

ACTS | Gospel-Centered Church | Story 31

Acts 20:17-37

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Introduction

The book of Acts gives us the history of earliest Christianity. Studying it helps us understand what real, authentic Christianity is.

Paul brought the gospel to Ephesus, and after having served there for three years, preaching, teaching, making disciples, being on mission—in Acts 20, he is about to depart for Jerusalem. He gives his farewell address to the Ephesian elders and overseers.

This speech is the only one in Acts specifically targeted toward Christians—toward leaders of the church.

- **It gives us great insight not only regarding what it meant to be the church then, but also what it means to be the Church today!**

Acts 20:17-37

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how 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. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 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.

²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² 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. ³³ I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ 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.’”

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ 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.

What do we mean by “gospel-centered”?

1. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ is our saving King.
2. That He's ushered in an eternal and ultimate Kingdom through His death, burial and resurrection, and ascension.
3. We've been invited to enter that Kingdom through trust in Him, and empowered to live out the Kingdom of God by the Holy Spirit.
4. That the King will return one day soon to reign as King over all creation forever.

**When we say "Gospel Centered"
we're talking about everything we are
and everything we do, as being based on, informed by,
and permeated by everything
that King Jesus has accomplished, modeled, commanded,
and empowered us to do.**

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.

Preaching & Teaching (What)
Persistent & Profitable (How)
Public & Private (Where)
Insiders & Outsiders (Who)
Repentance & Faith (Why)

Preaching & Teaching (What)

Paul was preaching and teaching **the gospel**. He was declaring and instructing in the TRUTH.

Acts 20:27

...for I did not shrink from declaring to you **the whole counsel of God**.

Everything Paul taught was rooted in the gospel—nothing less and nothing more.

Paul taught his protégés Timothy and Titus over and over again “Teach Sound Doctrine.” Don't waiver from the truth and the beauty of the gospel. It is the main thing **so fight to keep the main thing the main thing!** Don't let modern philosophy, trending beliefs, culture wars, social norms creep into what you're preaching and teaching. Preach. The. Gospel. The end.

We've said it before but it's worth saying again...

“The gospel you believe will inform the life that you live.”

In verse 30 he issues a warning to the elders....

Acts 20:29-30

²⁹ I know that after my departure **fierce wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ from among your own selves will arise men speaking **twisted things**, to draw away the disciples after them.

Paul says to the elders... don't let the wolves come in and mess with the sheep! People will begin to speak all kinds of twisted ideologies that are based on their own opinions—**remember the gospel that I preached to you...** and don't depart from it!

- Be vigilant, watchful, be good shepherds, and adhere to the gospel, and protect the sheep from false doctrine!

Paul was **declaring the Truth of the gospel**—*but it didn't end there.*

He was also **instructing and teaching** *on how to live it out!*

We have something to Declare! The good news of the gospel.

But if all we ever do is PREACH and we never INSTRUCT—if we declare from a distance but we never model what it looks like to live it out—we might be motivating people, *but is it actually helpful?*

Jesus was the master of this—He not only provided ENORMOUS motivation for His disciples, but He also was constantly modeling and teaching His followers how to live it out. He didn't just motivate, He equipped. He trained. He developed.

Inspiration is great, but without providing the means and method for application... is it actually helpful? Is it beneficial? Paul gave them **motivation** and **practical application**. This is why we have Life Groups and Equipping Classes, discipleship groups in both Men's and Women's ministry... and all kinds of ways for you not just to receive inspiration but to dig through and to apply and live out what God is teaching you.

Persistent & Profitable (How)

The context of Paul's work in Ephesus was constantly surrounded with controversy.

Acts 20:18-19

...from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews...

Paul didn't shrink back from declaring truth... even the midst of plotting from the Jews (his own people) to undermine him, trying to destroy the work he was doing.

He was persistent, tenacious, diligent... he didn't quit! He pressed forward and didn't let anything discourage him from fulfilling the mission that God had given him!

- In the midst of it all, Paul had the mental, emotional, and spiritual fortitude only to give the Ephesian believers what was profitable to them!
- He didn't fall into spiritual apathy... he didn't play the victim!
- He stayed the course. He pressed on. And He only offered what was profitable to others.
- He knew it wasn't about *him*! It was about those that God had called him to serve.

Talk about self-sacrificing, servant-hearted leadership! What a beautiful example for us... for pastors, leaders, managers, business owners... this is leadership at its finest.

This is exactly what Jesus lived and modeled.

Incarnational Leadership.

Serving others at your own expense.

Laying down your life for the sheep.

**True leadership is not elevating yourself at the expense of others,
but elevating others at your own expense.**

Look what Paul tells the Ephesian elders...

Acts 20:28

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**.

If you are an overseer, and pastor, and elder—*God purchased the church by his own blood. We own nothing. We're entitled to nothing. In fact, our charge is to offer our lives as a living sacrifice just like Jesus, for the sake of the sheep.*

There is only One who is the Head of the Church, and His name is Jesus. He is the Chief Shepherd—*Elders, Pastors, our leaders, our staff—we are His under-shepherds, temporary stewards of His flock.* We will answer to HIM one day for how we cared for His body—and we will rightly be judged more harshly for it. But gospel-centered leadership lives out the example of our Chief Shepherd, laying down His life, shedding his blood and tears for the sheep.

