



Catalog No. 1273

Acts 20:1-21

Thirty-first Message

Gary Vanderet

April 23rd, 2006

LAST WORDS: A LOOK AT WHAT MATTERS IN MINISTRY – 1

The opening 16 verses of Acts 20 consists largely of names and places as Luke summarizes the apostle Paul's movements over a period of about two years. Encouragement seems to be the theme of this chapter. The verb *parakaleō*, translated "exhort" in the NASB, appears three times in the text. In verses 18-35, where we will spend the bulk of our time for the next three weeks, there is an example of the encouragement that Paul gave during this period. We will confine ourselves to some brief comments as we read the text.

And after the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he departed to go to Macedonia. When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece. And there he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews, as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. But these had gone on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas. We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days. (Acts 20:1-6 NASB)

After encouraging the Ephesian believers, Paul leaves for Macedonia. A number of details are left out. Second Corinthians records that from Ephesus he went to Troas. There he anxiously awaited the arrival of Titus, who would give him an update on the church in Corinth, which was having a number of problems. But Titus failed to arrive, so Paul travels into Macedonia, where he finally does get some good news about the church in Corinth (2 Cor 2:12-14; 7:6-7).

Verse 2 suggests that Paul spent a substantial amount of time in Macedonia, unlike his first visit there when he had to leave three Macedonian cities in a hurry. Some scholars think he may have remained one to two years in that area. During this time he wrote 2 Corinthians. He may have wanted to go to Jerusalem for Passover, so he booked passage on a ship bound for Syria, which may have carried Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for this feast. But he found out about a plot against him, possibly by some of the passengers on board the ship, so he decided to take the

long route on foot through Macedonia, going north instead of east.

Paul was accompanied by a number of people, some of whom are known to us from Luke's prior references to them. Gaius was a nobleman; Secundus, a Latin ordinal meaning second, was probably a slave. In those days people often gave numbers rather than names to slave children born in Roman households. Tertius ("third") is another man who appears in Paul's writing. This mention of real people and real places shows that the gospel was reaching all classes: the wealthy, Gaius the aristocrat, and Secundus the slave. The good news was reaching out into every part of the Roman Empire, all as a result of one man's ministry. Paul was also collecting contributions from each of these gentile churches to help the poverty stricken believers in Jerusalem. These men might have been hand picked by Paul to travel with him so that it might be clear that the funds were being handled properly and that no one was misusing them. They were also selected so they could learn from the apostle in this a traveling mini seminary.

Notice the "we" beginning in verse 6, as Luke now joins the team in Philippi. The author inserts an interesting story of an incident that occurred in Troas.

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." When he had gone back up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted. (20:7-12)

The believers gathered on the first day of the week for worship. This is the initial unambiguous reference to the church meeting on the first day of the week. Jews worshipped on the Sabbath, but Luke writes that now they were gathering on Sunday to break bread. Paul was the teacher. Luke

doesn't recount the message, but he does have something to say about what happened to a young man who was present. Eutychus was sitting on a window sill and fell asleep during Paul's sermon. This is very encouraging to me. Someone has said that preachers are the only people who talk in other people's sleep! Even the apostle Paul had trouble at times keeping people's attention. It was probably a warm night. Luke says the lamps had been lit for a long time, so it was hot and stuffy. Eutychus began to doze and fell off the window sill to his death. Luke, a doctor, ought to know.

But look at what the doctor records happened: "Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, 'Do not be troubled, for his life is in him.' When he had gone back up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left." Despite the humor in this passage, the point is two-fold. It shows the power of the Christ over sickness and death, and Paul's passion for ministry. He took a great deal of time to teach the word, going on until well after midnight. They met at night, because Sunday was not a day off. He taught and taught and taught for hours, until well past midnight.

Following his time in Troas, Paul and his companions set sail for Jerusalem, making a stop in Miletus, where he sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus to come and meet him there. We will spend the rest of our time this morning, and possibly the next two weeks, looking at these verses.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. (20:17)

Notice that there is multiple leadership in the church. No one person is in charge. The New Testament church knows nothing of singular leadership. Here we have Paul's teaching to these leaders. In Acts, Luke gathers a number of samples of Paul's teachings. In chapter 13 there is a sample of what he said to a Jewish audience in a synagogue; in chapter 17 a sample of his address to a gentile audience; and here in chapter 20 his message to the leaders of a church. This certainly is a condensed version of Paul's words. Luke was probably taking shorthand notes. So what we have here is the actual verbatim, though condensed message that Paul delivered to these leaders.

