



Acts 20:17-27
The Life of a Servant

Summary: Paul knew the one thing worth accomplishing in life – do we?

Right now life is full of disappointments, set-backs, and frustrations. My kids are trying to set the record for most cancelations at summer camp in a single summer. So far they have registered for a total of six weeks of camp on three different dates in two different states from New Hampshire to Illinois and each of them has been shut down. Sports and other activities are shut down and this week we learned that schools are going to remain closed this fall – everything will be online. Which, of course, creates some problems for parents and teachers, and especially parents who are also teachers – how do you take care of your own kids and your class, all on-line, all at the same time?

Life is hard.

So, I hope you'll be encouraged by our study of Scripture this morning, because we're going to see how the apostle Paul handled difficult days and what we might be able to learn from his example of humility, concern, and openness. We'll also spend a good amount of time considering his message and why he could speak of joy in the middle of life-threatening difficulty.

When we jump back into the book of Acts, we find Paul in the Mediterranean Sea sailing toward Jerusalem, but like a flight with many layovers, the ship stops on a regular basis. So Paul leverages the opportunity to catch up with some old friends, asking them to come down to the coast and meet up:

Acts 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. 18 And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, 19 serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; 20 how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, 21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, you need to know two things here. First, what's an elder, who are these men Paul calls for? And the answer is, they're leaders in the local church.

If you grew up in a Presbyterian Church, you're probably familiar with the term; one of the distinctives of Presbyterian churches is an elder-led leadership. But, if you look down in verse 28, the elders are also referred to as **overseers** which could also be translated as bishops, a term you may be familiar with from Catholic, Methodist, or COGIC churches. But

also notice in verse 28 that the overseers are told to [shepherd](#) the church. Shepherd is where we get the word pastor, which is probably what you're most familiar with if you have a background in Baptist, Bible, or non-denominational churches.

Now, I just used a lot of words, but what did I say? Basically this: the Bible uses several terms and titles for leaders, and so do different churches today, but they all essentially mean the same thing - the elders should be good bishops, as they pastor.

Here at City Gates we don't use the term bishop, but we use the terms pastors and elders almost interchangeably. We have a board of elders that is responsible for the direction and guidance of the church. Some of those men are on the paid staff of the church - and in practical terms, we often call those men the pastors. And the men who are not part of the paid staff we call elders - but you don't have to make those distinctions. The qualifications are all the same for pastors and elders. The expectations are all the same because Biblically, it's all the same office.

Right now, we have six elders. Jim Greening, Jesse Wallace, and Vic Ransom are non-staff elders and Stephen Simons, Matt Pottenger, and I are staff elders. If we can do anything for you, please let us know because we are supposed to be here to pastor you and your family - to love and care for you. And we do.

Forgive me for not saying it more often: you are loved. You are prayed for. I keep a membership roster with my morning devotional materials and I pray for six to eight of you every day - that gets me through the whole list in a month, so if you ever have a personal prayer request, or need some spiritual help or guidance, please just let us know - it's what we're here for.

We're supposed to know each other, be connected to each other - which is the second point I want to make. First, what are elders, but then second, the power of a personal example and relationship.

They say character is who you are when nobody is looking. But it's also who you are when people are watching all the time, when they see you up close and personal and get to know you well.

Ephesus was a major city in the ancient world. Paul spent at least two years living there and visited several times, so the elders he calls for are men he knows personally. They're friends. So, he can say - you know me, you know what I've been through, you were there and you saw it.

He says ["You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you."](#)

If someone watched your life over the past year, what would they see? Can you say to someone, "you know my manner of life, you know my habits, my character, my typical response," and could you be proud of that? Are you setting the example you want to set?

I know I'm not, at least not all the time, there are plenty of areas where I want to grow. But look, that doesn't change the fact that people *are* watching. Whether you're ready or not, they're watching. And they see things in us - things worth esteeming and looking up to as well as the patterns and habits we hope they don't see.

Now, there is room for grace, of course, but we should still feel that pinch. We should ask the hard question sometimes: am I setting an example that I would be proud of my little brother following, or my daughter following, or my friends, whatever the case may be – is your example worth holding up, and if not – what are you doing about it?

Well, the great news is, as Christians, we can find forgiveness for our mistakes as well as our flat-out sins and rebellions *in Christ*. And, we can pray, asking God to give us the strength and the spiritual gifts that we need to be the person God is calling us to be, which is always going to be a model worth following.

The more you look like Christ, the more comfortable you can be with people watching you because the things you're ashamed of, disappointed by, the parts of you that you hate, are often the things God wants to work out of you, so talk to Him about it, ask Him for forgiveness and strength. He loves you and He wants you to succeed in the life He is calling you to live.

God wants to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) in you “[love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.](#)” The kind of things you want more of yourself and the kind of things you want to see more of in others. But these aren't things we generate on our own, God has to change us – our role is to ask Him for it, and to submit as He works.

