

## “Finish Well – Today!”

*Acts 20:17-38*

As we continue following the apostle Paul's 3<sup>rd</sup> journey, we saw in Acts 20:1-16 his purpose in ministry was to encourage people to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus wherever he went. Paul had a desire to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost because he knew the streets would be packed of people – people who needed to hear about Jesus. People were his agenda; not tasks. His to-do list was filled with people's names.

This was his life's passion and purpose. We see this reflected in his final words to the Ephesian elders. Paul did not stop in at Ephesus on his way back to Jerusalem because that would have taken a lot of time but he did want to talk to the Ephesian elders and share what was on his heart before he got to Jerusalem. This is called Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesians. They will not see him again – they both know it. These are final words. Paul anticipates suffering and possibly death for the Lord. Paul is finishing up even though he will still live for another 10 years. But in those last 10 years half of that will be spent in prisons. Paul would live to be about 70. He and Jesus were roughly the same age.

How do we finish well? How will we finish well even if we know we have another 10, 20, 40, 60 years left of life? The only way we're going to finish well in the end is if we finish well today. That's biblical. Jesus said in Matt. 6:33-34,

*6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

The disciples were anxious about their future needs; food, clothing, housing – the basic needs of life. Jesus said don't worry about the future, God has it under His control. He knows what we need. Focus on living by and for the rule of God, for today. Lam. 3:22-24 says

*22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;*

*23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

*24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."*

So tomorrow's grace and mercies haven't arrived yet. But today's have. Live for today. I like this statement by Dallas Willard. 'Too many of us are asking the question 'If you die tonight where will you be?' When instead we should ask 'If we live tomorrow what will we do?' Salvation is not just about so you can go to heaven when you die, its about how to live now for God so you'll be ready to be with Him when this life ends.

Paul anticipates the end is not far; and he's partly correct. His freedom to travel and share God's Word will be taken away soon. Most of the last 10 years of his life will be spent ministering from a prison somewhere. How's that for finishing the race well?

So what can we learn from Paul about working on finishing well today, so we'll finish well when life is over?

Paul begins his speech in v.18

... “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. <sup>19</sup> I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. <sup>20</sup> You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

Twice Paul says ‘you know’. He is confident that the Ephesians witnessed and can affirm how Paul lived among them. And that’s a pretty good measuring stick by which we can gauge our own spiritual maturity.

## **Will People Know We Served the Lord with *Humility* and *Consistency*?** **(20:17-21)**

Paul reminds them of his ministry – not because he’s arrogant and needs their applause – but because he knows Jewish ‘wolves’ are coming and they are going to discredit everything Paul said and did and twist it to make Paul look like a money-grabbing, self-centered religious hypocrite. Using ‘social media’ to discredit someone’s credibility is nothing new. It’s always rooted in hatred of someone and usually fear that they will expose them for the true hypocrite that they are.

But Paul served the Lord as he served people with humility and consistently. Consistently because that’s just the way he lived. He loved God and had a passion to see God glorified as He taught about Jesus. And it wasn’t just the Ephesians; it was the same every town he stopped at in Asia. And he served with tears meaning he served humbly and consistently

### ***Even in difficulties (v.19)***

*I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews*

‘Plots’ to kill him. That’s quite the burden to serve with. Paul knew they were around, sometimes he even had to go into hiding or be persuaded by friends to stay away from certain situations. While I’m sure he worried about these people at times he didn’t let them stop him from serving people and the Lord.

We’re tempted to quit when we’re under fire from within and without. We may not live under death threats but there are people sometimes who want to assassinate our character or at least undermine God, Jesus, or the church because of a few Christians who made some poor choices. This didn’t deter Paul and it shouldn’t deter us.

Scripture always reorients us if we’re distracted, discouraged or even disobedient. We read on Friday in our schedule Isaiah 44 which reminds us,

**44** *“But now listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen.*

<sup>2</sup> *This is what the LORD says— he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.*

<sup>3</sup> *For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.*

<sup>4</sup> *They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.*

<sup>5</sup> One will say, 'I belong to the LORD'; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,' and will take the name Israel.

Paul was constantly in the Scriptures as a teacher and when he was down. And instead of having a pity party he consistently and humbly served the Lord

### ***With the goal of benefitting others (v.20)***

*You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus*

Paul was all about building up people in their faith. And that went telling anyone that what they needed to do at times was repent of sin. That's beneficial because we can't grow without dealing with sin in our life. Nor can we come to faith in Jesus without repentance. Paul's gospel was not a 'let's see how many people can come forward' it was 'if you truly want to follow Jesus you need to change'.

Serving others with humility doesn't mean only telling them what they want to hear but sometimes what they need to hear. But we don't have to do that in a hurtful way.

Paul next says to the Ephesian elders,

*<sup>22</sup> "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. <sup>23</sup> I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. <sup>24</sup> However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

Paul's life was centered on the Lord Jesus.

