Acts: “A Charge to Leaders”
Acts 20:17-38

As we resume our journey through Acts, let’s pick up the story in Acts 20:17-38.

To get started, let’s look to our trusty map to get a sense of where we are (show map from last week). Remember that Paul has begun his journey to Jerusalem following his all night sermonfest in Troas. However, we learn in vs. 17 that Paul and his team unexpectedly end up in the city of Miletus for an extended layover. Since Miletus is about one day’s walk from Ephesus, Paul sends a messenger up to Ephesus who invites the Ephesian elders to take a spontaneous road trip down to Miletus to visit with Paul before he leaves the country. Now, the elders spend a whole day walking down to Miletus to spend some time with Paul, so we should assume that there were lots of conversations and meals that took place for at least a day or two before Paul departed. What Luke provides here in Acts 20 is Paul’s final farewell speech, and knowing Paul, we’re probably only getting the Cliff Note version of what was actually said. Still, what we have here is powerful, emotional, and instructive for us as 21st century Christians, and particularly for those of us who serve as elders.

Now…most of you know this already, but in case you are visiting with us today, let me point out the irony: in just a few hours, we will be ordaining four people into the ministry of the gospel as Teaching Elders: Cory Ozbun, Mark Potter, Jeff Sparks, and Tami Lundgren. Last week we ordained elders and deacons at our Wornall Campus, and the week before that we ordained elders and deacons at our Quivira Campus. So…it’s only appropriate that today, of all days, the passage in Acts that we just happen to be on after 2.5 years in this series is THIS remarkable passage that truly speaks directly to those who have been called to serve as ELDERS! Hmmm…turns out God is actually sovereign after all…go figure.

So, beginning with vs. 18, let’s hear what Paul has to say to the Ephesian elders:
You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and house to house, testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul begins by reminding the elders of the example that he set for them in 1) his lifestyle; 2) his love; 3) his perseverance; 4) his courage; and 5) his teaching.

First, Paul points to the way he lived among the people. Elders and leaders, the way we live among people speaks volumes, right? So how are we to live among the people? What does Paul expect of church leaders? Paul address that question very specifically in 1 Timothy 3:2-7: An
overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be thought well of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

I don’t know about you, but every time I read that description in 1 Timothy 3, I’m ready to fire myself! Serving as an elder of God’s church makes us accountable on many levels, but Paul begins by pointing to his own example and says, “You yourselves know how I lived among you…” Elders, pastors…if we are not willing to model the lifestyle and temperament we expect from our church members, we have no business serving as elders. Our ministry begins with our example. Such is why when I ask you to pledge, I pledge first. When I ask you to tithe, I tithe first. When I ask you to give to the capital campaign, I give first. When I ask you to serve one another, I am constantly eager to serve you first. Every decent elder/pastor leads by example.

Secondly, Paul points to his example of love, as demonstrated by his spirit of humility and the tears that were shed on behalf of the church. Love, humility and compassion are prerequisites to church leadership. As we’ve all heard many times, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 13, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” When I think of all the pastors and elders I’ve known here at Colonial over the past 10 years, I can tell you one thing for absolute certain about each and every one of them: they love God, and they love you…genuinely.

