

“PAUL’S EXAMPLE IN EPHEBUS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Acts 20:16-27

Prayer:

Introduction.

What’s the hardest good bye you have ever had to make? Dropping off a child for the first day of school or college is hard, lots of tears. Having a child move far away, and take grandkids with them is a sad event. Sending a husband or son off to war tore up a lot of hearts. Our departures from two churches left a trail of tears.

Have you said good bye to someone you knew you would never see again at least in this life? In the past three weeks three families have had to say good bye to loved ones who were dying.

To understand Paul’s words in our text it helps to have a painful good bye in mind, you have to feel this text as much as hear it. This meeting will end with much weeping, hugs, kisses, and deep sorrow over the prospect of never seeing their beloved shepherd again (Acts 20:37-38).

Acts 20:17-18. Homeward bound, farewell to the elders from Ephesus.

Paul is on his way home from this third missionary journey. His plan was to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost (fifty days after Passover).

Paul honors the elders of Ephesus by making a point to stop on his way home to bid them farewell, anticipating he will never see them again. This shows a deep love and concern for the church there.

Luke recorded this personal conversation Paul had with the elders that gives us a glimpse into the heart and soul of Paul, into both his theology and his personality, and his view of the church and his view of leadership. We see the kind of pastor he was to the flock.

Acts 20:18-19, “You yourselves know how I lived among you serving the Lord.”

Paul wants to ensure the continuation of the ministry in Ephesus. He wants to be clear about the foundation that has been laid and that they see and understand and build on it. Like a master builder he has laid a good foundation for others to build on (I Corinthians 3:10).

Paul points to himself as the example to encourage the elders. “You know me, you have seen me and heard me.”

It is a remarkable testimony that his words and his actions were consistent, they lined up. Paul was the same in all seasons, at home and at work, with friends and with strangers, when he was strong and when he was weak, rested and tired. He didn't have to make excuses for his behavior, like he was having a bad day. He didn't change with the wind or weather or circumstances. He didn't have to say to them "do as I say, not as I do."

We all know the importance of consistency in our actions, our example. It is what people see, what our children and grandchildren see, what our friends and neighbors see.

We all know people in our community whose words didn't match their actions, whose Sunday didn't match their Monday. One of the things that came through for me these past two weeks meeting with Clarice Blankers' and John Berendsen's families was how Clarice's and John's words and actions matched, they were the same at church and at home and at work.

Paul set an example worthy of being followed. He set an example for how we should set an example. Some years later in his letter to Timothy Paul urged him to "set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (I Timothy 4:10).

I want to say a quick word to all of us here about setting an example and by all of us I include you middle school and high school students. Think about the example you set.

Do we spend more time and money on clothes, accessories, cosmetics, fitness, getting in shape, than we do on our character, and the example we live. Shaping our character is so much more important than shaping our body.

What kind of example are you at school, at home, with your friends, on social media? Do you set a higher standard or a lower standard? How easily influenced are you to go along with a bad example? Does your speech or behavior honor Jesus, or dishonor Jesus? Do you care?

Do your words do good or do harm? The sad truth is our mouths reveal what is in our hearts. What is in our hearts comes pouring out of our mouth. Ugly words reveal an inner ugliness and beautiful words reveal an inner beauty. Set an example. Be an example. Make your life a beautiful work of art.

But in order to be able to set a Christ-like example you have to have Christ's Spirit in you and you have to ask for God's power and help to be a good example. Just trying to be good on your own won't work. At the funerals these past three week I tried to make clear that Jesus was the source of what was good in the lives of their loved ones.

There are *three ways* in particular Paul set an example and served the church. I want us to consider, *tears, truth and trials*.

Acts 20:19 With all humility and tears.

What does “with tears” imply? It implies intimacy, close, personal relationships, pastors and elders who know their people and people who know their pastors and elders. Paul identified with the people and they did with him.

Churches are not to be run by professionals, by CEOs, administrators or bureaucrats. They are to be pastored, shepherded by leaders who care, who are involved, connected at the heart.

This is how the church is supposed to be. There is supposed to be a shepherd leading sheep through relationships, daily and weekly contact and interaction and accountability.

TV church is not church. Listening to preachers online is not a substitute for church. God’s plan for His church is for human pastors and elders serving in human relationships, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. Loving and caring for each other.

Church ministry is meant to be incarnational, in the flesh. That is why Jesus came to earth, He didn’t stay in heaven. He gave us the example. He came in the flesh to identify with us and to be with us.

Paul wept over the eternal souls of lost sinners, his fellow Jews especially, but all who rejected Jesus and scorned His cross. Paul wept over internal division in the church, over the hard trials he faced at the hands of so many ungodly people.

Paul was not made of iron, he was a man of flesh like us all, he faced fear, anxiety and despair. He confessed his weaknesses and inadequacies.

What brings tears to our eyes? Any number of things no doubt, sad things and joyful things. Tears soften our souls, they keep our hearts from growing hard. Just as rain loosens the soil, so tears loosen the soil of our sin-hardened hearts.

I wonder if deep and lasting change doesn’t come to our souls until we weep over our sin and spiritual poverty and lack of interest in what promotes holiness and righteousness.

Part of being a good leader means tears. Tears for ourselves, tears for our sins, tears for the sins of others, tears for those who weep. Tears for losses. Tears for deaths, tears for births.

