

A Faithful Disciple

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Acts 20:17-35

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

If you read the letters of Paul, you know the love and grace of Christ was on his mind and in his heart and on his lips.

Acts 20 marks a critical turning point in the book of Acts. Paul is headed for Jerusalem, and, while he doesn't know what will happen to him there, he is sure he will never be back. Paul wants to pass on the leadership baton handed to him by Christ. Paul reflects on his own life and ministry and offers himself as an example of a faithful disciple as a means of encouraging and equipping the next generation of leaders. Listen for God's word to you.

In his wonderful book *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard remarks there are people in this world who emerge and rise far above their origins and surroundings....They really are different because they carry a fire or passion within them, and that difference explains why these individuals have such great effect on their environments and even on the world.

Paul was such a person. He was a remarkable man who made a remarkable impact on the church and the world. It's easy to say, well, yes, he was anointed by God and had a special calling, which is certainly true. But I think what set Paul apart is that he never forgot Jesus and his faithfulness to him. And Paul never forgot who he was in Christ.

Paul was an example of a faithful disciple who forever remained Christ-centered. We read earlier in Acts how Jesus came to him on the road to Damascus and confronted him, laid hold of his life, and called him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul was radically changed by that encounter with Christ. He went from persecutor of the church to proclaimer of the Good News. If you read the letters of Paul, you know the love and grace of Christ was on his mind and in his heart and on his lips.

Paul kept the vision of Christ, and his love was always before him and compelled him "to want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10). He had been captured by the love and grace of Christ, and that is why he says in verse 24, "I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace." Paul counted the cost of following Jesus as a faithful disciple.

What makes a person able to say this? Again, in *The Great Omission*, Willard writes, "The love of God, and only the love of God, secures the vision of God.... Vision of God secures humility. Seeing God for who He is enables us to see our-

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selves for who we are. This makes us bold, for we see clearly what great good and evil are at issue, and we see that it is not up to us to accomplish it, but up to God—who is more than able. We are delivered from pretending, from being presumptuous about ourselves, and from pushing as if the outcome depended on us. We persist without frustration.... [because] the humble are dependent upon God, not themselves.... In our love of Jesus and his Father, we truly have abandoned our life to him. Our life is not an object of deep concern.”

Paul’s life and love for Christ really speak to me as he trusted God’s grace and the power of the Spirit to accomplish for him what he could not accomplish on his own. Our lives are so complex with many responsibilities, roles and relationships. Even here in the church, there are so many things going on. But hear me now: the one necessary thing is to keep the vision of Christ and to love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. It’s all about Jesus and cultivating a deeper love and devotion for him. I keep talking to you about disciplines of prayer, scripture reading, silence, solitude, and such, but I want to say again: These are not merely a list of things to do to add to all the other things we do. They are means of offering ourselves to God, of spending time with Christ in order to cultivate a deeper love for him. To be a faithful disciple, we, too, need to remain Christ-centered, always remembering Jesus and

what he has done for us and who we are in him.

Paul was an example of a faithful disciple who cultivated community. Notice how Paul says, “You yourselves know how I lived among you.” Sometimes we think of leadership as someone at the top, but Paul exercised servant leadership. Think about how remarkable a person Paul was—his education, training, gifts, abilities—and yet, he resisted the temptation to do it alone.

He understood that servant leadership in the manner of Christ was not something that could be done from a distance. It had to be up close and personal in order to be caught, not merely taught. He modeled the incarnational ministry of Jesus in being with them. He lived among them for three years sharing the journey—sharing his very life with others, meeting in small groups in homes as well as preaching to large crowds.

Paul was contagious. His love and passion for Christ was so pronounced that he infected people wherever he went. And wherever he goes, Paul is in community and cultivating community. He always has traveling companions, as you can note in Acts 20:4. Like Jesus, he mentored a few disciples over the long haul such as Luke, the writer of Acts, and Timothy, to whom he writes, “The things you have heard from me, pass on to faithful people who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

What is evident in Paul’s ministry is that he follows Jesus in not merely wanting to see individ-

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uals come to faith in Christ. He is also interested in establishing Christ-centered communities. He plants churches because he wants to see believers gathering together to follow Christ together. It is not possible to be a faithful disciple in isolation. We need each other, and the life that is hidden with Christ in God is life that is lived out in the context of relationships.

Are you sharing the journey with others? Are you close enough to a few others that you are able to know, love, and serve them and they you? We encourage small groups in this church, not as a program but a means of following Jesus as a way of faithful discipleship—a way of living in community with others. You need to know that your pastors meet as a small group every week, first sharing our own lives of discipleship, and then praying and discerning leadership issues. We also lead groups to help others grow. Your staff meets in small groups regularly, because we live what we believe. We must be the church before we can do the work of the church. It is not enough to come to a large worship service. Every one of us needs to share the journey with a few others as Jesus did, as Paul did. That's why we are encouraging children, youth and adults to be in small groups. To be a faithful disciple, we have to get close enough to a few others to be contagious and cultivate community.

Paul was also an example of a faithful disciple who courageously crossed boundaries in ministry. Paul follows Jesus in breaking

down the boundaries of who's in and who's out of the kingdom of God. Jesus was known in his day for spending time with outcasts and sinners, and, in the end, the Jews handed him over to the Romans because they wanted him dead. The Jews did not like what Jesus said or what he did.

Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples to make disciples of all nations, and God chose Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles—the non-Jewish people. Paul follows Jesus in extending the gospel to Jews but also across cultural boundaries to the Greeks and other non-Jews. Look at verse 4 of chapter 20. Paul's companions on the journey are Greek men who have come to faith as Paul preached the Gospel in the Gentile world.

