

Paul's simple plan for a successful Church.
Acts 20

1 Corinthians 13
Ephesians 2
Responsive Psalm 84

This morning we are going to be starting out in chapter 20. As we read through this passage this morning we will see that Luke has sort of picked up the pacing here, giving pretty much a summary over the period of a few months as Paul is traveling his way back to Jerusalem. There is very little of note in the first half of this chapter, as most of it is just chronicling Paul's journey, and who was with him through various regions. As is Paul's way, though he is traveling through these regions with a goal in mind, of reaching Jerusalem by the time of Pentecost, yet he still makes sure that he stops at the various churches along the way to encourage and instruct and strengthen the believers there. He had spent the last 3 years in Ephesus and as we will see he is now going back to some of the churches he had established years ago in Macedonia and Achaia during his second missionary journey which was recorded back in chapter 16.

We also will see the conclusion of his ministry in Ephesus, and will get a little insight into the personal struggle Paul had while he was there. While the first half of this chapter may seem like a dry and boring record of the path someone has taken on their journey, it gives context into Paul's ministry itself, his heart for these people whom he truly does care for that he is making time to revisit and go back to these churches he had established. Luke in his writing this, is emphasizing Paul's thoroughness of his efforts to encourage and warn these churches. Let us go ahead and read the entire chapter this morning, and while we do, keep in mind Paul's heart for these people as he stops at each city on the way. (read chapter 20.)

You can see the emotional scenes throughout this chapter, as he says goodbye to many he who have been very dear to him. Especially those from Ephesus which he had spent 3 years together. His message is a message of warning to these churches, knowing that he soon will be departing and no longer be able to come back and check up on them, he instructs and warns the leaders of those churches about the very things we have been talking about over the past few weeks. The main theme of this chapter, is pastoral care over God's people, with Paul being used as the example model to strive for. As we dig in to this chapter, having the understanding that Luke's inclusion of these accounts are given so that those who read them can see this example of pastoral care and concern in Paul's visits. The first example we get is in the first few verses, it comes immediately after referencing the uproar that took place which we talked about last week.

The Gospel had become a threat to the livelihood of many in Ephesus, with people now coming to Christ, and laying aside their pagan worship and belief, the economic structure that was built around the worship of these idols and pagan Gods was beginning to suffer. As I had mentioned last week when we were going through that passage, Paul and his companions were not on an anti-pagan crusade, rising up and tearing down temples, they merely were preaching the gospel, and the effect was that many were coming to believe and leave behind their pagan worship. And I think that this stands as an example to us even today, for the true power to change the hearts and minds of people lies only in Christ, and the only true and real way to effectively change the world around us is through this ministry.

All other changes or reformations are temporary, but the gospel enacts a permanent change within the people. Which is why I think that one of Satan's main attacks against the gospel is to cause distraction and to water it down, one of Satan's biggest tools is to cause confusion, and deception within the church. And in doing so, we see ineffective ministries, weak, and impotent bodies of believers who are tossed around by various false doctrines and societal pressures.

Therefore making the gospel message not one about Christ itself, but about physical reform, or worse..focused upon being in an emotional state. Having no basis, and no root, creating an army of deceived people who claim Christ. This is exactly what Paul is warning about here in his chapter, verse 28 he says “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood. For know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples for themselves.”

Sadly this is much of what we are seeing in our churches today, savage wolves who are using gospel for their own gain, and in doing so have become a tool of Satan to deceive, and lead people astray. And notice who this responsibility falls upon. Paul is talking to the leaders, the overseers, to the shepherds of the church of Ephesians in the last half of this chapter. . This is just as much a warning about being deceived and letting wolves into the midst as it is to those who govern and manage the local body to be wary themselves to remain true and steadfast to the church which God has purchased with his own blood. This is a responsibility that falls upon those who God has given such roles, verse 28 says, In which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. This is a calling from God, and should be taken seriously as such. This is one reason that I see for some of the practices we have in managing the local body of believers, that is a plurality of leaders, maintaining membership roles, conducting meetings, I find that these are things necessary to guard the local expression of Christ's bride. I would agree that we don't not see such in scripture, and much of how a church operates today is based around traditions, but not all traditions are bad and some are done for protection of the church.

