

## Gospel Triumph: A Farewell Full of Grace – Acts 20:13-38 (Part 1)

One of the beneficial uses of social media is the ability to keep up with people you no longer see on a regular basis. You see pictures and life updates from that old friend you used to serve with in the military. You find out rather quickly about the job change of your roommate from college. You probably know more than you want to about the political views of that one crazy uncle. Or maybe you ARE that one crazy uncle that everyone in the family talks about your social media posts.

While it can be nice, these sort of “friendships” are more zombie friendships than real relationships. You really don’t have any sort of ongoing interaction, but you still feel like you know this person because you see their posts and comments online. Back in the olden days, you know, 20 years ago, long-distance friendships were still doable but much harder. You had to pick up the phone or write letters to each other. Or you had to schedule a trip to spend some time together. But go back 2000 years to Paul’s day and close relationships were next to impossible apart from living near each other. You could write letters, but most people just couldn’t do this. And if you did write a letter, you couldn’t rely on the postal service to deliver it. You had to ask a friend to hand deliver it, which often meant a dangerous and expensive journey that could last weeks or months.

The difference in circumstances between our day and Paul’s day gives us some insight into the importance of this farewell speech in Acts 20. Look at verse 17. This speech is given to the elders from Ephesus, a church where Paul had spent 3 years loving, teaching, and shepherding. Now he’s on his way to Jerusalem and ultimately, he wants to go to Rome. He knows he won’t be doing extended ministry in Asia again, and it’s highly unlikely that he will ever get back to visit them.

Now, this speech is given specifically to the elders at Ephesus, but I also think we are meant to read this as the sort of speech Paul probably gave several times throughout this last missionary journey. What was Paul saying when he visited the churches in Macedonia in Acts 20:2? What did he say in Troas when he spent all night with the believers there and Eutychus fell out of the window? I think something like what he says here.

So, what does he say here? Well, we are going to explore this speech today and next week but let me try to give you the thirty-thousand-foot view. Paul uses his own ministry as an example for them. He reminds them of what he did in ministry so that they can follow his pattern. One of the best ways to truly learn a skill is to learn by example. I can tell you how to parallel park, something I am particularly skilled at, but the best way for you to learn is to hop in the car with me and watch.

Notice how Paul begins the speech in verse 18. Paul's pattern of ministry drives the speech. And what was the heart of the example he set for them? Look how Paul finishes the speech in verse 35. This is the essence of grace. God has given to us apart from merit and favor and we have received. Paul drank in God's grace and then turned and sacrificially gave of himself for others in ministry. The great theologian Bono once said, *"When you boil it down, the universe runs by either Karma or Grace. I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I'm holding out for Grace."* Paul knew God's grace and so he found it quite natural to give of himself in ministry to others and this was what he wanted for those he loved at Ephesus and us as well.

So, here's what we will see today and next week in Acts 20:13-38. **4 Elements of Grace-Oriented Ministry.**

### **1. Embrace the Mission (vv. 13-21)**

Last week we ended with Paul departing from Troas after a week there. He had spoken all night and raised Eutychus from the dead. Look at verses 13-15. Since Luke is clearly with Paul at this point we get a more detailed description of the travel. Let me show you a map so you can get your bearings. All of this lands them in Miletus, which you can see is just south of Ephesus. Look at verse 16.

In all likelihood Paul and the others have not chartered their own ship where they have complete control over timing, route, and destination. There may not have been a ship that was going to Ephesus and then continuing on toward Jerusalem. So, Paul gets as close as he can to Ephesus while maintaining his plan to be in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Why did he want to do this? Most likely so he could

present the offering he and the others had collected for the struggling believers in Jerusalem. Notice what Paul does in Miletus. Verse 17.

This was a short trip over land, and the elders received word and probably arrived within a day or two of Paul landing at Miletus. Everything so far in this journey indicates to us that Paul's ultimate desire is to serve others. He wants to go to Jerusalem to serve them with a gift. He wants to encourage the churches. Paul lives his life by the mission, and the mission is driven by love for Christ and His people. This commitment to the mission is clearly demonstrated in Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Look at verses 18-19 as the speech begins.

He reminds them of his example and of their close relationship with him and then he gives two words in verses 18-21 that summarize the mission. The word "serving" in verse 19 and "testifying" in verse 21 are both the same part of speech in Greek and are set apart as key ideas in this section. What did Paul do in Ephesus? He served the Lord and testified of repentance and faith.

Let's talk about these two core parts of the mission. Serving and Testifying. First, notice who Paul was serving. The Lord. I know it sounds basic and simple, but how easy is it to forget this reality. As you serve in the church and interact with people and use your gifts, you don't do any of it for yourself or even ultimately for other people. You are Christ's servant. I am Christ's servant, and I serve at the pleasure of the master.

You can tell someone serves Christ and not self when they serve in the manner Paul did. Look further in verse 19. Humble submission to the master, genuine tearful love for others, and endurance of trials and difficulty. Nothing positions us to recognize and receive grace better than humility and nothing puts up a barrier to grace with more fervor than pride. God gives grace to the humble.

