

Gospel Triumph: A Farewell Full of Grace – Acts 20:13-38 (Part 2)

There's a short online video that I've seen several times over the years that shows just how intense a person can be when something they love is threatened. The video is from a home security camera in one of those tiny California backyards. This yard is enclosed by a concrete wall that stands maybe 4 feet high. In the video a mother bear and her two cubs start to walk across the top of the wall. You start to hear dogs barking and then see 4 or 5 dogs run toward the bear and start to jump at it. The bear starts to paw at the dogs and at one point it looks like it may actually get one of the smaller dogs.

All of the sudden you hear a door slam and shouting and a lady runs into the picture and straight toward the bear. She extends her arms and shoves the bear off the wall. Then she turns around and picks up the smaller dogs and runs back into the house while the bear is trying to figure out what happened while it climbs back onto the wall. There's no doubt she saved those little dogs from getting badly injured or worse.

I want you to have that image of protection in your head as we move into the second half of Paul's farewell address to the elders from Ephesus. Last week we saw Paul recount his own ministry methods and remind them of what he did so they would copy him and learn from him. This week he will continue to speak of his example, but now he directly addresses the elders and charges them to protect the flock of God.

While it is true that this speech is given to elders and the commands here are specifically for elders, it's very helpful for all of us to hear what Paul says. There will be threats from outside the church and inside the church. The body needs to be prepared to recognize those threats, and the elders need to be prepared to protect from those threats. But please keep in mind this is all within a speech describing grace-oriented ministry.

So, let me briefly remind you of what we saw last week and then we will move into the rest of Paul's farewell speech. We are looking at **4 Elements of Grace-Oriented Ministry.**

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

Last Sunday in Acts 20 we saw Paul leaving Troas with the ultimate destination of Jerusalem in mind. He landed in Miletus for several days, probably waiting on the boat he was on to unload and load its cargo. While waiting he called for the Ephesian elders to come see him and he gave them this farewell speech in verses 17-35. Look at verses 17-18. The whole thing is based on the premise that the Ephesian elders had watched how Paul did ministry and they must copy his example. Paul was devoted to the mission.

You may remember that there were two words that summarize his mission among them. Serving in verse 19 and testifying in verse 21. Paul's goal was to remind them of what they had seen and encourage them to imitate it.

2. Evaluate Your Purpose (Vv. 22-24)

Grace oriented ministry compels us to know our purpose, and this means having properly weighted values. Look at verse 24. Paul's ultimate purpose was to put the grace of God on display through his actions, through how he treated others, and through the words he spoke. Paul had experienced God's grace. He knew God's grace and he rested in God's grace and so he wanted others to enjoy this as well.

Now, verse 25 serves as a sort of breaking point in Paul's speech. You can see this with how he begins verse 25. He starts to move his thoughts toward the time when he won't be with them any longer. In light of his absence, they need clear direction to continue to imitate his ministry of grace. This brings us to our third element.

3. Exert Yourself for God's Church (vv. 25-31)

These are instructions for elders and Paul gives them because of Paul's upcoming absence. Look at verse 25. It's not that Paul was going to be put to death soon, but he planned to go to Rome and possibly beyond. So this is it and they have responsibilities. Paul has done all he can for them. Look at verses 26.

When Paul says he is innocent of the blood of all, he's echoing a passage from Ezekiel. This passage describes a watchman put on the wall and responsible for the safety of the city. What was Paul's responsibility? Look at verse 27.

When Paul says the whole counsel of God it's similar to the idea given in Ephesians 1:11. The counsel of God is God's plan for all of creation and for His people. It's the story of God from creation to final consummation on the new earth. It's the way God's plan of redemption unfolds from the OT to the New with Jesus Christ as the center. So listen, I do not plan on diverting from this purpose in ministry here at WBC. My responsibility is simple and clear. We all need God's Word explained and put in context. You need to know the story from beginning to end. The job of the watchman is to not get distracted and to tenaciously maintain a single focus.

It's this focus that leads Paul to give the only two commands in this whole speech to the elders. Look at verse 28 and verse 31. What does it mean to be alert? Readiness. Watchful. Aware. Not distracted.

So, I'm going to kind of put it out there this morning. Last year I did some serious evaluation and thought through my life stage, my responsibilities, and how I use my time. I'm 43 and have maybe 25 years of focused pastoral ministry left. That's not that long and the years seem to go quicker all the time. I spend too much of my life online reacting to reactions of reactions and getting emotionally and mentally swamped by what happens in places I have no connection to and with people I don't know. So, I got rid of all of my social media accounts and spend way less time online. I cannot pay careful attention to myself and to the flock if I am constantly consumed with the spats, arguments, and trends of the online world.

