

Farewell Sermon
Acts 20:17-38
Sermon #695
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¹⁷ Now from Miletus [Paul] 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.

Good-byes are never easy to do. And yet it is something that we must do many times in our lives. Our best friend next door moves away. We go off to college. We get married. Our children then repeat that same cycle. We may move a number of times in our lifetime. The average today is every three or four years. Finally, there is the ultimate farewell when a loved one dies. Over the course of a ministry, a pastor may serve a number of congregations. For me it has been three different congregations. The first congregation was Grace in Vero Beach, Florida where I served them as a vicar, the second one at Faith in Clara City, MN, and then, of course, here at the Five Point Parish of North Iowa.

As a pastor you become very close to members. You share their joys such as the births and baptisms of their children, the confirmations, the weddings, anniversaries, birthdays and promotions. You teach them God's Word in Bible classes, Vacation Bible School, and adult information classes. In each of the church years you get to celebrate with the members special days like Christmas, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, Reformation, and church anniversaries. You also share their sorrows such as hospital visits, lingering illnesses, counseling problems, and the death of loved ones. Friendships have also been established with our children. With all these contacts, there are strong emotions when a pastor leaves. That's what I am experiencing right now. Although I hope that someday I will see you again, I know that for some I will never see you again on earth. That's hard after working together, worshiping together, and serving together in the Lord's kingdom. The good news is that by faith in Jesus Christ we can look forward to a joyful reunion in the mansions of heaven. Our Savior has made that possible through his death and resurrection. In that light, we have the joy of knowing that as Christians we never say good-bye. Rather, we can say, "I'll see you later in heaven." That's the importance of preaching and teaching God's Word so that we remain strong in our Christian faith. Again today we acknowledge that

THE LORD BLESSES HIS CHURCH.

Three things we want to note today:

1. He blesses a pastor and congregation through his Word;
2. He answers their prayers for one another; and
3. He blesses them with salvation.

Acts, chapter 20, is Paul's farewell message to the leaders of the church in Ephesus. He had spent three years with them. He had established this congregation and spent much more time with the Christians there than many of the other congregations he had established. He had gotten to know them well. Paul had been traveling a while on his missionary journeys but now he was able to stop and meet with the Ephesian Christians one last time. He reminds them why God had sent him to them. He said, **"You yourselves know... how 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."**

A church had rented a billboard to encourage young men to consider the ministry. One of the signs said, "WANTED: DOCTORS OF SOULS" and then gave the name and number of the seminary. That advertisement points to the heart of a pastor's work: the care of souls. He works to heal people's spiritual problems and strengthen their spiritual health. That means proclaiming Law and Gospel. That's why I also was sent to you. The Law brings us the bad news - that we are born sinful, that we keep committing sins in our life every day, that we deserve God's just punishment, and that we are called to turn to the Lord and seek his forgiveness. Then there is the sharing of the good news, the Gospel, - that Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, lived that perfect life for us, died on a cross as a sacrifice for our sins, has risen from the dead, and that God offers us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life freely, because of Jesus Christ. God wants us to hear these wonderful truths so the Holy Spirit can work on our hearts to bring us to faith or strengthen our faith in his Son.

Paul was thankful for the ministry but he could not boast that he had made the Word successful and neither can I. The Lord has done that. Paul could not boast about the fruits of faith in his converts and neither can I. The Lord gave them the Holy Spirit who prompted the fruits of faith. One of

the fruits of faith is sharing the Gospel with others. Someone once said that we are on this earth for two reasons: to come to faith in Jesus and to tell others about him. Paul was God's servant to serve the Ephesians for a period of time and God was now calling him to proclaim the Gospel in Jerusalem. God also used me to serve you for a period of time and now in an emotional farewell will be going to proclaim the Gospel in Holton, Michigan.

As a pastor and congregation are blessed together through the Word, they will also pray for one another. Paul says, "**He knelt down and prayed with them all.**" Once in a while you hear someone say jokingly, "Yah, pastors got it made; they work only one day a week." So what does a pastor do when he is not preaching? He prepares for and teaches classes, visits the sick and shut-ins, make evangelism and delinquent calls, writes and prepares sermons, gathers information for the Sunday bulletin and monthly newsletter, studies the Bible and also prays. Martin Luther said that there are three things that make a pastor: prayer, study of the Scriptures, and the struggles of life. He also said, "I have so many things to do today that I have to spend twice as much time in prayer before I begin." A pastor must be a man of prayer. He prays daily to thank the Lord for all the blessings he has been given by God's undeserved love and mercy. He sees himself as only a fragile jar of clay. He is humbled by his own unworthiness yet confident that he can do all things through Christ who gives him strength. He prays for the ability to properly distinguish between Law and Gospel. He prays for himself, for his wife and children. He prays that God will enable him to be a good husband and father. He prays for wisdom to balance his time between congregation and family. He prays for the members of his congregation. He prays that God will give his people health, wisdom, love and faith. He prays for those in the hospital, for those who recently lost a loved one, for those having marital and family problems, for those experiencing financial problems, and for those who have wandered from the Lord's house. All this I have also considered to be part of my ministry. I pray for you all. And I also know you pray for me. I remember visiting a shut-in and after having a devotion and distributing the Lord's Supper and offering a prayer, the member said, "Pastor, I want you to know that I have been praying for you." That was heartwarming to hear. I realized that God had sent me there that day, not only to comfort

that member, but for her to comfort me as well. The Apostle Paul even said in one of his letters, **“Pray for us.”** Pray for all of God’s servants. Pray that God would give them health, courage, joy, a love for souls, and a love for the truth of God’s Word.

But the greatest joy is knowing that God has blessed us with salvation. In John’s vision of heaven recorded in the Book of Revelation, John looks into the future, into heaven, into eternity. What John sees is the Holy Christian Church. All whoever trusted in Jesus during their lives have been gathered together there. John himself would have to wait a while before he could join that large multitude in person. Every pastor wants this vision to be the goal and result of his ministry. The many messages and classes, all the shut-in visits, evangelism calls, and deathbed visits, the hours of counseling, all these things are aimed at increasing the numbers in heaven. In the end, that’s the only statistic that matters. I also want to be in that number. I want all of you here today to also be in that number. Whether we see each other again on earth after today or not, we do know that by faith in Jesus Christ we will rejoice together in the mansions of heaven. This is what the church is all about – people wearing white robes, holding palm branches in their hands, and singing praises before the throne of the Lamb of God. So the church is not about locations, buildings, traditions, and ministry styles. It’s about people! That’s what the church is all about! That’s the goal of Jesus’ commission to make disciples of all nations. That’s why Jesus died and rose again. So that people – you and I – will be in heaven with him. Amen.