## **Will People See Our Life as One Centered On the Lord? (20:22-24)**

V.24 was Paul's purpose and passion to finish the race and complete the task God had given him; that's what he considered a life worth living. That doesn't mean we can't use that verse if we aren't in full-time ministry. Because God has given us all different races to run in life. Different vocations, different health situations, different life experiences, different trials, different life-lengths. Yet in all those God still wants us to serve Him and center our life on Him, sharing God's truths with those God has given us in our circle of influence.

That's what Jesus did. Why didn't Jesus travel farther, go to Rome, go to Egypt and Africa? He could have done so much more? Why didn't He die at 43 or 53? Listen to Jesus' words Himself in John 17,

<sup>4</sup> I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

<sup>6</sup> "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. <sup>8</sup> For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.

God's will for Jesus is not really much different than His will for you and I. He has given us people in our life to share His Word with so that they will know who God is and we lived for God, bringing Him glory on earth with our life. We can all do that in our jobs, homes, neighborhoods, etc.

Is this how people will see how we lived our life? The answer is no if they don't see us living a Jesus-centered life now. What else was on Paul's heart as he shares what he believed were final words?

*<sup>25</sup> "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. <sup>27</sup> For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. <sup>28</sup> Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

Paul's passion was to share Christ. But how did he share it?

## **Will People Know We Shared Truth Graciously?** **(20:22-24)**

There are a lot of graceless examples of well-meaning believers trying to share God's Word in our world. And perhaps we've been guilty of that ourselves a few times. But when we have the goal of trying to benefit people then like Paul we'll do all we can to

### ***Help people grow spiritually (vv.25-27)***

Paul said he declared the whole counsel/will of God in v.27. That doesn't mean he taught them everything there was to know or preached through every book of the Bible. But it does mean he tried to touch on as many things about the Christian life as possible so that people would grow. Did he teach through books of the Bible probably? Did he teach about marriage, money, parenting, work? Probably. Did he teach about creation, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the return of Christ and God's plan for future Israel? Yes, we know He did all those things. The whole counsel of God means a healthy balanced diet of Scriptural truths that will help people to discern when they are studying Scripture to have the foundational truths so they can build on it for themselves. And Paul did not hesitate

### ***Even warning when necessary (vv.28-31)***

Paul warns them about their own future; about being aware that people even from their own midst might and will sneak their way into the family of God, befriending them, pretending they are one of them wanting them to grow together but eventually their true agenda of division and sowing seeds of doubt about Paul, Jesus and God will come to be known. Watch out for these people. Christians don't want to hear this. We're a little naive at times, a little too trusting at times because we want more people here, we want to fellowship and worship and we're outnumbered in the world. So its exciting to have new people come. But once in awhile you get people who sneak in and are only here to harm and bring division and make things about themselves. Watch out Paul says; these things happen.

And this is how he kind of ends his last words, reminding them once again of his own honesty and integrity:

*<sup>32</sup> "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. <sup>35</sup> In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

Paul has to remind them about his servant spirit because this is one of the areas the false teachers will seek to discredit Paul in. They will make Paul like one who used people as opposed to serve them when in fact it is the false teachers who will use people and not serve them. But that's another good question to ask of ourselves?

## **Will People Feel That We Served Them Or Used Them? (20:32-37)**

Do people genuinely feel we are listening to them when we talk to them? Do we often talk to people only because we need some information from them? Do you make a genuine effort to talk to people when we gather together? Do we try to say hi to as many people as possible without actually talking to them?

None of us are perfect. We're all guilty of using people at times more than truly engaging with them. And we can't always every time we see someone. But, that doesn't give us an excuse to avoid people or only make sure our conversations are surfacy because we have better things we want to do.

The answers to the questions,

will people know we served the Lord with humility and consistency  
will people see our life as one centered on the Lord  
will people know we shared truth graciously  
will people feel we served them more than used them?

Start now. We won't finish our life like this if we don't finish today like this. I know its clichéish but today really is the first day of the rest of your life. Because the past is gone. Can't change it; can't revisit it. But the future is wide open and we still have time to change how we finish and that starts today.

And if you're thinking 'That's too hard, I can't change' then, that's a lie. Because you won't let God change you. But lets make this very approachable.

For those of you who have been following the 5 day read through the Bible plan, did you notice something significant after Friday's reading? You turned the page. Your in the last quarter. Back in January this looked daunting but now we've read through 75% of the Bible. 37 full books. Almost finished Isaiah, 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, 101 Psalms (including 119).

How did you do that? One day at a time. Now you see the finish and you're like, I'm almost done. I can do this.

Some of us are almost done life here. Will you finish well? Some of us are in the last quarter. Will we finish well? Some of us have lots of life left (so we think). How ill we finish well? We finish well just today. And tomorrow, in the grace and strength of God we finish well tomorrow. And before we know it, we will have run the race and kept the faith and are receiving the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge has been waiting to give us since the day we accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

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