

Acts 20:17-38

A Charge to the Church and to Church Leaders

Introduction: We are looking at Acts which is the history of the earliest Christians and it is a major tool for our understanding as the Church and for the greater society to know and understand authentic Christianity; the real vs the watered down, compromised or nationalized Christianity. At Refuge Christian Fellowship we want the real thing. We want the real Gospel and the real Jesus. We want authentic Christianity.

In our story Paul has been away from Ephesus for sometime visiting and encouraging the other churches that he planted in the region. Now Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, and at every stop along the way, prophetic words are shared with him that chains and imprisonment await Paul in Jerusalem. Paul believes that this is accurate so what we have here in the second half of Acts 20 is Paul's farewell address to the church leadership in Ephesus that he dearly loved. As far as we know Paul spent more time with the church in Ephesus than with any other Church community - they were probably very special to him..And this turns out to be a very emotional goodbye.

Paul begins by reminding them of his own example of leadership and then charges the Elders of Ephesus to continue in the same posture.

Fun Fact - This is the only place in the book of Acts where we have a sustained address to Christians about how to be the church. This section of scripture addresses the question -What should a gospel church or ministry look like???

Also, I believe that we are looking at this passage specifically because the Lord is calling some of you to leadership within the church, maybe not immediately, but God wants to begin to instill within you a vision, and understanding of leadership qualities and convictions to be able to lead God's people well.

1. Paul's Own Example

1. Transparent, Humble, Vulnerable

1. **“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.”**
 2. What vulnerability - Many in our culture would say this is not leadership at all. You shouldn't show weakness, or fear, or any of these things - you need to be firm and unmoved. But that's not real life.
 3. Paul did not control what people saw, only letting others see the positive, only the good, only the strong. He was totally open before them, transparent... “tears and trials” as he puts it.
 4. This is so important for leadership, because people will naturally put leaders on a pedestal and either they will lift you up to a height that no one else can ever achieve and that leader will never have the accountability or challenge that they need to be a good and healthy leader, or they will cast you down so far because you failed them. Don't let people put you on the pedestal, only ever put Jesus there. He is the savior, he is the only perfect leader, the shepherd that will never fail us..
- 2. Bold Concerning the Truth**
1. **“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ....I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God....remember that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”**
 2. Paul held nothing back. He didn't avoid things that were hard to hear or receive, but made known what is helpful. Helpful - healthy, build you up - we don't believe the truth for truths sake, we believe truth because it is healthy, life giving, it builds you up... But as he already said it was done in such humility, and personableness - with tears and trials. (We'll talk more about this in a moment)
- 3. Others Focused -Servant Leadership**
1. **“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.'"

2. Paul's ministry was all about helping others and especially the weak - he considered and focused on those who were out of social standing in the Greco-Roman world. Of course we have all seen and heard of the gross abuses of power - those who prey upon the weak, those who use people under them as a means to an end. As a means for self promotion or personal pleasure - money, sex or status. Paul says this was never the way he acted among them. He showed in every way servant leadership. **True leadership, especially in God's church is about serving others, not about being served.**

1. Jesus himself is the prime example of this - He said, **"the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** - Matt 20:28
2. If this was the way that Jesus, the King of Heaven, treated others, how much more those who are leading God's people?

4. **The Charge** - Paul's charge is to the Ephesian Elders, and where we could address this to leaders only it applies to all of us because it is not just the leaders that create a church culture. We all have a part to play in that. Paul gives three things that will be so helpful to the church as we seek to honor Jesus, hold to the truth of the Gospel, disciple men and women, and represent the Gospel to our community.

1. **The Church should - Protect God's Precious Sheep** - **"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."**

1. People are frustrating, annoying, stubborn, selfish, and every other negative quality that you can think of and the church is no different because it, too, is full of people, sinful, broken, people.
2. But we the leaders of the Church and the church itself, should see something far more glorious and weighty behind all that and that is that the church - is filled with people who God

created, who he desperately loves and who he purchased with the blood of his dear son!

3. Remember when Jesus looked out on the multitude - he saw beyond what people were wearing, what they were pretending to be or not to be, he saw beyond their wealth or poverty, their sin or righteousness, he saw beyond social status and class, beyond race and color - He saw them as sheep without a Shepherd and he was filled with compassion!
4. There is this thing happening right now where it's really edgy and cool to bash the church, to distance ourselves from the church institution, to separate ourselves - Can you be as gracious with "Saints" as you can with "Sinners"? Be careful how you speak, think and act towards God's people - these are the very ones whom Christ' blood was poured out for. We should determine that what we say, think and do will always and only be for building up the church and not for tearing it down. Not only that But Paul says, "Keep watch on yourselves" - Have we forgotten that we also are sinners in desperate, daily need of God's grace? When your indebtedness to God's grace over your life reaches into the depths of your heart, then you'll begin to see people, as God sees them.
 1. Pastors and churches that always make people feel like God is disappointed with them do not understand the Gospel of Grace! They have not understood the depth of the work of Christ and the great love of God! God does indeed call us to change through repentance and sanctification, but he always does it through rooting us in his grace, his unfailing love and commitment to his church!!
 5. What a charge - Care for the church of God which he purchased with his own blood - those are weighty words, that we should take seriously and think through carefully.
2. **The Church should -Guard against Wolves -**
 1. **"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.**