There needs to be a sense of accountability within the body, and a balance to guard against the very things that Paul is warning of here. This is why it is important to have a plurality of elders, so it is not one leader, one person making all the decisions for the body, for as we have seen throughout history such systems rarely end well. And like wise, the congregation and the body must have authority to challenge and remove such leaders in the event of corruption, or a falling away from the true mission of scripture, for Paul likewise warns in verse 30, speaking to these leaders in Ephesus, “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves.” This is why it is also important to have balances to be able to deal with these issues as well. This is why Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians, We are hard pressed on every side, but he says, even so, we are not crushed, we may be perplexed but we are not in despair. The ministry of the local body of believers is a ministry that is pressed on all sides. There is the obvious pressure from the outside, from those who are not of God, who mock, who jeer, such things are expected for Jesus said, They hated me, they will hate you also. We should not be surprised when we are despised by the world, when our friends and family distance themselves from us as we grow closer and closer to God.

Then there is the pressure of other gatherings of believers, other local churches. Who, though they may say they don't, seek to make themselves inviting to draw others in, which in effect is taking some away from others. Some of it becomes an unspoken competition, when the metric you are striving for in success is the size of the building, and the amount of filled pews, then one will market themselves just as a business seeking to grow, taking business away from another.

And while there is a natural sense of this, it should not be over the menial things, such as how well this church or that church fulfills my emotional or physical needs, but rather if one leaves one body to join another it should be over doctrinal, and belief issues. But sadly a lot of what we see today is a choice of one program over another.

More often than you would think I have seen people who move into the area getting on Facebook to the local Holland page and asking for church recommendations, and the answers are numerous recommending many congregations in the area...but none are for the reasons of belief, or biblical teaching, it is always the amenities that are listed as reasons to attend, and again this fostering of competition as each person is striving to bring this new person to their group. So even within the larger universal church sort a speak, there is a pressing from all sides. I had mentioned last week, we have been told by some that we should give up, close our doors, and that this church isn't really a church and is a failure....really all that such statements do, is expose the heart of the individual. We should not be in a competition with each other, but rather recognize the unity we have in Christ, and rejoice together in that unity, and thoughtfully and prayerfully discuss our differences in love, not with the intention of bolstering ourselves over another, but with a heart focused upon the word, and a desire to truth and proper understanding.

So, we see there is pressure from the outside, there is pressure from others, and we also have a pressure from inside, which we have already been talking about this morning. There is definitely the threat of wolves who come in, and even those wolves may not be intentional. By that I mean, it isn't like it is their mission to come and destroy, they don't necessarily start out with a desire to cause problems and division. These would be those that we have been talking about quite a bit over the past few weeks. Those who claim Christ without having the spirit, those who claim salvation without having the new birth. They don't see themselves as wolves, for they have been deceived into believing they are lambs, but often times when issues arise within a body of believers there is usually a contingent who are seeking their own power, or recognition and glory. They begin backbiting, spreading rumors, and begin to tear down each other over their own ideas and agendas. And again Paul addressed this very thing in 1 Corinthians 11. "Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you."

As hard as a church may try, the leadership is not God so does not know the hearts of the individuals, and there may arise trouble makers, there may arise factions and schisms, but in such an event as painful as they may be for the time, they have a culling effect usually leaving the most faithful standing while all others abandon. But there is the opposite as well, remember verse 30 in Acts, he says, "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, to draw away people after themselves." Likewise it can be the leadership of a church who are the wolves, and the schism is the exposure of their deceitful doings, and in that case it is usually the faithful who leave, not wanting to be under the authority of one who may be abusing the power given to him. And then if that wasn't enough, there is the simple fact that we being yet in this body wrestle with sin, and so it isn't always necessarily the lost and ungodly who cause problems within a church, it can also be sin within a believer. So as you can see, the church, and its operation is not an easy, cut and dried, black a white sort of thing. When it contains people, which it of course does, it seems to inevitably get a bit messy. Hence Paul's warning, to be wary and watchful, to guard and protect as much as within your power to do so.

So in the context of Paul's warning here about the sadly inevitable problems that will arise, he gives some instruction using himself and his ministry as an example. First off he says, in verse 31, Therefore, which is one of those connecting terms, he had just finished warning against the coming of wolves, even among the leadership...therefore, watch, and remember for 3 years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears." Part of the ministry of the church is to warn, exhort, one another. We must remain faithful to the word, and watchful of each other.