Third, Paul points to his example of perseverance. On behalf of Christ’s church, Paul endured many trials and plots, but he didn’t give up. Let me tell you something about ministry and church leadership: after 29 years of serving in vocational ministry, my temptation to give up is as strong now as it has ever been. Our Enemy would like nothing more than for leaders to give up. Giving up is easy. Becoming embittered by the trials that come our way in ministry is easy. Dropping back and playing it safe in church leadership is easy. Hopping around from church to church so as to avoid having to deal with conflict is easy. Persevering, staying, and overcoming trials is NOT easy…not at all…but it is necessary. Paul persevered…and that’s why those men walked a day just to see him one more time. The Bride of Christ needs leaders who will not quit when the going gets tough. As long as we are called by God to serve a certain congregation, we must endure hardships and persevere.
Fourth, Paul points to his example of courage. He writes, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable” and in vs. 27 he emphasizes, “I did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” Let me tell you something: it takes courage to declare the whole counsel of God, because most people don’t want to hear it. They didn’t want to hear it in the first century, and people pretty much don’t want to hear it in the 21st century. In fact, on most days, even those of us who are Elders probably don’t want to hear it. The whole counsel of God…everything that is profitable…is not always comfortable, and sometimes it’s downright offensive. Depending upon which culture you happen to be preaching to, some part of God’s Word is going to get you into trouble. It changes from culture to culture, but every culture is at some point offended by the Word of God. But listen—if you edit the Bible to accommodate culture, and the part you edit keeps changing with each culture you are in, what is left? Elders and pastors, church leaders and Sunday School teachers…listen: Our call is not one bit shy of exactly this: teach the whole counsel of God! Don’t pick and choose the parts you like and leave out the parts you don’t. Don’t edit God to accommodate the culture. I failed in this area for a time in my ministry, and I will live with that regret for the rest of my life. Never again. Declare the whole counsel of God, or step down out of leadership. Period. And make no mistake: declaring the whole counsel of God will require courage…more courage than you have in your flesh. But God will give you that courage if you ask Him for it. More on that in a moment.

Finally, Paul points to the example of his teaching. He states in vs. 20 that he was committed to “teaching in public and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and the Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

First Paul describes his methodology of teaching: He taught in large groups publicly, and then he taught people privately, in their homes, in discipling relationships. The teaching ministry of a church must always include both public instruction and private instruction. In our church, Greg and I handle a great deal of the public instruction, but we rely upon Elders and other gifted teachers to do much of the private teaching and discipling in people’s homes. We will fail in our teaching ministry if both are not done with excellence.

Paul also boils down the teaching to two imperatives: teach repentance towards God, and teach faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Elders, pastors…ethical studies are great…the end times can be fascinating stuff…unpacking the dietary restrictions of Leviticus or the genealogies of Jesus can good and meaty things to teach from time to time. We certainly need to teach the whole counsel of God as previously mentioned. But listen to the words of the Apostle Paul. All people, everywhere, always need to be taught two primary things in order to be saved and go to heaven: repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. So whatever you are teaching, keep the main thing the main thing…preach the Gospel! Call people to repent, and call them to faith in Jesus.
Now, following his opening statement, calling the elders to follow his example, Paul continues beginning with vs. 22: And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

Not unlike Jesus, Paul has an internal, spiritual conviction that he must go to Jerusalem. And not unlike Jesus, Paul will be walking into certain danger and possibly even death. Next week we’ll see an example of how people in every city where he stopped prophesied that great trouble would greet him in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Paul is undaunted. Look what he says next in vs. 24, “But 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.”

If you remember, in Acts 9, the risen Jesus comes to Ananias in a vision and tells him to go find Paul. In that vision Jesus says in 9:16, “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Apparently, Jesus has been showing Paul that suffering is coming…though Paul has already suffered much as we all know from his first two missionary journeys. I’m sure, to some degree, Paul feels like suffering for Jesus is the least that he can do given his horrible past. Remember: Paul was once a persecutor of the church who imprisoned and even consented to the martyrdom of the believers. So Paul says, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only…” Listen: Paul does not have a martyr complex…he’s not eager to die. He is, however, all in. He recognizes that the whole reason he has a life…the whole point of his life…is to finish the race that God has set before him. When the race is over, he goes home. But as long as he has breath, Paul will go where God sends him…suffering or no suffering. Elders, Pastors--Paul was extraordinary, and for the most part, ain’t none of us Paul, right? I get it...if I’m honest, I probably think way too much of myself and I’m not nearly as eager to knowingly walk into trouble as Paul comes across here in Acts 20. I know for most of us as believers, just trying to make it from one day to the next, Paul’s heroic attitude is admirable, but we also see it as unattainable.

To which I would point out the obvious: we’re all going to live for something. We’re all going to risk conflict…we’re all going to make some sacrifices…we’re all going to make hard choices and work hard for something. Now granted, maybe our highest aim is pleasure or power or fun or a beautiful body, but to get what we truly want, we’ll have to endure some hard times to get there, right? I mean, you don’t just go out and buy a new lake house and a big ol’ boat, right? You have to work for it. You don’t just lose 30 pounds, you have to work for it.