So, Paul has called these leaders of the church together, he tells them, you know me – you know what I've been through. You saw how I lived in difficult days, by God's grace and for His Kingdom, and now I'm telling you, it's going to get worse.

Acts 20:22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. 24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

25 “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

There is more, his speech goes on to the end of the chapter and we'll finish it up next week, but for now, we've got a lot to work with and I want you to see this: Paul's life has been

hard and he expects it is going to get harder – in fact, he expects this will be the last time he ever sees these friends.

And yet he speaks of finishing his race *with joy* and he's not really affected by the idea of coming hardship, "*none of these things move me.*" He's faced difficulty for years and lived well in spite of it.

Paul says you've known me since I first set foot in Asia, you know my reputation. You've watched me go through hard times, what did you see? If you're looking for an outline you might want to jot down three things: personal humility, concern for others, and openness to all.

Let's think about each of them.

Number one, Paul says he served with humility. He counted his life as worth nothing to himself. He didn't make a big deal of himself. There was no self-promotion.

How often do we make our hard lives even harder with pride or self-focus? When something doesn't go our way we stew in it, lash out against it, and make sure everyone around us knows what we think or feel.

But remember the words of the prophet Micah:

Micah 6:8 He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?

Yes, our lives are difficult right now. But can you walk humbly with your God, even in this? Even during difficult times?

Now that's something of a trick question, did you pay attention to the details? Can you walk humbly *with your God* even in this? That's the command, right? To walk humbly *with your God*.

Because, if you are a Christian, if you have been born-again, God has not left you. He's not out running errands when bad news strikes. He's not in isolation for two weeks or self-quarantining until this whole COVID thing is over.

We need to remember that the God we love, worship, and serve, has been loved, worshipped, and served by millions of people through the centuries in times at least as bad and often worse than our modern lives. He walked them through their challenges.

Christian, when you struggle, remember, God is with you. Ask Him for the grace and strength to humbly accept your circumstances and, perhaps, ask Him for the strength and courage to change your circumstances with humility, justice, and mercy.

Because humility – thinking less of yourself and your issues - is going to make it possible to understand the concern Paul had for others, even for people who made his life difficult. He says he served in Ephesus with humility *and tears*, weeping over those who would not accept his message.

But why? Why was Paul weeping? It wasn't because he was fragile, overly sensitive or a little too in touch with his feelings. The man never backed down from a confrontation. He was beaten physically multiple times, and suffered time and time again for his faith. These are not the tears of an emotionally unstable man. No, he was weeping because he understood the severity of the situation – he was preaching a message of salvation to people who saw no need for it, and worse yet, actively resisted it.

You catch a glimpse of the pain and frustration in his letter to the Philippians, where he says, [\(Phil 3:18 CSB\) For I have often told you, and now say again with tears \[in my eyes\], that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.](#)

Paul understood that people who remain in rebellion to God and do not accept the gospel face eternal judgment. This was the same reason Jesus wept over Jerusalem when they did not accept Him.

Fellow Christians, we need to ask God to give us this kind of burden for people, especially for those who are close to us and whom we can affect. We need to ask, and keep asking God to give us His heart for people, but it will require humility – it is hard to care so deeply about people outside your tribe, your group, your circle.

Let me ask – would you say most groups in the world today are characterized by a deep sense of concern for others? Do Republicans weep for Democrats, or vice versa? Do Millennials weep for Boomers? Pick an issue in politics, media, or culture and tell me, does anyone really care about the other side, weep for the other side?

And what about the church? What about the church? Christians, I need you to hear me for a minute, because I've got to say something hard, but we need to hear it.

A radical moral and cultural revolution has occurred over the past 20 years in America. The pace has been aggressive. The change has been stunning. And the typical response of the church has been anger and outrage.

Now, that is understandable, to a point. When you get hit out of nowhere, you didn't see it coming, it's natural to lash out in response.

But, we need to recognize what has happened and we need to respond appropriately – with tears and prayer and kindness and love. You don't see Paul lashing out with anger at the

people that rejected and harassed him. You see him patiently and persistently reaching out in humility with tears.

Is that the reputation you have? Have you, do you, can you, weep for those whose lifestyles, policies, and agendas you disagree with? Or do you just pull back into your own corner and get angry?

Friends, God will judge, there is no escaping it. But He sends us to love.

Now, look, this doesn't mean you have to accept everyone and everything. You can still say ideas are wrong, actions are wrong, but you have to figure out how to care about people in the process.

That's going to be hard. But Church, we have to figure this out. We don't just want to be known for what we're against – though we will still be against things. Jesus said, they will know you are My disciples by your love for one another.

So, does our love set us apart? Are we known individually and as a congregation as people who love, people who care? Paul was able to point to his own example and stand by it – he walked in humility with concern for others, even others who actively, intentionally, sought to harm him and in doing it all, he looked an awful lot like Jesus who did the same thing for all of us – loved us, reached out to us, when we were actually His enemies.

