Acts 20:17-32

Bryn MacPhail / Nov. 7, 2010

As we seek to close out our 10-week sermon series from the Book of Acts, my expectation is that our text for this morning will provide us with an adequate summary for engaging in Christian ministry.

The apostle Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, but he has a brief stopover in Miletus and so he takes the opportunity to call for the elders from nearby Ephesus.

What follows is one of the most memorable farewell accounts in all of Scripture. Paul explains to the leaders of the Ephesian church that they will never see him again (20:25). Quite naturally, Paul wants to impart to them one final message of wisdom.

I think we get this. Many of you know what it is to be at the side of a loved one during their final days on earth. When our ailing loved one speaks to us, every phrase and every word takes on a special place of importance. As we attempt to say “good-bye” to our loved ones, we’re looking for them to give us a final message of inspiration.

This is how I imagine the Ephesian elders on the day when Paul called them together.

And while I can hardly compare my ministry context to Paul’s predicament, I do know what it is like for a pastor to say good-bye to a

congregation having done this 6 months ago. I remember having a strong impulse to choose my final words carefully, and having a desire to convey a message to help the congregation to wade sensibly into the future.

I don't know if it seems backwards to have your newly settled pastor talk about a farewell speech. But again, I hope you will see that Paul's message to the Ephesian elders provides us with an excellent summary of what Christian ministry looks like, or at least, what Christian ministry *should* look like.

To help us track with Paul this morning, I have broken down his message into 4 parts:

- 1) The **Task** of Ministry
- 2) The **Manner** of Ministry
- 3) The **Context** of Ministry
- 4) The **Reward** of Ministry

(Sorry—no helpful acronyms for you this morning!)

By “Task of Ministry” I'm referring to *the primary thing that the local church ought to be doing*.

If you survey Paul's letters you see that there are many activities worthy of the church's attention. But if you want to see *the main thing*—if you want to see the activity Paul regards as *central* to our

mission, then read his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20.

For Paul, the central task of the local church is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We see this everywhere in his farewell speech. In verse 21, Paul says, **“I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”**

In verse 24, Paul identifies this task as the most important thing in his life—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.”**

The final years of Paul’s life were spent talking to others about Jesus. Proclaiming the gospel of Jesus was the primary mark of Paul’s ministry.

As we give our attention to this passage of Scripture this morning, it is my encouragement to you that we be similarly marked.

There are many good things we could be doing, and many good things we could be known for.

We could and should be known for our compassionate service to the surrounding neighbourhood. We could be known for having a vibrant children’s ministry. We could be known for having outstanding music. We could be known for our warm hospitality....and the list goes on.

But let's at least admit that Paul names none of these things. As Paul prepares to leave the church of Ephesus behind, and as he gives them one final exhortation, let us take note that it is all about the Gospel of Jesus.

I'm not suggesting that we proclaim Jesus to the exclusion of these other things, but rather, I'm suggesting that these other things find their root in Jesus.

The good things we do, and the programs we initiate, ought to be designed to promote the Gospel.

Because what we learn from Paul is that our **task** is singular: *We are charged with sharing the message of what God has done through Jesus Christ.*

Now, *how* we do that may take many forms. And the temptation is to fall in love with the forms. Our temptation is to sometimes prioritize the forms. But the forms are just the vehicle. The primary task of the Christian, and the primary task of the local church, is to proclaim Jesus Christ.

Having identified **the task** of Christian ministry, we now turn our attention to "the manner" in which we are to engage in this task.

If proclaiming the gospel is the "what" of ministry, this second prong describes the "how" of our task.

The examples of “how not to” share the gospel are easy to come by.

The gospel should never be imposed by force.

Sharing the Gospel should feel more like you are presenting a gift to a friend than it should feel like you are debating with an opponent.

Think also of *the disposition* of the preacher or the evangelist. We ought not to be the least bit angry in our proclamation of the Gospel. We ought not to be unduly aggressive as we share the message of Jesus. Nor should we be leveraging guilt and shame when presenting the gospel to others.

