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Acts 20:17-21

Thirty-second Message

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LAST WORDS: A LOOK AT WHAT MATTERS IN MINISTRY – 2

Last week, we began to look at Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders, in the 20th chapter of the book of Acts. These were the apostle's final words to men he probably had appointed and to whom he had given three years of his life.

At last, Paul had embarked on his long anticipated return to Jerusalem. Years, even decades had passed since his departure from that city, and he wanted to return there by Pentecost. He and his companions booked passage on a merchant ship that was slowly making its way down the Aegean toward the Mediterranean, stopping at various centers of trade along the way. As the Lord would have it, the freighter stopped in Miletus, close to Ephesus, a layover that probably would last several days. Paul made use of this time by requesting the Ephesian elders to come and meet him for a final time. One of the great farewells of Scripture is heard in these verses. If you want to grasp some of the pathos of this event, think back to some of your own times of saying good-bye to loved ones.

This very emotional farewell ended with much tears and affection. Reading the passage with sterile detachment deprives us of its life and benefits. These significant words summarize Paul's years of laboring for the gospel, and set out Biblical principles of ministry. They have been very significant in my own understanding of what ministry is all about. These verses taught me what I was supposed to do. This certainly is a condensed version of what Paul said. They were written by Luke, who was probably taking shorthand notes. So here is the verbatim, though condensed message that Paul delivered to these leaders. We will read the entire message and then focus on the first paragraph.

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

"And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

"And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one 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 have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they should see his face no more. And they were accompanying him to the ship. (Acts 20:17-38 NASB)

As we have already seen, Paul's message divides into four sections, the last three of which are separated by the words, "And now" (verses 22, 25, and 32). We might call these paragraph breaks. Each break also marks a change in verb tenses.

The first section, verses 18-21, deals with the past; the second division, verses 22-24, are in the present; and verses 25-31 are in the future. Finally, verses 32-35 form the apostle's last will and testament, his legacy.

We will focus on the first paragraph, as we did last week (verses 18-21), in which Paul looks back on his years of ministry.

The two main ideas in this paragraph are found in the two main verbs, "I was with you" (verse 18), and verse 20, "I did not shrink from declaring...and teaching." Here we have the essential elements of any ministry: being with people, making friends, befriending people (the relational side of ministry), and teaching them the Scriptures (imparting truth, the revelational side of ministry). Those are the basics, the parameters, the essential elements, without which there is no ministry. Ministry is not that complicated. It is simply making friends and imparting truth. Everything else is superfluous.

Jesus is our model. Observing his life and that of the apostle Paul, two things emerge around which everything else revolved: they were with people, and they taught them. Those were their primary tasks. They befriended others and imparted truth. John described Jesus as one who was "full of grace and truth." Love and truth are everything. Without truth, love is mere sentimentality. We can't love without truth, because truth defines love, telling us what is best for another person. But truth without love is cold and sterile, mere dogma. Ministering effectively therefore involves growing in those two areas: building relationships, and understanding and communicating the Scriptures.

Last week, we focused on the relational side of ministry: making friends. This is not an easy task. From the first century on, Christians have had difficulty fitting into and penetrating society. But penetration is the name of the game. Without it we're good for nothing, like salt that has lost its tang. We've got to mingle more to gain a greater measure of solidarity with the world and win the right to be heard. Jesus socialized with the irreligious. We tend to cluster too much, enjoying one another's company at the expense of outsiders. We haven't learned from our Lord the principle he taught so well. There is no lasting influence without sustained and loving contact. Communicating through bumper stickers, tee shirts, billboards and lapel buttons doesn't earn us a hearing. In fact, rather than communicating, these things often alienate people.

Now friendship is more than just socializing. It is a matter of spending time with God and his word, cultivating friendships, and then telling people what God has been teaching you. The friendship between Jonathan and David is instructive here. At a critical time in David's life, Jonathan befriended him. Once when Jonathan found David

after he was sent off in the wilderness, the text says, "He strengthened his grip on God." What a great phrase! That's what a friend does. The goal is not merely to socialize with people; we want to strengthen their grip on God.

Imparting truth is done in two ways. First, by our example, and second, with our words. And it is done in that order. Following last week's message, a friend reminded me of St. Francis's powerful exhortation, "Preach the gospel constantly and, if necessary, use words." Example is the most powerful way to communicate truth.