This is Paul's last will and testament. Howard Hendricks has said, "Last words are lasting words." These are significant words, a condensation of Paul's years of ministry; therefore they are words to be remembered. This passage has been very significant for me in my 28 years of ministry here at PBC. They teach me what I should be doing as a pastor. It is so significant that we are going to take more than one week to look at it and reflect on it.

Many years ago, David Roper, a former pastor here at PBC, taught me this text and suggested an outline, which I

have adapted over the years. Paul's message divides into four sections, each separated by the words, "And now." Three times the apostle says, "And now" (verses 22, 25, 32). These act like paragraph breaks. In the first section, which begins in verse 18b and runs through verse 21, the verbs are in the past tense. Then comes the phrase, "And now," which transitions to the next section, verses 22-24, where the verbs are in the present tense. Then in verses 25-31 the verbs are in the future tense. Finally, in verse 32 and following, Paul concludes with his last will and testament, what we might call his legacy.

This morning we will look at the first section only.

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." (20:18-21)

The two primary ideas in this paragraph are found in the two main verbs, "I was with you" (verse 18), and "I did not shrink from declaring ... and teaching" (verse 20). Here are the essential elements of any ministry: being with people, making friends with them (the relational side of ministry); and teaching them the Scriptures, imparting truth (the revelational side of ministry).

Asking which is more important is like asking which wing on a bird is more important. They are both equally critical and necessary. You can't have one without the other and have an effective ministry. Our task is to make friends with people and impart the truth. All of us naturally tend to fall toward one or the other of these. Depending on how you are made, one of these tasks will be easier for you and you will be drawn more naturally to it. If you are an introvert by nature and prefer to be alone, the revelational aspect of ministry comes more naturally to you. Some people can spend their time in a cabin reading a good book or studying the word. This type of person needs to learn how to develop friendships. Others of you are more extrovert. For you, being with people is energizing. Such people love to socialize; their problem is to discipline themselves to study and teach.

I am a people person. I love meeting people and getting to know them. I love building community. People energize me. Studying is hard for me. The continual exhortation to me from my brothers on the elder board is, "How is your studying coming along? Are you making the time to study, to let God speak to you through the word?" I am so happy

to have brothers who love me enough to push me to study. There are only a couple of extroverts on our staff; most of my brothers on the staff are introverts. Reading and studying comes much easier for them. My exhortation to them is to mingle more.

Ministry is not that complicated. It is simply making friends and imparting truth. Everything else is superfluous. This makes sense when you realize that the only two things that are going to endure are people and God's word. Love and truth are everything

Let's begin by talking about making friends. Much of ministry involves hanging out with people. Our Lord's ministry is a model. He had an infinite job to do and only three-and-a-half years to do it. Yet he spent an inordinate amount of time hanging out with people: going to parties and weddings, fishing with them, sitting in their boat while they fished, walking on the seashore with them. We tend to dismiss those activities as merely unimportant things compared to the real ministry, which involves counseling or discipling or spiritual disciplines. Our Lord was into friend making, and out of that friend making he was soul making. Now friendship is certainly more than merely spending time with people. It is also imparting to others what God has imparted to us. But it begins by just being friendly, and that isn't wasting time. Listen to what Mother Teresa wrote:

In the West we have a tendency to be profit oriented, where everything is measured according to the results. And we get caught up in being more and more active to generate results. In the East, especially in India, I find that people are more content to just be, to just sit around under a Banyan tree for half a day just chatting to each other. We Westerners would probably call that wasting time, but there is value to it. Being with someone, listening without a clock, and without anticipation of results, teaches us about love. The success of love is in the loving, not in the result of loving.¹

She's right. We want to see something happen in every encounter. Someone comes into counseling and we want to see results. But there is great value in just being there.

Over the years I have asked many groups to think of the person who had the greatest impact on their life. I will ask you that same question. Think of the person who has had the greatest impact on your life. That person is not necessarily the one who gave you the most information. More likely it is someone who spent time with you, who loved you, cared for you and believed in you.

That is true in my life. I think of Norm Wakefield, one of my professors in seminary. He took the initiative and asked if he could spend time with me. We met weekly for a long time. I have some great memories of spending time in his

home. I think of Gary Davis, a pastor in southern California who believed in me and encouraged me in those early days of my Christian life and ministry.

There are others, like Ray Stedman and David Roper. Young Life has a motto, "You have to earn the right to be heard." There is a lot of wisdom in that statement. These men earned a significant place in my life. Much of the Christian life is caught as much as it is taught. It comes through association and observation. When I think of Ray Stedman, my memories are not of sermons but the hours I spent in his house, conversations on planes, hours playing chess, listening to his jokes, etc. Someone has said, "People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care." Our children's ministry is based on that premise. The same goes for our youth ministry. It is all about relationships. Parenting is no different. I hear parents talk about quality time versus quantity of time, but there is no quality time without quantity of time.