Again, some of the Jews did not like what Paul said or did in crossing boundaries to preach to Jews and Greeks alike. There was a great deal of concern about polluting the community of God by allowing Gentiles in, because they were considered unclean by the Jews. Paul experienced a great deal of difficulty because of his commitment to follow Jesus' commission to reach the Greeks. We cannot appreciate the great divide that existed at that time between Jews and Gentiles. But the vast majority of us in this room are Gentiles, and, as such, we have been greatly impacted by Paul's ministry.

This is especially significant because today is World Communion Sunday. We celebrate our oneness in Christ. No matter what our background—rich or poor, urban or rural,

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Greek or Jew—we are all one in Christ. Christ unites us to himself and each other through his death, resurrection, and ascension. Men, women, and children of every language, color, and nationality are one in him.

The Apostle Paul crossed boundaries and faithfully proclaimed this Good News of Jesus Christ in his life and his ministry and through his letters, and every one of us is a beneficiary of his commitment to that. And, what's more, we are called to cross boundaries as well as we take this good news to a world in need of the love and grace of Jesus.

This is not something we do on top of all the other things on our To-Do list. This is the overflow of experiencing the love of Christ and loving him in return. We become aware of how God's Spirit is working in us and in the world, and we are alert to opportunities to be his vessels, his instruments of love and grace wherever we are, wherever we find ourselves. Opportunities come to us every day in our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools to love and serve the Lord as we love and serve people. A small gesture or kindness can go a long way in showing forth God's love in the world, and he wants you to share the journey of the abundant life in Christ with others.

Paul reflects on his life and ministry and points to himself as an example of a faithful disciple, because he wants to encourage the next generation of leaders to remain faithful disciples, as well.

At this critical point of transition, Paul wants to ensure that the ministry that he started continues. In essence, Paul wants to see that a leadership succession happens gracefully. He wants to replace himself, if you will, to ensure that this community, this church, continues. So Paul exhorts the leaders to watch over themselves and watch over the flock of God.

It's interesting that Paul begins with "watch over yourselves." I think he realizes that the responsibilities of ministry and leadership can become a distraction. Henri Nouwen says, "Nothing conflicts with the love of Christ like service to Christ." This is particularly true if we find outward success in ministry. Dallas Willard comments on this in *The Great Omission*: "We can experience a sense of accomplishment and a sense of responsibility for what has been achieved—and for further achievement—which, in turn, can reorient our vision away from God to what we are doing and are to do. The mission increasingly becomes the vision. It becomes what we are focused upon. The mission and ministry are what we spend our thoughts, feelings, and strength upon. Goals occupy the place of the vision of God in the inward life, and we find ourselves caught up in a visionless pursuit of various goals. Grinding it out."

Do you see that Paul has come full circle? He lifted up his own life as a model of a faithful disciple. He recognizes the dangers inherent in leadership, so he charges these leaders to follow his example to live as faithful disciples, no matter the

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cost. The health and well-being of the churches—the communities of God—depend on counter-cultural leadership characterized by faithful discipleship.

There will be a lot that would pull these leaders away. There will be false teachers, whom Paul likens to savage wolves who will try to entice people away from God and away from the truth revealed by God in His word. Even today, there is a great temptation to be spectacular or sexy in ministry. While it's always important to be relevant, Paul wants these leaders to be faithful by teaching the word and maintaining sound doctrine as a means of feeding and nourishing the flock of God.

Paul is also concerned that leaders not be pulled away by greed or envy of what others have. He exhorts them to be faithful by modeling gracious and generous sharing of possessions. In essence, Paul is saying, don't just teach the truth; live it. In other words, walk the talk. Do what you say and so model the way of Christ, who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Paul also understands the temptations of pride and power of leadership. Sadly, most of us can easily recall with regret the moral failures of a number of Christian leaders. Again, Paul exhorts them to be faithful by imitating his model of humility and dependence on the Holy Spirit to serve the redemptive interests of God and the needs of God's flock. The prophetic leaders of a counter-cultural community serve others

and set aside personal ambition, pretension, and self-importance. They serve for God's glory and the good of the flock or the people of God.

And now comes the "So what?" So what does Paul's example of a faithful disciple have to say to me? A lot. God wants all of us to be faithful disciples, and that is a life-long journey of following Jesus. I was trying to think of an image to convey to you what I am trying to say, and then I realized the meal we are about to receive is that image. This meal was given to help us remember Jesus and all he did for us. And it reminds us of who we are in him. Each one of us is a sinner who has been redeemed by the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. Individually, we come to receive the grace Christ extends—not only for forgiveness but to be continually fed and nurtured by his grace.

Though we individually need this meal, we never partake alone. This is a community meal that reminds us we are not "lone ranger" Christians. We are not only one with Christ, but we are one with each other. We are united to each other and all those in every place and time who have trusted Christ as Lord and Savior. We are a community of disciples who partake of Christ's grace together. We belong to God together; we need each other

But even that, my friends, is not the end of the story. The one loaf is broken to be given to the many, and we the many are sent out—scattered even from this place to be Christ's body, to be his representatives,

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ambassadors to a world in desperate need of the gospel—the Good News of Jesus Christ our Lord. That good news is meant to go to every corner of this earth until the whole world is transformed by this love of grace that is in Jesus Christ.

As we come to this meal, let us remember Christ and all he has done for us. And let us remember who we are: We are in Christ with each other for the world. And let us respond to the invitation of Christ to live as his faithful disciples until he comes again.