And since Paul was serving the Lord, he knew he was responsible for conveying the message of the King accurately and for the benefit of those who heard it. Look at verses 20-21.

Again, Paul is going back over his own ministry to help the Ephesian elders follow his model and example. I love the perspective he has on what he taught. He

wasn't shy about telling them profitable things. Paul loved them and wanted them to know the truth because at the end of the day the truth of God's Word is good for people. It's advantageous. All that he taught was for their benefit.

So, this is a matter of faith. Do we believe that God's Word, rightly understood and taught is profitable? This can be a struggle sometimes because we don't always easily see how Scripture applies to everyday life and our normal, common challenges. And so, we start to think of Scripture and sound doctrine as less profitable. And we find ourselves thinking, well, come one, the Trinity is just not that helpful of teaching. And so, we end up downplaying God's Word in favor of something we think is more useful and beneficial to our lives. But at that point you have become the authority. Paul knew that what he taught was profitable and for us, if we can't see how a particular truth matters in life, keep learning and keep diving in and God's Word will shape you in ways you can't even imagine.

As a side note, why does a right grasp of the Trinity matter? What's the most fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity? The difference that accounts for all the other differences. Allah is one and Yahweh is Triune. Why does this matter? Allah is one, the only authority and love is not intrinsic to his character because there is no one else. Yahweh is triune and has always been a Father loving a Son through the Spirit. Therefore, Christianity understands love to be natural to God and core to God and all the other qualities of God operate in and through God's love. Allah is authority and the whole thing flows from his authority down. Doctrine matters.

And this is why Paul spent his ministry living in the mission of verse 21. So, to follow Paul's example here we must be committed to God's grace and the mission of serving the Lord and speaking of that beneficial grace. Let's move to our second element of a grace-oriented ministry.

## **2. Evaluate your Purpose (vv. 22-24)**

To embrace the mission and endure trials, Paul had to properly evaluate his purpose on earth. And there's no doubt that Paul understood difficult times lay ahead. He may have even expected his death in the not to distance future. Look at

verse 22-23. But his willingness to move forward in ministry comes from his firm grasp of his purpose on earth and the value system he has. Look at the beginning of verse 24.

Paul is not saying his life is not valuable and doesn't have purpose. But he is putting the value of his life up against something much greater. This is a comparison. Paul holds his physical earthly life loosely because of something that is much more important than it. What's more valuable? Continue reading in verse 24.

Paul uses a sports metaphor here of finishing his course. I'm not sure if Paul was into athletic competition but he does use sports illustrations often. I draw your attention to that to just say how justified I feel in constantly talking about sports from the pulpit. It's also a helpful picture. One author said this:

*Athletic metaphors can be helpful. In the arena, out on the field, or in the starter's block, an athlete is exposed, and details about them and their performance are observable. Athletes don't carry extra baggage when competing. Good athletes have singular vision and commitment. There may be a significant investment of resources to train an athlete, but once in the race the aim must be on just one thing. In his farewell address to the Ephesians, Paul employs an athletic image to illustrate his commitment (Acts 20:24; cf. Phil 3:12–14; 2 Tim 4:7). Like a runner in a race, his "aim" is to finish well. For him, finishing the race means testifying to the good news of God's grace (v. 24). – Dean Pinter*

And what's his ministry? Look at the end of verse 24. Paul wants nothing more than for people to begin to grasp the grace of God. He wants each person he interacts with to walk away knowing something of God's kindness and gracious gift.

At the end of the day what's the one thing that Christianity has to offer the world that no other religion, philosophy or ideal has? It's grace. We don't have to earn it. God came to us. He loved us, bought us, and sought us in order to pour out the riches of His grace on us. Paul's life was spent for the purpose of making sure this message got out there.

Now, what do these first two elements mean for us today? You don't have to be a pastor or elder to embrace the mission and evaluate your purpose. You don't have to be a pastor or elder to be overwhelmed by God's grace and to begin extending that grace to others. Let's pray.

### Sermon Reflection Questions – 9/14/25

- Do you have any long distance relationships that you maintain outside of social media? How do you do this?
- How would you describe the focus of Paul's speech?
- Explain the phrase, "The universe runs by either Karma or Grace".
- How does the quote in verse 35 summarize Grace for us?
- Is it arrogant of Paul to use his own ministry as the primary example for the Ephesians elders? Why or why not?
- Describe the difference between "serving the Lord" and using your gifts to serve people in the church but motivated by self-glory?
- How would you explain humility? Why is humility so closely associated with grace in Scripture?
- Explain how Scripture is profitable?
- What do we do if we can't see how a particular teaching of Scripture applies to daily life or is beneficial to daily life?

- Where else in Paul's letters do we get a sense of how he values his own life?
- What would it look like to live with your life as the highest value you have as opposed to the way Paul's describes his value system in verse 24?
- Explain what it means that grace is the one thing Christianity has to offer the world that is different from every other religion, philosophy or way of life?