

Acts 20:17-38 - Paul's Emotional Farewell

Some leaders of the world, as Jesus said, use their positions of power to maintain an advantage over their subjects (Matt. 20:25). Jesus modeled a different way. He placed himself in a position of weakness and was completely humble with his disciples, even calling them his friends (John 15:15). Paul exemplifies this humility as well (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:29–30).

Whereas Jesus was able to be completely open with his disciples because he had no fault within him to hide, Christians do not always have that same level of confidence. Our lives are often marked by failures and shame, by “tears and . . . trials” and “all humility” (Acts 20:19). Our strength to open ourselves up to others, to be vulnerable despite our failings, comes not as we drum up self-confidence but as we focus on Christ’s finished work and rely on him. Paul was weak, yet he was confident in the strength of his Lord (2 Cor. 12:10). When our identity is found in Christ, we are free to be honest (James 5:16). If you have faith in Christ, your new identity is secure and robust. Your new identity in Christ is deeper than any of your wounds, sins, suffering, trials, and failures.

Lastly, Paul reminds the Ephesians of how God has worked in him to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (v. 24). He expresses confidence not in human ability but in “the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (v. 32). Paul knows that the grace of God is more powerful than any laws, commands, or threats to motivate and build up his people. Paul is concerned that they continue to live under the grace of God that has been poured out for them.

Acts 21 - Paul in Jerusalem

Paul’s visit with James is another episode in the continuing struggle on the part of many Jewish Christians to comprehend the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. With Paul at the forefront, the word about Jesus scandalizes many Jews because it brings Gentiles into the people of God without requiring them to abide by the law. We see Paul confronting this issue throughout his letters, most especially in Galatians and Romans.

Paul is unyielding about the obligation to spread the gospel to the Gentiles, and about their not having to keep the laws regarding Jewish ceremonies and traditions; however, we also see Paul doing all he can to demonstrate to the Jews that he values the law, even undergoing these rites of purification (v. 26). For the sake of spreading the message of God’s grace, Paul insists that he can become “all things to all people,” allowing a remarkable space for adaptation in nonessentials for the sake of mission (without compromising the gospel or his identity in Christ; see 1 Cor. 9:19–23). He also encourages others to this flexibility in nonessentials for the sake of harmony and humility in the church (see Romans 14).

vs. 20-26 - The grace of the gospel frequently leads to the charge of antinomianism, or lawlessness—that if grace is free, people will feel free to sin all they want. The first to levy such charges are, as here, those who are zealous to keep religious commands and compel others to do the same. Paul goes to great lengths to satisfy the Jerusalem accusers (v. 25), even accommodating James by submitting to a ritual Mosaic cleansing (v. 26) Paul’s opponents

believed that commands could only be kept out of fear of punishment, and that if that fear were removed, there would no longer be any motivation to live a righteous life. Into this situation comes news of the gospel, in which Jesus has removed the fear of punishment and freely reconciled us to God. Those zealous for the law can only see the potential danger: If Christians do not fear punishment, they will do whatever they want! Think of the anarchy! The book of Acts refutes such accusations, showing that those who have experienced grace are motivated by remembering God's grace; because of God's great love for them, they do whatever he wants (cf. John 14:15). They are compelled by the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14).

Acts 22 - Paul's Speech in Jerusalem

The gospel Paul proclaims sometimes incites riots: it challenges the livelihood of some (Acts 19), it stirs up fears of antinomianism in others (Acts 21), and here the Jews of Jerusalem are offended that God is concerned with the Gentiles. As soon as Paul mentions God commissioning him to go to the Gentiles, they are infuriated and want to execute him. This is the scandal of the gospel. The Jews treasured their status as God's people, and found it difficult to accept that God was "grafting in" those from outside their race (see Rom. 11:17-24). God's grace extends to those we assume are beyond his reach, even to those we despise. Paul is living out the persecution that Jesus promised would come to some of his followers when he foresaw that families would be bitterly divided on account of his kingdom (Luke 12:51-53). Paul is convinced that God has called him to this vocation, despite the rejection he suffers. Enduring such suffering for the sake of the gospel involves greater love for the very ones who persecute him.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Notice that Paul's priorities were always the strengthening of the churches and the establishing of new ones. Your calling and context will be very different than the apostle's, but how are you living out the same priorities as him?
2. Think about Paul's legacy with the Ephesian elders. As a Christian, what would you like your legacy to be, in your family, church, and community? How are you working toward that end?
3. Review Acts 21 - How does Paul's example of faithfulness to Christ in the face of upcoming persecution encourage you in your life? Is there a person in your life you have neglected to tell the gospel to due to a fear of rejection or pain? Pray for boldness.
4. Look back at Acts 21:25-26 - One commentator writes - "Believers, however, can let freedom assume the status of an idol and, consequently, enslave themselves to freedom. We can easily entrench ourselves in our own freedom and thus paralyze our ability to serve others. True freedom, as Paul demonstrates, means we can dispense with our own preferences, wants, and needs. True freedom is a freedom from self." This is hard to see in our own lives, but can you spot areas in which you are most tempted to idolize your freedom or preferences? What would it look like to worship Christ in those areas instead?