Public & Private (Where)

There was Paul's public preaching—and then there was private teaching—instruction from house to house. Paul was involved in the life of the people he was teaching. He was *WITH* them. He *preached* in public, but he *discipled* in private.

Often the church makes the mistake of assuming that if we just preach a good enough sermon that disciples will be made. Is that what Jesus modeled for us? Is that what He believed? Is that what He lived out?

Clearly “no!”

Did Jesus preach? Absolutely.

Did he teach? Absolutely.

Is that all He did? Absolutely not.

The primary thing that Jesus did, and the primary thing Jesus commanded us to do as his followers is what?

Make disciples! The only way to do actually “make disciples” is if your life is accessible to the people God has called you to disciple...

Objection: *I'm not a disciple-maker...*

- **Are you a Christian?** Then you're a disciple-maker. You might just be making really bad disciples because you're not being intentional about it. “I don't know how?” We're going to walk this out together, we want to EQUIP you to be intentional disciple-makers.

The other principle we see in Paul as a shepherd is that He was WITH the people of Ephesus.

Acts 20:18

You yourselves know how I **lived among you** the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia

Acts 20:31

Therefore be alert, remembering that for **three years** I did not cease **night or day** to **admonish every one with tears**.

Paul made a three-year investment in the life of this community—he lived among them, served them, toiled for them, and was not separate from them. He wasn't above, he wasn't separate—he was WITH them. There were beautiful friendships that were born out of his private investment in their lives.

Acts 20:36

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him,

They weren't just acquaintances... this was family. That's what the church is.

Now, who is it a family for?

Insiders & Outsiders (Who)

Acts 20:20

...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**...

Jews had been taught all their lives that Greeks were unclean—they worshiped idols, ate impure food, were constantly breaking the Mosaic law, and were outsiders to the family of God. Because the Jews were God's chosen people. The Greeks or any non-Jewish people were outsiders.

This is not a first century problem. This is a human problem. Every single person on the planet is trying to find their value, their worth in something—often that something is the “community” we belong to—and we look down on anyone that doesn't fit in to the behavioral norms for that community.

*But Jesus comes along and flips that totally around and essentially says, **if you think you're an insider**, you've made yourself and outsider... the first will be last, the greatest will be the least.*

What Jesus is doing is revealing the sinful tendency in the human heart to pridefully assume that “of course I'm an insider! Of course, I'm a Christian! Of course, God loves me, after all, I'm pretty great!” And we look down with scorn and devalue anyone who isn't as great as we are.

Who is the gospel for?

- Insiders? Or outsiders?
- Anyone and everyone that would believe!
- That includes religious people AND rebellious people!
- It includes unsaved churchgoers and strung-out heroin junkies!
- It's for the exhausted and struggling single mom, and the anxiety ridden teenager...
- It's for the religious tightwad, and the rebellious prodigal
- The gospel is for ev.er.y.one.

In Luke 15, the story of the prodigal son... at the end of the story, the younger brother returns, the dad throws a party, and the older religious brother is seething outside of the party because his younger brother got the fatted calf. The father goes out to reason with the older brother, and to invite him in. As the story ends, we don't know if the older brother got over his jealousy and envy. So, the one who thinks he's an insider, ends up becoming an outsider. (*We think this story is about the prodigal son, but it's actually about the religious older brother—because Jesus was telling the story to the religious leaders.*)

But the Father's invitation goes to both—that's great news for us, whether you would consider yourself religious or rebellious, that invitation is the same. The gospel is FOR YOU! You're invited into the party!

It begs the question—how do you get in? This is why Paul preaches...

Repentance & Faith (Why)

Paul had a singular aim.
Point people to Jesus.

Repentance gets a bad rap—but it is a beautiful invitation to return to unhindered relationship with Christ—to grow in such deep self-awareness that your understanding and awe of God's grace might cause you to fall more in love with Him. **The more in awe of Him you are, the more like Him you'll become.**

Martin Luther opened the Reformation by nailing “The Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. The very first of the theses was:

“Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”
~ Martin Luther

Notice what Luther is saying—repentance and faith are not only the way through the door of Christianity—***but the entire life of the Christian.***

And the dichotomy of what Jesus instructs about the kingdom is—*the more you recognize the depth of your own sin and brokenness, the more you're growing in maturity. The more you recognize what a mess you really are, the more God can do with you.*

If you belong to Jesus, the gospel tells you that you couldn't be more loved by God than you are right now. There's nothing you can do to make Him love you less or more than He does right now.

Discussion Questions

1. What is unique about the audience of this last address that Paul made in Ephesus? Why?
2. He warned the leadership that “fierce wolves” would arise out from among their own selves speaking “twisted things.” Why did Paul continually emphasize declaring the “whole counsel of God—remember the gospel that I preached to you”?
3. Paul preached in public but disciplined in private. How does that resonate with your life?
4. Have you ever felt like an “insider” or “outsider” in any situation? Explain.
5. Who is the gospel for?

NOTES