So, Paul was humble, he was concerned, and he was open to all people. He taught Jews and Gentiles, publically and privately, and held nothing back.

There was no favoritism, no prejudice, no discrimination, because there is one gospel for all people and there is no one who cannot be saved. Sometimes we look at people we feel might be our enemies and we forget that what they really need is the same gospel that saved us.

Where would you be without Jesus? For that matter, look at where you are even *with* Jesus. Most of us aren't that great. Most of us see areas we need to improve. So why look at someone without Jesus at all and think they're just an idiot or an animal or a pervert, or whatever else you call them – they need Jesus more than judgment – the same Jesus you and I need. Can God give you compassion for them? And what will that look like, how will that change your heart, thoughts, and the things that come out of your mouth and keyboard? These are important things for us to think about.

But notice, it wasn't just who Paul shared with, it was also what and where he shared. He shared everything he had to say with people publically and privately and held nothing back.

There is no secret knowledge in Christianity. We all have the same Bible. It is my responsibility to teach it, but you can open it up for yourself and judge whether I am right or wrong. You can turn to places like 1 Timothy and Titus and see the qualifications for my job.

We don't meet at midnight on the third Tuesday of the month for any private rituals. Everything is out and open for all to see.

Of course, the down side of that is: we have to share everything. And there are things in this Book that people don't like. You can take the Scriptures to any community around the world, at any point in history, and there will be something in here that will offend people – which means, there will be times when the Scriptures offend you.

And what will you do then? Let them speak to you, correct you, and grow you, or turn away and resist? I can tell you what your first reaction will be, but I'm hoping, that as you grow, that will change.

OK, so Paul experienced a lot of difficulties – but he did it with humility, concern for others, and openness to all, just like Jesus – but why did it happen? Why did he go through all of this? Look with me at

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Or, as he says in verse 21

21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul gave up his entire life in order to tell others about the gospel. He traveled across mountains and deserts and open seas, he endured all forms of persecution, punishment and personal attacks – just to be able to keep telling people: repent toward God and have faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

What in the world does that mean?

We don't use the word "repentance" in our everyday language. But it's not common a word because it isn't a common concept in our culture.

Repentance is turning around and running toward God instead of running away from Him. It is a fundamental shift in the orientation of your life. It was the message of the Old Testament prophets when Israel was doing its own thing, it was the message of John the Baptist, and it was the first word of Jesus' first public message (Matthew 4:17): repent!

What does that look like? Well, Biblical repentance involves both remorse and change.

So, there should be a feeling of contrition – a recognition that you have been wrong, not REGRET because you were caught or things didn't work out your way, but remorse because you recognize that you have offended God and you need forgiveness.

One important aspect of that is: you need to name your sin and ask for forgiveness of it – the more specific the better – don't blow it off or minimize it, stare it in the face, own up to it, call it what it is, take responsibility for your actions, and ask for forgiveness.

There should also be change – there should be a difference in your life as you repent – it shouldn't look the same.

God cannot love you anymore than He already does... but He still wants you to change – change proves repentance and repentance produces change – you were going in one direction, now you're going in another. Things are different before and after you repent.

So, Paul's message is: [repent toward God](#) – realize that you have been in rebellion against Him, that He created the world and everything in it and instead of using it all for His glory, we have used our lives and everything else we could get our hands on for our own benefit to achieve our own goals.

So we need to turn around, repent toward God, and according to Paul's message, we do that by having [faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ](#). Believe that He has absorbed all of the punishment you should have received for everything you have done wrong and that nothing else ever has or ever could do that for you.

You have to do that for the first time and be converted from death to life, but then you keep responding in continual confession, repentance, faith and obedience for the rest of your time on this earth. Think of the moment of salvation like a the wedding, it's only the beginning of a life long relationship. You need to say Yes to Jesus, you need to say I do, but then you need to work on that relationship for the rest of your life.

Here's a little fun fact: in Hebrew the word faith has no noun form, it's not just something you have – the concept is always expressed as a verb, it's something you do.¹

Paul's life was hard. But he faced it all with humility, concern for others, and openness.

And difficulty did not crush him. Actually, quite the opposite. None of these things moved him, he was full of joy. With difficult days behind him and even more difficulty ahead, he was full of joy, IF he could know and serve Jesus.

Friends, what difference does the gospel make in the way we experience COVID? What difference does the gospel make in the way we experience cultural change? What difference does the gospel make in whatever flavor your particular life challenges take? Is Jesus enough?

For those who will seek Him and receive Him, the answer is yes. And it has been proven countless times throughout history in situations as bad or worse than ours. There is joy in

¹ Erickson, 951.

Jesus, even in the midst of trials. May God show you that joy and use you to help others see it too.

Let's pray.