Tears are a grace from God. They are good for the soul. I don’t think I have near enough tears, and hope I grow in that grace. Jesus wept, Paul ministered with tears, may we all.

Acts 20:20-21, “I didn’t shrink from declaring to you the truth.”

Acts 20:20-21 I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 20:24-25 ... to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ... proclaiming the kingdom.

Acts 20:27 I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Four times Paul emphasizes how he spoke the whole truth of the Gospel of God's grace concerning repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And he tells us how he did it. Through preaching and teaching, in public and from house to house, to both Jews and Greeks. He was faithful and diligent day and night and he is urging the elders to do the same.

Notice he didn't preach what was pleasing to them, what was fashionable, what was acceptable, what tickled their ears, he preached truth that was profitable to them, what would edify their souls.

Paul gives a summary here of what he preached, a summary of the Gospel, what he meant by the whole counsel of God.

Repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the two great graces.

These are the two elements of the Gospel, they cannot be separated. They are two different things, but they are not separate things.

Repentance is turning away from sin, renouncing it, hating it, and turning to God in obedience. This involves seeking after holiness and righteousness, denying ourselves, killing sin. Fear of the wrath of God drives us to faith in God.

Faith is believing in and receiving the grace held out to us in Christ Jesus. This is how we are reconciled to God. By faith we are forgiven and given new life and adoption and the power of the Spirit to live in obedience to God.

The church is the place where the truth of the Gospel is held out as the only hope for lost sinners. We have the way to forgiveness through faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone.

The church is not primarily about self-help, but about the truth of the Gospel. Get this first, seek this first and the rest will be added to you.

This is the twofold goal of the Gospel. We strive to urge all people to embrace the salvation of Jesus Christ and submit to God in repentance and faith. The cross of Christ is central. Christ crucified for our sins, Christ resurrected for our faith.

Paul declared everything they/we need to know in order to be saved, to live a life of faith and to have eternal life in the life to come. Everything for salvation, sanctification and glorification.

Acts 20:22-23, “Now I am going to Jerusalem.” Trials.

The church of Jesus Christ is planted by God in enemy territory. Christ builds His church on earth while the gates of hell try to hinder and destroy. There has never been a moment of peace in the last two thousand years.

Paul expected and anticipated trials and troubles, hardship and hatred. He was never caught off guard or surprised by it. And he was never put off course by it.

He was warned against going to Jerusalem. Paul’s picture was in every post office. He was a wanted man. He already survived the assassination attempt back in Corinth some months ago.

Paul knows danger awaits him, but he is undeterred, unafraid, he trusts himself into the hands of God. Pastors and elders, spiritual leaders, all Christians should expect to face difficult times.

As Peter reminds us, let us never be surprised when we are tested by fiery trials. The goal of our lives is not to preserve our lives, but to be faithful with the life God has given us.

The example of Paul, the lesson of his life, is to never resist the Spirit of God, but to obediently surrender ourselves to the will of God and His Word. In fact, we should pray for this very thing, that God will rule and over rule in our lives, and guide and direct us by His Spirit, that His will would be done daily in our lives.

His commitment is to finish the race, to finish well, to follow the will of God to the very end.

Paul didn’t know what lay ahead, and neither do we. We never know what trouble or difficulty awaits us. We must go by faith, trusting everything to God, and accepting everything as from His sovereign and good hand. We must learn the secret of being content with good and bad.

Can you imagine what would be accomplished in our world if there were not men and women willing to die for what is worth dying for? Can you imagine what would be accomplished in our world if people only did what was safe, what was in their own best interest? A person who only does what can be easily or safely done will do nothing worthwhile.

What missionary would ever have left the comforts of his own home? We would not be here today if it were not for men and women willing to lay down their lives, willing to suffer hardship and persecution for the sake of the Gospel.

We have friends who live on Fiji Island in the south Pacific, he is a professor in a Christian college there. How did there come to be Christians on Fiji? In the mid-1800s James Calvert a young man from England went as a pioneer missionary. On the way the ship’s captain pleaded

and begged him not to go. “You will lose your life and the lives of those with you to those cannibals.” Calvert famously answered, “We died before we came here.” He ministered there fruitfully for 18 years.

Acts 20:24 I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul labored for the sake of Christ in the midst of the severest of trial and the greatest of opposition, under the constant threat of death. None of this deterred this faithful, loyal servant, who counted it a privilege to suffer for the sake of his Savior.

Paul by his example is urging the elders to not grow weary in well doing, not give up in the face of trials, criticism, being despised by others. Don't be disheartened.

Conclusion.

Tears, Truth and trials. This is the example Paul set as the pattern of ministry in the church, as the pattern of leadership for church leaders, as the pattern of priorities for pastors and elders, for all Christians, Christian parents, Christian teachers, Christian business men and women, Christian students.

May we have the kind of personal relationships where there are tears and tenderness. Seek opportunities to grow in relationships. (Dinners 8)

Truth. Seek opportunities to grow in your knowledge and love of the truth. Sunday School, Bible Studies. Sharing the truth in love with others, reflecting it in our words and actions. May our lives be consistent with what we say we believe.

Trials. Don't be afraid, don't be surprised, be bold, step out in faith, as Paul did. See God in it.

James 1:2-4, 12 Count it all joy, brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.