One of the function of the local expression of the body of Christ is the accountability toward one another, the sharing of one another's burdens, and in the case of sinfulness, and call to repentance. But it must not be done in a haughty, arrogant, prideful way...but as Paul said, through tears for we are to love one another, and desire not the best for ourselves but for each other. As Paul wrote to the Roman's (chapter 12) "let love be without hypocrisy, Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another. Not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the lord. Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfast in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another, do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble, do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil, have regard for the good things in the sight of all men If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."

In our text this morning Paul gives himself as an example to follow in all of these things, and in verse 32, of Acts 20... he says, "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Recognizing that it is God who works in the hearts of men to will and to do. Such brotherly love which he mentions in Roman's is not a part of natural man, for natural man seeks himself, seeks to bring glory to himself, seeks his own interest, but everything Paul lays out, is not a concern for self, but a concern for one another above self. And this is something that can only truly be accomplished through the spirit, and granted by God. To have be of one mind, to all come together around the throne of God to worship and praise him...that is our end goal, and in this ministry we strive to help one another to join in, and remain in such worship.

Paul goes on, again using himself as an example, says, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he said, "it is more blessed to give than to receive." Again we see an example of Paul putting others before himself, working and laboring not only to provide for himself but for those who were with him, not counting anything as his own, but all being given by God, for the use of God in the ministry. So often it seems that money becomes the issue that divides, how it is managed, how it is spent can have a dividing factor in a church, therefore Paul instructs that even in this be generous, support the weak, and have a mind seeking the benefit of one another in love. Again instruction the church at Colossae in this very thing he says, (chapter 3) "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, long suffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another, even as Christ forgave you, so you must also do. But above all these things out on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body, and can be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

The basis of all things within the church must be Jesus Christ, this ministry is about him, and the church's service and purpose is to worship, praise and glorify him, together corporately, and to almost minister to one another individually, encouraging, exhorting, one another in prayer. Do you want to have a successful ministry within the church? Then it is these things that should be focused upon, praising God, ministering to one another in love, support, rejoice together, weep together, lifting each other up in the faith.

And we do this through standing firm on the foundation of God's word, being faithful to preach and teach the word of God, share the gospel with one another, and rejoice together in his mercy and grace. Having ourselves be reminded of his mercy toward us, that we may be likewise merciful toward one another. One of the outcomes of a faithful preaching of the word, by that I mean, not bending scripture to fit a social or societal construct, but as much as we are able preach what God has given, will have a culling effect upon the church. For as we read last week, to some the gospel, the word of God is the perfume of life, bringing life..but to others it is the stench of death unto death. The bible rightly taught, brings with it the weight of conviction, and those who are in the spirit respond in the spirit, but those without the spirit are repulsed, and driven away. The first line of protection against these wolves that Paul warns, is the faithful teaching and preaching of God's word. Then the second line of defense, is the being knit together in love toward one another, seeking and preferring one another over ourselves. These wolves who may come in, do so seeking their own, as Paul said, they rise up from among yourselves, speaking perverse things so that they may draw away disciples to themselves. They are seeking their own power, and their own glory...and one of the ways to combat this is to have a spirit of love not preferring oneself over another, but rather esteem each persons needs greater then our own.

So, there it is, Paul's 2 steps to a successful church and ministry, preach the word and stand firm upon the message of scripture, do not water it down, manipulate it, avoid the difficult parts of it but instead dig in, learn from it, meditate upon it in prayer. And also treat one another with brotherly love, preferring the well being of one over yourself. Do these things, and they will help to protect the church from those who are seeking to do her harm. But not only will such things have a protective aspect to it as you rely upon God and his word, God is also pleased to bless such a ministry which has to purpose of magnifying and glorifying him. It is not we who measure the successfulness but rather it is God. He has called some to preach and teach to a dying world who will not hear. And though by the worldly standards such ministry may look like a failure, it accomplishes God's purpose what ever that may be which is the true success that we should all be striving for in our own ministries.

Having Christ as the center of all things, the one who has given of himself for us should always be the goal of the church, and it's ministry, and if we can remain faithful in doing so, having our faith rooted in him, then we will have a successful ministry in the eyes of God, no matter what it may look like to the world.