2. The main threat of the wolves is the way they twist the truth they only teach things that are easy to hear and receive It is evident then that they are not teaching Jesus word and that they are Seeking followers for themselves and not for Jesus Christ.
3. The contrast to this is what Paul has already said about his life - he didn't hold back, he taught everything that was helpful - Unhesitating and helpful (biblical truth will always offend somebody somewhere - if the Bible has come from God, and not a particular culture it will offend every culture somewhere, differently...and it does - easterners have a hard time with grace, mercy and forgiveness, Westerners have a hard time with truth, judgment, sexual ethics, and so on.. You and I desperately need a truth like this, an unchanging truth, that does not bend to our cultures or our personal whims and wishes.. We desperately need Shepherds and Church community that speak this truth into our lives and yet do it with compassion, and humility.
4. As real as the threat is from within the church and without to be deceived and lead away. I think the real threat is always closer to home. Our hearts are deceitful and the reason we follow leaders that tell us what we want to hear is due to a heart or individual that thinks they know what's best for them. (It comes back to that original lie of the serpent in the garden - God's commands keep us from what we really want and what will really satisfy) That's why God gives us Shepherds who really care about our best, and friends who love us enough to tell us the truth even when it hurts, so that we won't be led astray.
 1. **“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” -Hebrews 13:17**
5. I think Paul is reminding us of the way in which we handle truth, it is not in an impersonal way, unrelate-able or unsympathetic to people's struggles, but it is also face to face, it receives and welcomes questions, we walk along side people.

1. I think Ray Ortlund Jr captures the idea of how these two fit together when he says, “the Church is where people should find lots of gospel, lots of safety, and lots of time.
 2. People need: Multiple exposures to the happy news of the gospel from one end of the Bible to the other. People need to hear the Truth even when, especially when it hurts.
 3. People need: The safety of non-accusing sympathy so that they can admit their problems honestly. - personal transparency about sin and weakness from leadership and other Christians.
 4. People need: Enough time to rethink their lives at a deep level, because human beings are complex and changing is not easy.
 1. When we strike this balance it creates an atmosphere where no one person, or one kind of sin is under pressure or singled out for embarrassment. Everyone is free to open up, and we all grow together as we look to Jesus.
 6. Also, in verse 33 Paul inadvertently warns against those who serve as means of monetary or selfish gain - **“I Coveted no one’s silver, gold or apparel.”**
 7. Leadership in God’s church looks like this - Those who use their power, gifts, charisma and talent for the good and building up of others. They use their leadership to help individual growth, personal dependence upon God and for the protection of those who are weak. Using our leading as a means to protect others, humbly being that warning voice in their life, again, speaking hard truth that is helpful...
- 3. Finally - The Church should - Trust in the sovereignty of God and the Word of his Grace - Paul says, “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.”**
1. Paul first commits us to the sovereign care of God -by which he means - Rest, relax, God would never let anything happen to his Church that is beyond his love and goodness; he is in control.

1. This is such a good word for the church and church leadership... I am learning over the years to be slow to speak, and slow to judge, even slow to correct, and quick to listen, give people the benefit of the doubt. As Paul says, **“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”**
2. In earlier days I was so afraid of apostasy, of people being led astray, so afraid of sin destroying the church, feeling that I always had to have the right answer or the perfect argument or rebuttal. I acted out of fear and not love, fear and not confidence in God’s sovereignty and the effectual power of his word. I failed to keep the first commandment which is to love - I would correct people quickly, and I think my zeal would scare people. Because of this I greatly misrepresented Jesus, the gracious savior, who was never rattled by people’s sins, questions, doubts or fears but received people graciously while telling them the truth firmly. Here’s what I am trying to live out now - God loves his people more than I do; God is more committed to his people than I am. I am going to make mistakes; God is bigger than my mistakes. Trust that, and work and serve out of that truth.
3. “Above all, trust in the slow work of God We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability and that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually – let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don’t try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make of you tomorrow. Only God could say what this new

spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete."-

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

2. Secondly, and lastly for us, Paul commends the Church to the Word of God's Grace -

1. It's powerful and telling that Paul refers to the scripture as the word of grace. This is the message of the Bible from cover to cover - God's grace given to us through Jesus Christ.
2. I say this all the time but the message of the Gospel is unlike any other religion - religion says do and you will be excepted, the gospel says, you are already excepted for what Jesus has done, in his life, death, and resurrection. simply turn to him and believe.
3. This is what we need to hear more and more of, again and again - Often we think people need more law.. I think of the words of John Bunyan - "Run John run, the law commands But gives us neither feet nor hands. Far better news the gospel brings: It bids us fly and gives us wings."
4. No, we need more Jesus, more contemplation of the work of the cross. More contemplation of what he suffered for our sake. More thought to his sacrifice for our sins. Deeper contemplation of the love that drove him to the cross.
5. The love, and acceptance that God gives us through the substitutionary death of his Son, Jesus Christ, is able to cure all unrighteousness, free from all addiction, heal all ailments, forgive all wrongs, banish all worthlessness, squelch all fear, remove all pride and fill us to overflowing.
6. Why would we focus on anything less than the Gospel - the word of God's grace. This is the cure to all of our problems, this is the source to all our righteousness, peace, and joy.