Paul wanted the elders at Ephesus to maintain focus and avoid distraction for some really good reasons. They needed to pay attention to their own spiritual lives and the spiritual lives of the church because of what he says in verse 28. They are to care for God's church which God obtained with his own blood, speaking of the blood of Jesus Christ.

You can tell how important an item is by what someone is willing to sacrifice for that item. The lady who shoved the bear clearly valued her dogs. I'm not sure I would attack a bear for my dog, but there are certainly things I would shove a bear for. Paul understood that God had sacrificed Himself for the church and then given Paul the responsibility to care for the church and so Paul must maintain careful focus and attention.

Let's stop here for a second and just consider these two phrases from Paul concerning your identity. You are the church of God. We belong to Him and He wants His people to be taken care of. God loved you enough to come Himself to rescue you from sin. He gave Himself up and suffered on the cross because of His great love. The level of His commitment to you and care for you is that high and Paul wants the shepherds of the church to operate out of that care and concern.

They must maintain this careful attention because of what would happen after Paul's departure. Look at verses 29-30. Two categories of problems that would confront the church with false teaching.

First of all, fierce wolves from outside. There are those outside the church that threaten the life and growth of the church. The difficulty with these wolves is that they don't present themselves as false teachers. Jesus described the problem in Matthew 7:15. Jesus goes on in that passage to say that you will recognize them by their fruits. We know that their fruits ultimately arise from their character.

Second, unfortunately the church has always had to face threats from inside. Notice a couple of things about those threatening the church from inside. They speak twisted things. This gives us the picture of something deformed, distorted and perverse. They teach what is bent and out of order. What might this look like? Often times you will have a true believer teaching something that is true but just with a little twist to it or an out of balance emphasis. People tend to latch onto one area of teaching and pull it away from the rest and fail to put that teaching within the context of the entire Bible or the whole counsel of God.

A church may really want to help men to be strong and biblical and to lead well and so that church may drift into an improper grasp of leadership and authority.

This results in a domineering mindset and authoritarian leadership in homes and at church rather than servant leadership. A church may distort love into simple acceptance and affirmation.

Distortion in teaching also happens when a teacher fails to emphasize the core truths of Scripture and the essential doctrines and instead pulls one minor area out and holds it up as the key to everything else.

In contrast to these threats, Paul has set an example for them that he wants them to remember. Look at verse 31. This is why it's so vital in our day and age to lean into local church ministry and not find your only or even primary biblical influences online. Those resources can be helpful, but in the local church you have people who know you and love you and who you can actually have a conversation with. I think Paul would say to make the local church primary and other teaching influences secondary.

Now, this whole section sets a pretty high bar for church leaders and it can be intimidating and exhausting to think about the responsibility given here. And I think that's precisely the reason that Paul finishes his speech where he does.

4. Entrust to Grace (vv. 32-38)

Look with me at the beginning of verse 32. Paul is leaving and he's given instructions to the elders, but ultimately this whole thing isn't dependent on the elders to hold it together. Who has promised to fully and finally keep His people? Paul commits these elders to God and to the Word of His Grace.

The God who gave Himself as a substitute for the church will keep the church. He's a God who is faithful to His promises and loves His children. He will keep them and the primary means He will use to keep them is the Word of His Grace. Once again we have Paul wanting to leave the Ephesians in the safe keeping of God's grace.

This is how we persevere. A continued focus on and trust in God's grace. Look at the rest of verse 32. Notice how Paul ends his commendation, by focusing on his own grace enabled example and on the grace filled pathway to the good life. Verses 33-38.

We've spent this week and last week working our way through Paul's farewell speech here and I hope you see quite clearly how Paul was radically focused on grace. Grace empowers us, encourages us, grows us, and keeps us. Paul would absolutely affirm the 3rd verse of Amazing Grace and I think he would say this is a pretty good summary of his message to the Ephesian elders.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come,
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 9/21/25

- Have you ever been put in a situation where you had to protect someone important to you?
- How does the emphasis of Paul's speech in Acts 20 change beginning in verse 25?
- Why is it helpful for those who are not elders to hear what Paul says to the elders at Ephesus?
- What OT prophet is Paul referring to in verse 26 by saying he was innocent of the blood of all?
- What does Paul mean by the phrase the "whole counsel of God"?
- What are some possible distractions that keep us from exploring the whole counsel of God?
- Do you find social media helpful in your life or something you struggle to control?
- What are the two commands Paul gives to the elders in Acts 20?
- What do you think Paul means when he tells the overseers (elders) to care for the flock of God?

- What are the two types of threats that Paul says will afflict the church?
- Do you have any examples of either of these threats?
- What's the relationship between exerting yourself for God and trusting His grace?