

What Are You About?

Acts 20:13-27

October 26, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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This morning we look at the first of three parts of the only recorded sermon that Paul preached to Christians.

Luke probably had dozens if not hundreds to choose from, and this is the one he chose. He must have deemed these words of Paul's to be especially important for us to hear.

Perhaps the occasion holds the key to Luke's thinking. This was Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders. He would never see these brothers again. They had spent years together and gone through much. Here, then, were words to remember Paul by. Here is how he wanted them to remember his ministry.

I said the speech consists of three parts. In the first Paul reminds the elders of his life and ministry with them (18-27). Then he charges them as elders to be faithful in carrying on where he left off (28-31). Lastly he commits them to the Lord in prayer (32-35).

We focus on first part today, because in Paul's testimony, we seen not only how he lived and ministered among the Ephesians, but why his testimony for Christ, he was so effective. It was not how he wanted the elders to remember him.

Every Christian wonders: How can I be most effective as a witness for the Lord? How can I have a lasting impact in people's lives? How can I live my faith so it really is passed on to others?

It is significant to me that Paul doesn't remind the church of any of the miracles he did, or dramatic incidents of deliverance from demons. Those distinguishing characteristics of an apostle are not what made him effective.

From the speech itself, it clear Paul recounted his life as an example to follow. He declaration in verse 26 makes this clear: "I am innocent of the blood of all men."

As far as we know Paul never led seminars to teach the techniques that made him so effective. Because the impact of our witness for Christ isn't a matter of technique – asking the right questions, giving the right answers, including the right illustrations.

Our impact for Christ, our effectiveness, has everything to do with who we are and how we relate to others.

But Curt, aren't we just call to be faithful? Yes, and that's exactly what I'm getting at. "Faithful" to do what...to live how?" If we are faithful as Paul was faithful, if we are faithful to Paul's example, which is a biblical idea, we will be effective.

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But Curt, doesn't the Holy Spirit determine whether we are effective? Yes, he does. As Paul later wrote, "It is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." And this is what I'm getting at. "What is God working in you that pleases him so much, that you shine like stars in the universe among this crooked and perverse generation?"

This morning, I don't want us to begin where Paul began. Paul began in verse 18 by recalling how he had lived and served the Lord among the Ephesians. I want us to begin at verse 24, because it is there, toward the end of Paul's testimony, that he reveals the motivation that gave his life its focus and drive, even to the point of accepting imprisonment, assault, or worse.

He said, "However, 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."

Here was Paul's core commitment, his bottom line, his non-negotiable. It can be summed up as testifying to the gospel of God's grace. He couldn't stop testifying of the gospel of God's grace because he couldn't stop thinking about it. He couldn't stop thinking about it because he couldn't stop marveling at it. It not only filled his mind, it had captured his imagination.

Of all the descriptions for the Gospel in the New Testament, the one Paul used here is my favorite: the gospel of God's grace.

To me grace is the most beautiful word in the world. In the New Testament grace is a term reserved for God alone, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Nothing is more wonderful than grace. It is the highest form of love. It is the form of love that only God can express. If it is love that makes us secure, if it is love that brings us peace, then it is grace that makes us secure in God, and it is grace that brings us God's peace.

As creature the highest form of love that we can show one another is mercy. As you know mercy is a wonderful thing. Mercy is how we respond to pain and misery and the distresses of life. Mercy brings relief. Mercy makes life bearable.

"Into what estate did the fall bring man?" our catechism asks. "Into an estate of sin and misery." The world is full of misery – physical misery, emotional misery, the misery of poverty, the misery of oppression, the misery prejudice and bigotry, the misery caused by sin. Mercy acts to heal, to help, to relieve, to defend. Mercy means we make someone else's misery our business, and we intervene to make things better or at least, to relieve suffering.

What does the Lord require of you, O man, but to love mercy? Blessed are the merciful.

Mercy. It is how we who are made in the image of God come to reflect his image in our lives. But the reality in God is greater. I tell you it is so much greater.

I have pictures of my children at home. These photos bear their image. I love to look at them. They delight me, they cheer me up, they bring me comfort, only because they reflect a reality that far greater still, the reality of who they are.

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We all have pictures on our walls. We set them off with frames, we cover them with glass. We do all that we can to preserve them because they are beautiful, they add to our lives. They affect us deeply in ways help get us through the day. They are not nearly so great as the reality. They point us beyond themselves to the reality. In the same way mercy points us to grace.

Mercy brings us relief. God's grace saves us forever. Mercy does not treat us as we deserve. God's grace forgives all our sin and removes all our guilt. Mercy brings us comfort in the midst of suffering. God's grace brings us eternal life.

This is the good news of God's grace, the good news brought by the Lord Jesus, accomplished by him, and now sent throughout the world by his Spirit.

Mercy is good. Mercy is sweet. Mercy is needed. It comforts, helps, and relieves. But it does not end the suffering. It does not remove the guilt. It cannot raise the dead. Only one expression of love is greater than death: God's grace.

The reality absolutely captured Paul's heart. It made him run the way he ran, and it made him run hard. In II Corinthians 5, he put it this way: "For the love of Christ compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again...If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." (II Cor. 5:14-15)

This is why Paul wrote, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus gave to me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Paul was saying, "This is what I do." Can you say the same, "This is what I do."

We want life to be simple. We equate simplicity with harmony and peace. The simplicity that matters is simplicity of heart. Because we were created in God's image, to know him. Paul also expressed his heart this way: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Phil. 3:7-8)

Of course, because in him in fullness of grace. Now I told you we would return to Paul's description of his life from verse 18. With the heart's drive fueled and directed by the good news of God's grace, it was plain to all that with complete sincerity, Paul served the Lord.

He describes in verses 19-20 how he served the Lord in four ways. He served him with humility, with tears, with testings and with an unhesitating commitment to the all the truth of all the scriptures.

With humility. That means he was determined that his life and words would be a testimony to the grace of God with everyone. Preferring the Jews? No. Looking down on the poor? Uhuh. Despising the rich? No. Reluctant with the gentiles? Nada. Concerned to associate with the right kind of people? Not at all. Showing mercy as best he could to everyone? Testifying of God's grace to any who would hear? Exactly.

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With tears. That means he not only accepted the suffering and rejection that came to him but entered into the suffering and hardships of others. He was fully engaged with people. As he told the Thessalonians, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. (I Thess. 2:8)

Through trials. When Paul was tested, he let his fellow brothers and sisters in on his own suffering, his own grief and fear. To withhold this dimension of his life from them would be to remain aloof, to maintain a distance that we associate with our security but proves a great barrier to influencing others. He didn’t wear his troubles on his sleeves any more than he was a weepy person, but he wasn’t afraid to let people in on his weaknesses. In fact he boasted of them. We have all known people who share their answers but not their lives, who conceal their own humanity as if grace was not necessary for them. Not Paul, not scum of the earth, not the chief of sinners.

Without hesitation. Paul was quite simply himself, the same everywhere with everyone. “Christian” wasn’t a role he assumed. “Apostle” wasn’t a title he wore. He wanted to identify himself with Christ and his word. He never worried that someone might know he was a Christian; he was concerned they know that he was and that everything God had inspired to be set down in writing was true.

With humility. With tears. Through trials. Without hesitation. Paul served Christ not only by what he said but how he lived, as a man taken captive by the grace of God, from the core of his heart to the far horizon of his imagination.

Here we see not only how Paul lived & ministered among the Ephesians, but why, and why his testimony of God’s grace was so effective. Follow me, Paul wrote, as I follow Christ. Can you also say with Paul, “It’s what I do.”?