Notice Paul's appeal to these elders' knowledge of the kind of person he was. Three times in the passage he asks them to remember, saying, "You yourselves know" (verses 18, 31, 34). Paul's life and ministry were in plain view. He had nothing to hide. His motives were pure. They knew how he had lived during the whole time he was with them, from beginning to end. He appeals to their memory of his ministry: his humility, tears, suffering, and sacrifice.

Lives speak much more powerfully than words. Paul thinks of his message in terms of two elements: He both embodied and imparted the truth. As Chaucer said of his monk in *The Canterbury Tales*: "First he wrought, and then he taught." That is where our authority, credibility and wisdom come from—our submission and obedience to the truth. Nothing is more devastating than duplicity in the Christian life. We are referring not to perfection, but sincerity. We need to be authentic, living out the life of the indwelling Christ.

As for imparting the truth, notice Paul's passion and the thoroughness of his teaching. He didn't hold back from teaching anything that was profitable (verse 20). He taught them about the necessity of repentance and faith. He taught them about God's grace (verse 24). He taught them God's whole plan of salvation (verse 27). He was concerned that everybody in Ephesus heard the whole counsel of God. He taught both Jews and Gentiles, both residents and visitors. He wanted to teach everything to everybody.

And look at his methods. He taught publicly (both in the synagogue and the lecture Hall of Tyrannus), and privately (in homes). And he did this both night and day (verse 31). He was the energizer battery. He just kept going and going. He shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. With his whole strength he taught the whole gospel to the whole city.

The apostle's passion to communicate truth is a great model for us. He did not want them to be short-changed in any way. At times he stayed up long hours to cover all that God has said to man. This, of course, was because he knew and understood that it is the knowledge of the word that sets you free.

Paul once summarized his ministry in this way in his letter to the Corinthians: “Let a man regard us as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.” The “mysteries of God” is the word of God. Here again we see these same two elements—befriending and imparting. As far as people were concerned, Paul saw himself as a servant. As far as truth was concerned, he saw himself as a steward. A steward in those days managed an estate. He was like a housekeeper or butler, one who rummaged around the pantry and brought out food and wine for the family meals. A steward or stewardess on an airplane does the same thing: they have been entrusted with certain commodities they are responsible to dispense. Paul says the job of elders and pastor-teachers, and anyone involved in ministry, is to descend into the pantry of God himself and bring out the goodies of his word on which others can feed.

We have been entrusted with some valuable commodities, what Paul calls in Corinthians the “mysteries of God,” that deposit of truth that contains the secrets of life. These are the truths about life, about God and about ourselves, what Ray Stedman used to call the “lost secrets of humanity.” The Bible contains the answers to the questions that plague us. How do you deal with your guilt? How do you heal a hurting marriage? How can you be reconciled with a brother or sister when the relationship is disrupted? How can you find meaning and purpose in life? What do you do when your heart is breaking?

These are the secrets that have been lost. They are mysteries, because they are undiscoverable by observation. But God has revealed them to the apostles, who through the process of illumination and inspiration, spoke and wrote of them. They are recorded in the Bible, and they are available to be revealed by the Spirit to those who love God. That’s how we understand what life is all about. That’s how we can face difficult times and not collapse. That’s why I can read to my sister, Marie Chaney, “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.” That is how we discover a resource for living when everything else is taken away.

Paul’s passion was to tell people of the grace of God and his love for the human race. That is what we learn when we read the Scriptures. The Bible is essentially a handbook on salvation. Its effect is to save us, to transform us. Its primary purpose is not science, or even history, but redemption. That’s why Luke summarizes Paul’s message as repentance toward God and faith in Christ.

The whole Bible is an unfolding of God’s plan of redemption: man’s creation in God’s image, his fall into sin, God’s continuing love for us in spite of our rebellion, his eternal plan to save man through his covenant of grace with a chosen people, and the culmination of that plan in Christ. None of

this would be known apart from revelation. Since the Bible is a book of salvation, and since salvation is through Christ, the Bible focuses its attention on Christ. That is the beauty of the Scriptures. Here you will find a Person who will become more real to you than the book itself, because it isn’t a book that saves us, but a Savior. The Jesus who saves us is the Jesus who is revealed only in the Bible.