So here’s my question for all of us: what is it that we value so much that we are willing to work hard, endure hardships, suffer, sacrifice, and devote ourselves to accomplish? Next question: will that thing…whatever it is…last? Will it reward you in this life? What about the next life? Will
that thing that you hold as your most desired outcome bring you a clear conscience…will it forgive you should you fail to achieve it?

Paul’s race was to testify to the gospel of the grace of God…his highest aim was to make Christ known. His race brought him a clear conscience, incredible friendships, treasures in heaven, and he was already forgiven…so he had nothing to lose, even if he failed! Elders, church… making the Gospel known…making disciples…is a race worth running! I suspect it may be the only race worth running when it’s all said and done.

Now, in vs. 25, Paul gets personal: “And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”

Paul is getting pretty emotional here…as are the elders from Ephesus. This is a hard thing to say for any pastor who is leaving those he has led and cared for over the course of several years. But Paul is calling it like he sees it…there is very little chance that he will get out of Jerusalem alive, and even less chance that he will ever return to Ephesus. So Paul declares that he has been faithful to bear witness to Jesus and to call them to faith, which is to say…he has loved them well. This part of the speech reminds us of Jesus when he said to his disciples in John 15:15, “I call you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” Listen church: Friends tell friends about Jesus. Elders and pastors who love their community, who love the church, who love their city, bear witness to Jesus at every opportunity. When we have been faithful witnesses, we have been truly loving, we can leave our ministry with a clear conscience; we can leave this earth knowing that we were faithful and we were loving because we told people about Jesus.

Now…in the last part of his speech, Paul is going to directly charge the Ephesian elders. Beginning with vs. 28 we read: Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone 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.

There is so much for us to think about here. I’m going to run long…get over it! Let me quickly point out a few things.
First, Paul charges the elders to pay attention to themselves! As C. S. Lewis once wrote, “The true Christian’s nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool.” To be a Christian leader is to be vigilant about what is going on in you at all times…and you can’t really do that alone. We all need accountability; we need truth tellers in our lives; we need spouses, coaches and bosses who will give us accurate feedback. Pay close attention to yourselves. Remember that the Holy Spirit put you in this role…you will need the Holy Spirit in you constantly to stay in this role.

Second, Paul warns the elders to be on guard against those who would come in to try to destroy the church from the outside. In the ancient churches, false teachers would come to town who would try to dissuade the church from following the apostolic teachings. Paul refers to these people as wolves among the sheep. Wolves don’t hurt sheep by accident; they have destruction in mind. These are the heretics, the secularists, the naturalists and materialists. Elders: defend and protect the sheep from false teachers and ideologies.

Third, Paul warns that people will rise up from among their rank who will twist the truth. Satan loves to corrupt from within. Man…this hits home. It’s hard enough to defend the gospel against competing religions, atheists, humanists and so on. But what sucks me dry is defending the gospel against other pastors and elders who preach a different gospel. I hate that, but it’s a part of my job as an elder and a pastor here at Colonial. We must practice civility and great care, but we must absolutely defend the church against those within the church who twist the truth.

So, clearly, to be an overseer of God’s church is to be vigilant at all times regarding oneself, threats from out there, and threats from within. But how can we live up to this charge? Who can be so vigilant? How can anyone live in such a blameless way? Who can set such a noble example for the church? Paul makes it clear: only those who live under the grace of God’s Word. Paul says that the power of God’s grace will, over time, build us up and provide us the “inheritance” that we need to accomplish God’s call upon our lives. Inheritance is a good word here…inheritance is something that you are given, not something you deserve. Inheritance is something that somebody else earned, but then they give it to you. Jesus earned for us the power of God working through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit, that we might be sanctified…which means that we might be made better than we are or than we deserve, because that’s what grace does for those who have been called to serve. My sermons make me look smarter than I am…that’s the Holy Spirit working through me…that’s my inheritance through grace. My lifestyle is more pure than I deserve…that’s the Holy Spirit sanctifying my desires, satisfying my needs so that I might serve God and not long for somebody else’s stuff. Listen: God has to do that in you and for you by grace, and grace is absorbed through the Word of God.

Elders…pastors…Jesus followers…stay tethered to the Word…stay under the grace of Jesus Christ…stay attached to the Vine…allow the Holy Spirit to dwell richly within you so that you
might serve the church out of the inheritance that has been set aside for you…an inheritance you did not earn, but one that will empower you to run the race set before you.

Paul finishes with a few reminders of serving the church with contentment and a pure heart. In vs. 33 he states, ‘I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

Paul finishes his address with a reminder that the life of ministry can never be motivated by money…we may not serve a shadow mission of building our own empire or somehow becoming personally enriched. Listen: ministry is driven by the conviction that it is more blessed to give than to receive. That doesn’t mean we never receive…but it does mean that we are not in the ministry for what we can get out of it. We can never NEED the ministry. In the end, ministry consists of following Jesus by giving our lives away to help the weak, to serve the least of these, to shepherd the church of God, to proclaim the Gospel regardless of the cost. Our reward comes in knowing Jesus intimately as we walk with Him and love His Bride.

Paul will write later to the church in Philippi: Whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that comes by faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Elders, pastors, and Jesus followers, there are not many of us who are where Paul was when he wrote those words to the Philippians or said these parting words to the Ephesian elders…but remember: Paul didn’t start that way…he grew that way. His growth came through a lot of long days, trials and tribulations, and hard work. But in the end, he had no regrets…because He knew Jesus, and he made some pretty amazing friendships along the way. Look at the end of our passage, beginning with vs. 36, “And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.”

I remember being in my hotel room in Wyoming this summer, reading these last few verses, and weeping. There are so many people I have met in the churches I have served over the last 30 years who I have loved deeply…who loved me more than I deserved…so, so many. And of course, so many of those faces are now souls in heaven…but I miss them terribly. I could go
right down the line and give you names from all of those churches, but there are hundreds more I have even forgotten, because that’s what time and age does to a guy.

But a day will come when I will no longer be weighed down by gravity, when the tinnitus in my left ear will go silent…when my back will finally stop hurting…when my memory of all those faces and stories and adventures will return. It will be the day that I breath my last…it will be the end of my time on this stage…my race here will be finished. And oh how I pray that, by God’s grace, when that moment comes, I might hear my Savior say to me, as I rest in His arms, “Well done, son! Well done!” Oh…what a glorious moment that will be! And then the reunion…oh…man…can you imagine it? A lot of you will be there before me…no offense…but I hope you’ll be there when I cross over, because I will want to see you…and we won’t be in a rush…we’ll have all the time in the world. While I’m in heaven, I hope to meet every soul who was ever encouraged in the Lord through the race that I ran on earth. I hope to know the story of every person who ever came to the faith because God used me to show them Jesus, and then I want to know what became of their lives, their kids, and all the people who were influenced through them for multiple generations! Wouldn’t that be cool? And I hope to meet every person who ever encouraged me, who preached the Gospel to me, who showed me what it looks like to become more like Jesus. I have a long list of thank you’s that I never said to many of those who have gone on ahead of me… I really do want to say thank you. I want to hug their necks, look them in the eyes and say, “Do you have any concept of how your faithfulness changed my life? Do you have any idea of how many lives were changed because you took a few minutes to share the gospel with me, to love me, to speak truth to me, to sit with me?”

That’s what heaven is going to consist of…one amazing encounter after another…celebrating the love of Jesus that made human friendships beautiful and eternal!

I know my life isn’t too impressive on this earth…I know I’m not much to look at, and I’m certainly no celebrity pastor. But listen: on the other side, my life is going to be amazing, because for those who live to bring glory to God…for those who live to give away their lives for the least of these…for those who are constantly investing in others to deposit the Gospel and to establish the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven…for those who follow Jesus and do what He saved us to do…heaven will be the greatest reunion you could possibly imagine…it will be a celebration unlike anything you have ever seen. And here’s the best part: there will be no more tearful goodbyes…no more lost memories…no more death. We will enjoy the eternal reward for our race down here…forever!

So…run your race church…be faithful elders…be vigilant pastors…make the most of the time you’ve been given. Soon our race will be done, but until then…press on.

Will you pray with me?