But rather, we take our cue from Paul, who reminds the Ephesian leaders of his manner: **“You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and tears”** (20:18, 19).

Paul did not simply *talk* about the gospel to the Ephesians; he *lived* the gospel among them.

There’s no finger wagging here. There’s no “my way or the highway” speeches. Paul did not come to them with an air of superiority, but rather he served them **“with great humility”**.

Nor was Paul cold or unfeeling as he proclaimed Jesus, but rather he pleaded with them with tears in his eyes.

Would you agree that our mandate is rather simple? Proclaim Jesus from a posture of genuine humility.

What then, is holding us back? Why does it appear that so few Christians, and so few congregations, are on track with this mandate?

I think the answer has to do with the third prong of our outline. What makes our simple mandate so challenging to execute is “the context of ministry”.

Here we see many similarities between Paul’s ministry context and our own. While we wouldn’t say that it is dangerous for us to proclaim Jesus, as it was for Paul, we can say that it is often unpopular for us to talk about Jesus.

And that makes us pause, doesn’t it? We don’t want others to feel uncomfortable. We’re nervous about upsetting the equilibrium of our relationships by talking about Jesus.

As a pastor, I feel that nervousness whenever I meet someone who has no idea what I do for a living. I’m nervous because experience tells me that the minute they find out what I do, their posture towards me is going to change.

Many of us, quite frankly, are afraid of the resistance that will inevitably arise if we begin talking about Jesus.

As a result, we often keep quiet. But because we have a sincere desire to be faithful, we end up choosing to do other things instead.

I think it is fantastic when a congregation becomes immersed in serving the surrounding neighbourhood. I think it is fantastic when a congregation is able to build and sustain a ministry to teenagers. I think it is terrific when a congregation is able to establish a quality music program. I think it is commendable for a congregation to regularly host fellowship events.

The danger, however, is for these *good endeavours* to distract us from our *main endeavour*.

And we're tempted to focus on these other endeavours because it is far more popular to do so.

We live in a society that will cheer us when we feed the poor, we'll be cheered when we mentor youth, and we'll be cheered when we promote good will and good manners among people.

But the cheers will likely diminish when we begin proclaiming Jesus Christ, crucified for sinners.

Paul explains as much using the metaphor of sheep and wolves—he says the Ephesian elders, **“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 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!”** (20:29-31).

I sometimes hear organizations talk about, “Staying on mission”. That’s what I hear Paul saying. More than that, I hear him calling us to *guard* the mission. I hear him warning that circumstances and people are conspiring against our staying on mission, and so we must fiercely protect our commitment to the main task.

How did Paul do it? How did Paul stay on mission?

I sense that Paul was able to stay on mission by *always keeping the finish line in view*. Or, to put it another way, Paul was motivated and focused by what I would call, “the reward of ministry”.

Paul says, **“I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish the course”** (20:24).

Paul is comparing his attentiveness to the gospel of Jesus Christ with an athlete’s dedication to finishing a race.

Paul also employs this analogy in his second letter to Timothy chapter 4, verse 7, where he writes, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing”** (2Tim. 4:7, 8).

Paul assures us that when our focus is on the advancement of the gospel of Christ, eternal rewards with infinite value await us.

Our **task** is clear: We are to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our **manner** should be compelling: We need to proclaim Jesus with genuine humility and great sensitivity.

Our **context** is challenging: We will be tempted to focus on noble things that are not the main thing.

Our **reward** is great: Jesus promises: **“No one has left anything for My sake and the gospel's who will not receive back a hundred fold”** (Mt. 19:29).

In other words: It is worth it!

Whatever you time you give, whatever sacrifices you make, whatever energy you expend, whatever resources you contribute to help the gospel message spread—it is worth it!

Friends, let's follow Paul's example—let's hold nothing back, and let's make every effort to *stay the course*.