That is the essence of ministry: befriending people, spending time with them, getting to know them, and teaching them what you have learned about Scripture. That’s all there is to it. That isn’t hard. Anyone can do that. Anyone here can befriend someone else and share what you are learning in Scripture. We all have friends. We all know a little bit of Scripture, and most of you know a lot of Scripture. You don’t have to have a theological degree to impart truth. Many of you are in small groups that study Scripture. You are in a women’s Bible study or a men’s study or you are part of a home fellowship. You come here every week and hear the Scriptures taught. Some of you study the Scriptures and truth is being imparted to you. Find someone to impart that truth to. You will grow much faster that way.

The way to grow in our Christian lives is not simply to come here every week and learn, but to give it out. The more you give it out, the more you learn. Make a friend and start imparting a little truth to him or her. Anyone can do that. Discipleship is two-way; it’s mutual. I feel awkward about asking someone if I can disciple him, but I’m very comfortable asking if someone would like to study with me, and we can help each other grow. Anyone can do that.

Think about the effect in our church if each one of us would take the initiative to disciple another in this way. There is a dearth of Bible teaching in many churches in this valley. People long to hear what God has to say, but that isn’t what they get. There is a reason why you are being taught the Scriptures: it is so you can impart that truth to others. They don’t even have to go to church here. But you can use the relationships you already have and impart the truth that has been deposited in your life. How simple can you get?

One more thing before we close. Our task is two-fold, to embody truth, and impart it to others. Before we can impart it, we need to embody it. But before we can embody it we need to embrace it. We need to welcome truth in our lives. In his letter, James talks about “humbly receiving the word which is implanted.” That word receive is the word for hospitality. God wants us to welcome truth into our lives the same way that we welcome strangers into our homes. So I exhort you to let God speak to you, to take time to read the Scriptures regularly.

I want to share with you five ways to do that which have been helpful to me. They have helped me see the Bible as a

love letter, because that's what it is. God loves us so much he wants to communicate with us. When we read a love letter, we read it multiple times. We wonder what did he or she mean by this or that. That's the way we are meant to read the Bible.

That is a mind-blowing thought, that God wanted to communicate to us and he wrote his thoughts in a book. He invites us to interact with that message and allow its truth to penetrate and transform our lives.

1. Read the Bible thoughtfully

To read thoughtfully is to study. When you come to the word of God, put your thinking cap on. Don't throw your mind into neutral. Apply the same mental discipline as you would to a book on nuclear physics or organic chemistry. The Bible does not yield its fruit to the lazy.

Proverbs 2 gives an interesting insight to this matter. It likens the word of God to precious ore. Precious jewels are not found lying around on the ground. They are reserved for those who dig. Just like with mining diamonds, the deeper you go the better the diamonds are.

2. Read the Bible repeatedly

If there was anything my friend David Roper left with me in terms of study, it was to read and re-read. A.T. Pierson, a great saint, once made this statement in a book, "When I had read the book for the hundredth time, the following idea came to me." Can you believe that? For most of us, if we read anything once, that is significant; if we read it twice, it's a miracle! Certainly we would never read anything three times. This man read the text a hundred times. That is the genius of the word of God that is not true of any other book. You may have had the experience of reading a book once or twice or even three times, and ultimately you are able to say, "I've got it!" That is never true of the Scriptures. You are continually going back and reading it again and again.

Along with this, you ought to consider reading the books of the Bible at one sitting. Most of the books are no longer than a newspaper article and can be read in one sitting. We must remember that they were written to be read as units. They hang together only when they are read that way.

3. Read the Bible patiently

This is difficult for most of us, because we want to throw in the towel. We read something and we think, "I don't know what that is about." So we immediately consult a commentary to find out what someone else said about the passage. Just at the time you feel like giving up and looking at a secondary source, that is when you need to resist, because often you are close to pay dirt. Like a runner, we need to develop a second wind.

4. Read the Bible prayerfully

We all have problems in prayer. Pray before you study the Bible, while you are studying, and after you study. Often in the midst of my study I find myself talking to the Lord about a question I have. He wrote the text. He longs for us to understand it. Talk to him about it.

5. Read the Bible imaginatively

Identify with it. Get involved with the text. If there is a sunset, see it! If there is a fragrance, smell it! Become a part of it. Try to get into the author's mind, to feel what he feels and see what he sees.

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