The key to befriending people is just making friends. A friend is not someone who befriends you, but someone whom you befriend. Friendship is built upon the commitment to be a friend, not upon the desire to have a friend. If that is true, then the whole world is full of friends. This means that one critical element of ministry is taking the initiative to move toward people, not waiting for them to show up, but going toward them, always moving out of yourself toward developing relationships.

Other things are involved in befriending people. There are qualities in our life that foster relationships. Paul says, "serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews" (verse 19). What were the characteristics of the apostle's life, the qualities that were evident in his ministry? Humility is the first one he mentions. Pride is a terrible trait. It not only separates us from God but from others, and damages our ministry. Humble people are teachable and approachable. Pride is a real danger for leaders. Some leaders need to be the focus of every conversation. When they walk into a room, they always need to be the center of attention. If they are not consulted, if they are not privy to everything that is going on, they get upset. This is something we all struggle with, but we simply have to deal with it.

The second thing Paul mentions is tears—empathy. When dealing with people who are grieving, oftentimes it is far more profitable just to be with them and empathize with them, rather than talking to them. George MacDonald said, "The time for being always exists. The time for talking comes rarely." Sympathy, empathy, showing mercy to others is a critical element of befriending. We have to keep asking God to tenderize our hearts. Sometimes the Lord uses suffering to bring us to the place where we un-

derstand the needs of others. It is all part of the process of learning to identify where people are.

The third thing that Paul refers to is adversity: the trials “which came upon me through the plots of the Jews.” People graduate from seminary with highly unrealistic expectations of ministry. They think that everyone will love them and their teaching. They are shocked when they are misunderstood, when they get called dirty names and criticized. They think it’s not supposed to be like that. But it is. Suffering is part of the plan. Oftentimes what happens in ministry is for our sake. It involves what God is doing in our life and heart. All the shots that we take are all part of the process God uses to make us beautiful.

I will end by saying something about the motivation for befriending, for loving people. Notice that Paul says his motivation was “serving the Lord.” He didn’t say he was serving people. If you serve simply because people have needs, then you will soon discover that there is no end to the needs. God does not call us to love the world. He loves the world. According to the story of the Good Samaritan, we are to love our neighbor, that small portion of the world that God puts us in touch with. Need does not constitute the call. The mere fact that someone is needy, or that the world is needy, is not our motivation.

Nor is it some need of our own. Some people serve simply because they have a need to serve, a need to be needed. But that is a bottomless pit. The more you try to fill that need by ministry, the emptier you become. It is not even love for the sheep that motivates us. The sheep can be downright difficult. If we serve simply because we love the sheep, we will end up hating them after awhile. We do what we do because we are serving the Lord. Paul put it this way, “We are your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

A service man visits the office from time to time to service our copier. He comes in for the sake of his company to work on these machines. Our secretaries do not ask him to pick up supplies on his way over, or to bring them lunch. He is there on behalf of the company that sends him. That is what Paul means. We serve people, but we serve them for Jesus’ sake. We don’t do everything people ask us to do, but we are willing to do anything for them that our Lord desires.

Some years ago, *Reader’s Digest* had a story about a man who was having his car repaired. He had planned for the car to be delivered to his home when it was ready, but the repair people got his address all messed up. They knew what street he lived on but not the house number. The man who delivered the car drove down the street thinking he might see the owner. Then he noticed a garage door opener on the sun visor of the car. He just pressed the button and drove down the street until a garage door opened!

This is a wonderful illustration of how we are to act—going through life, loving people, making ourselves available, with our thumb on the button, waiting for God to lead us to open hearts. It could be a long-term friendship or just a brief contact. But it is a matter of making friends wherever we go.

When I was in Mexico last week, I met with my friend Julio. We first met 21 years ago. He showed me a letter that I wrote to him way back then, when he was just 14. I just happened to be pushing the garage door opener and Julio responded. There was a connection between us right away. We usually see each other each year in Mexicali. He brought my original letter along to show me, including a photograph of my family when my sons were little. It looked like I had just written the letter. Julio speaks English now and we had a great time renewing our friendship. This is what God calls us to do, to step out and be his vessels, making friends, pressing the button and seeing whether hearts are open to a relationship. Then we can begin to share what God has done in our lives. That’s the essence of ministry.

1. Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, compiled by Linda Vardey (New York: Random House, 1995).

© 2006 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino