

Committed to God and the Word of His Grace

Acts 20:17-38

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Good-byes can be difficult. Maybe we're saying good-bye to a loved one. Maybe we're saying good-bye to what's familiar. Maybe we're saying good-bye to a way of life. Fred Craddock tells about teaching one summer at a university. One day in the cafeteria, he found a place at a table. A young woman was there and he asked if she was a student. She said that she was a graduate student in theology. They talked some more and he learned that she was a Roman Catholic nun—but hadn't been one for very long. She'd been a buyer for Macy's in New York. She had a nice apartment, and everything was going her way. In fact, she was engaged to be married. About two months before the wedding, she had prayed and thought, prayed and thought. She called her fiancé. He went over, and she returned the ring to him. He didn't understand, but he took the ring and left. Some time later, she was on the subway in New York, wearing her nun's habit. All the seats were taken and she was standing, holding the strap when she suddenly realized that facing her, holding the strap, right in front of her, was her former fiancé. They said hello to each other. Then, she said, "We both cried and said goodbye again." Fred asked, "Does it still hurt?" And she said, "Very much" (*Craddock Stories* 90). Even when they're good and right, good-byes can be painful.

Paul is saying good-bye to some friends. And he knows that this is a final farewell. They won't see each other again. We listen to what people say in a time like that. Paul's words here go deep and they carry significant weight. This speech of Paul's is invested with meaning because it's a final farewell. Also, this is the first time Acts reports a speech of Paul's to a group of believers. And it's his last speech before he returns to Jerusalem where he'll be arrested, imprisoned and eventually sent to Rome. Let's listen in on Paul's farewell to some of his friends from Ephesus.

The heart of the message is in verse 32: "Now I commit [or commend] you *to God* and *to the word of his grace*, which can *build you up* and *give you an inheritance* among all those who are *sanctified*."

Who's Paul talking to here? Who's he saying these things to? He's returning from his third mission trip that took him back to the regions he's been in before, then through the province of Asia and on into Greece. Now he's hurrying to get back to Jerusalem for Pentecost. At a harbor city called Miletus, he sends for the elders of the church in Ephesus. Earlier on this trip, he had spent about three years in Ephesus, preaching and teaching. He left there following a riot led by some silversmiths who made idols. If he stops there now, he'll likely be delayed, but he wants to see some of the Ephesians. So the elders or overseers or leaders of the church come to see him.

So if this message is a word for church leaders, is it a word for you? I believe it is.

When I was in junior high, our football team had a chaplain. He was also the school's custodian and an old family friend. On the day of our first game of the season, he came to speak to the team. We were in a classroom and he said that we couldn't be required to be there. Anyone who wanted to leave could. No one did. He said, "By staying, you're being a witness." We didn't think we were Christian witnesses, but he said we were. That spoke to me. I was interested in knowing about witnessing for Jesus and being a witness. To hear that affirmation of being a witness through something as simple as staying to hear a devotional helped me. Being a witness often means more than just showing up and sticking around. But sometimes showing up and sticking around are a big part of our witness.

Maybe you think you're not a leader, but you are in some way, for some people, in some area of life. Somebody's looking at you, watching how you live and work and respond to what happens to you. You're an example. You have influence.

The summer after my freshman year of college, I was home for a little while, then I moved to southeast Kansas to work with a group of churches in children's and youth ministry. The day I left to go there was harder than when I started college. For some reason, it really hit me and I cried for quite a while as I drove. Later I wrote home and told my parents about how I felt. They both wrote back to me. Dad wrote about when he went to the Army and how hard that was. He said something like, "I never thought about

someone being like me." But I was being like him as we shared similar experiences.

Maybe you don't think you're a leader, but you might be surprised at who looks to you and is influenced by you. So this word of Paul's to the leaders speaks to us.

Paul says, "*I commend you to God.*" As he left these friends for the last time, Paul committed them to God, entrusted them to God. The job of a pastor, the job of any Christian leader, is not to get people attached to us. Our job is to get people attached to the Lord. In this message, Paul refers to God, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit. We want to introduce people to the Trinity and ground people in the life of the Trinity. We help each other know the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

Now we're partners with God in this. God works through our personality, our experience. God uses the relationships where we have influence to draw people to himself. We're called to be examples. We may hesitate because we know what poor examples we can be. But part of our example is to repent when we sin, learn from our mistakes, get up and try again when we fail.

Paul reminds his friends of how he lived when he was in Ephesus with them. He served the Lord with great humility and tears in the midst of severe testing. He preached to them and taught them in all kinds of settings. He wasn't in it for the money. Paul was so intent on not appearing greedy that he worked with his hands to provide for himself and his co-workers. He lets them know that he's prepared to lay down his life for the gospel. He prays with these people. All of that was part of how God worked through him.

Who can you commend to God? Who can you influence for God? You do it by prayer. You do it by doing your work well. You do it by showing what a life with God looks like. It won't always be easy. It won't always be accepted. But we can do what God calls us to do and trust that God will use even our most feeble efforts.

Paul also says, "*I commend you to the word of God's grace.*" He's talking about the gospel message. A little earlier he says his task is testifying to the gospel/good news of God's grace (24). He's also talking

about the sound teaching that he gave to these believers. Paul says he never held back from preaching and teaching what would be helpful to them. He didn't hold back, but proclaimed the whole will of God, the complete plan of God. Grace is at the heart of that plan.

What if we really got the good news of God's grace? What if we really believed in grace? Everything we are and have is a gift from God. Creation is grace. Freedom to live in relationship with God is grace. When we turned away from God and tried to go our own way, God's response was grace. God set into motion the plan to recover, redeem and restore people to be God's own. From Abraham and Sarah through all the story of Israel, to the incarnation of God's Son in Jesus of Nazareth, God's grace was on the move to bring salvation. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God pours out grace and provides salvation as a gift. The present work of the Holy Spirit brings that grace to us, gives us enough freedom to say yes to God, puts us right with God and transforms our lives when we repent and believe.

Grace assures us that we can't do enough bad stuff to make God love us any less and we can't do enough good stuff to make God love us any more. God already loves us to the fullest. He shows us that love in Jesus. He pours his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. We love because God first loved us. We live and give ourselves to God with gratitude in response to the blessing of grace.

Paul tells the Ephesian leaders to be on guard and watch out for those who attack the church from the outside: "savage wolves will come in among you." He also warns them about the danger of those in the church becoming enemies of the good news. There will be those who "will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them." False teaching, bad theology, puts us in all kinds of bondage. It keeps us from knowing and living in the fullness of grace. Let's commit ourselves and each other to the word of God's grace. Let's keep listening to the word of grace. Let's live by the word of grace.

This word is able *to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*. The truth of God's love builds us up instead of tearing us down. The church is built up when we listen to and trust in the

word of grace. We grow and each of us is built up as we receive grace, live in grace, and share grace with others. Paul quotes Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." That's not just talking about financial giving, though that's part of it. It's giving ourselves in love, in commitment, in service. It means being instruments of God's grace. We can actually be "means of grace" that God uses to bless others.

God, through his word of grace, builds us up. God also gives us an inheritance. Paul talks about this in some of his letters. If we are children of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus, we are heirs with him. Jesus, as the first-born Son, inherits God's glory and all that makes up God's household. In the culture when the Bible was written, the firstborn son received a double share of the inheritance and other sons received less. But we are heirs with Jesus. He shares his full inheritance with us. "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26, 29). "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:17).

By God's grace, we share this inheritance *among all those who are sanctified*. What does it mean to be sanctified? "Sanctify" means "to make holy." To be holy means to belong to God. We are God's people. To be holy means to be set apart for God's service. We are committed to doing God's will. Sanctification is the process of God transforming us and making us to be more like Jesus. Our character becomes more like his. We learn how to live in relationship with God like he does. The Holy Spirit empowers and enables us to live God's way.

"Those who are sanctified" are those who follow Paul's example of humility and compassion. They face trials and even death with confidence in the Holy Spirit's guidance and help. They don't hold back, but share the good news, watch out for each other, and give generously.

After all this, Paul kneels in prayer with his Ephesian friends. Praying together is one of the ways we support each other. It's a way we receive God's guidance and strength. Prayer holds us together—even when we're apart. In prayer we commit ourselves and commend each other to God, to

the word of God's grace. Through prayer, we are built up as a church. In prayer we realize our inheritance—all that God has for us—as part of God's family, all the people who belong to God.

Will you hear the word of grace spoken to you today? Will you surrender to that grace, God's invitation, God's power to respond, God's willingness to forgive, God's power to change your life? Will you entrust yourself to the God of all grace? With God's help, will you be a leader, an example who helps others know the God of grace?