

# Gospel Grace Church | Acts 20:17-38 | A Model For Ministry

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## SUMMARY

The Apostle Paul had embarked on his long-anticipated return to Jerusalem. Several decades had passed since his leaving, and he wanted to be back for Pentecost. He was a passenger on a merchant ship slowly making its way down the Aegean toward the Mediterranean, stopping at various trade cities. As the Lord would have it, the boat stopped in Miletus, which is just 30 miles from Ephesus as the crow flies. The layover was scheduled for several days, so Paul called for the elders from the church of Ephesus. They came to meet Paul, and he delivered some farewell words regarding ministry. In his conversation with the elders, Paul describes the character of Christian ministry, the thoroughness of Christian ministry, and the commitment of Christian ministry. May the Lord use this model of faithful service to encourage and challenge us this morning.

## INTRODUCTION

I recently received a **CBD** (Christian Book Distributor) catalogue in the mail. As I flipped through I found the section on “**Church Growth.**” What’s interesting is you get all these books (most of which are garbage) telling you what Christian ministry is really supposed to look like. If you want to be successful then... How do we know what Christian ministry should look like – Let’s get this straight from the beginning... It’s not about hype, numbers, or money. So what’s it about? **What’s required for real Christian ministry?**

In the book of Acts we get glimpses at how Paul speaks to different audiences. In Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41) we see Paul’s approach to a Jewish Audience. At Athens (Acts 17:22-31) we see him with a pagan audience. But in our text this morning at Miletus, we get a sample of his ministry to a Christian audiences. This is the only speech in the book of Acts directed toward Christians. Now let me see if I can set the stage.

In Acts 20, we find Paul completing his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey, now heading to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost (20:16). He also has money that he has collected from the gentile churches of Asia Minor to aid the needy church at Jerusalem. He plans to deliver that gift in person when he gets there.

His boat stops at Miletus and he sends a messenger to Ephesus calling the Elders to come to him; it was a 30 mile journey (no small trek on foot). Having planted the church, and having spent 3 years there he wanted to meet one final time with the leaders of the church. He calls the elders together for some final words of instruction and encouragement. What Paul does, is he **lays out what Christian ministry requires.**

## CHRISTIAN MINISTRY REQUIRES CHARACTER

**Congressman J.C. Watts** once said, “To say America can have strong leadership without character is to say we can get water without the wet.” The same is true for the church. To say we can have strong Christian ministry with out character is to say we can get water without the wet. I think if we look closely at the text, we’ll see three character qualities that accompany Christian ministry. So, if you are going to have Christian ministry, you have to...

1. **SERVE WITH THE CHARACTER OF HUMILITY (v. 19).** Paul refers to “humility” as a character trait undergirding his ministry. His reference to “serving” matches Paul’s repeated concept of being a servant or “bond-slave” (*doulos*) of the Lord. The proper demeanor of a servant is humility. Many of our English translations gloss right over the word “serving,” but it is a strong word that more literally implies “being owned by another” or “performing the duties of a slave.” Too many believers approach ministry like a CEO not a servant. You know this because of the way they react when they are treated like a **servant** – “would you cover nursery?” or “Would you clean up the trash at the end of the service” or “sure could use some people to help pack the equipment up.” Sir, Ma’am, are you serving with the sort of humility commensurate with your identity (slave). **Believe it or not, there are many men in the ministry who are using it to serve themselves.** The Lord and his people are simply tools by which a man advances himself. **I spoke with an Air Force chaplain** recently and asked him what he planned to do when he retired in a couple years at the age of 48. He said “I am going to sit on a rocking chair on the back porch of my retirement cabin. **I think it is important to pause and remember that THE POINT HERE ISN’T, “be humble like Paul.”** The point here is, “Notice Paul’s humility. Where do you think it came from? How did a Hebrew of the Hebrews from the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, beyond all others in zeal, studied at the feet of Gamelial... How does he get to the point where he sees himself as a humble servant?” Well, friends, Paul had an encounter with **Jesus** the one who (Phil. 2:7-8) *“but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.”* When a man truly sees himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, he will take up the towel and basin as Jesus did (John 13:1-17) and he will serve others humbly. Christ’s way is that the greatest among us should be the servant of all (Mark 10:42-45). Paul served with **humility**. But not only that...
2. **SERVE WITH THE CHARACTER OF EMPATHY (v. 19, 31).** Paul’s ministry was amongst broken people. Sometimes he was moved because of pity for these broken people, but at other times he was being pounded by these broken people. Hurting people brought tears to Paul’s eyes. But hurting people hurt people (even apostles), and that brought tears to Paul’s eyes. He walked in the muck with people and had **empathy** (Greek *em-in*, *pathos*-feeling). He wept in deep-seated anguish, profound distress, and heartfelt sorrow. He *“lived among”* the Ephesians the whole time (v. 18). He served with intense personal involvement. His tears show how much Paul cared for these people. **When a pastor engages in real Christian ministry he serves the Lord in a way that brings him to points of pain.** Tears flow from heart-rending loss, unbearable frustrations, discouragements, intense longings, or overwhelming joy. You get so intimately involved in people’s lives that you cry with them and over them. **The story is told about Robert Murray M’Cheyne** a Scottish pastor (1813-1843) who died just before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. His church was visited by a young pastor. The custodian took the young preacher around to show him the church and led him to a small room where there was a little stool. The custodian said “Sir, do you see that stool?” The young pastor thought it strange to be shown a stool. “That is where Pastor M’Cheyne would kneel and weep before he’d ever preach.” The custodian then took the young pastor to the pulpit. There lying open was a Bible all watered and stained. “What is on this Bible?” the young pastor asked. “Those are the tears that Brother M’Cheyne would shed while he preached. I’m not talking about whipped up emotionalism – rather, a heart filled with compassion and empathy. **Paul cried** over the lost (Romans 9:2-3), he cried over straying Christians (2Cor. 2:4), he cried over those who tried to undermine God’s

work (Acts 20:31). When a marriage is breaking apart and the believers will not listen to God's word – tears flow. When a new believer gets lured by the things of this world and you see the truth being choked out – tears flow. When you pray and witness and minister to a lost person and yet they refuse the glorious gospel – tears flow. When people attack you for truth, when people leave you for lies, when people try to hurt you and your family – tears flow. In the struggles for faith, hope, truth, and holiness – Tears flow. That's what happens when you serve with the character of **empathy**.

- 3. SERVE WITH THE CHARACTER OF PERSEVERANCE (v. 19).** Paul's ministry was an embattled one. Paul endured what seemed like incessant "trials." Paul will write about the trials in Ephesus when he pens (1Cor 15:32; 16:9) which say, "*I fought with beasts at Ephesus...there are many adversaries.*" Paul had trial after trial after trial and yet he served with perseverance. He didn't quit, didn't give up. Paul faced **opposition for the redemptive work** that God was doing amongst those trapped in **witchcraft**. So many were being saved – 50,000 talents worth of magic books were burnt in the streets. Paul faced opposition for the redemptive work that God was doing amongst the **idolatrous** worshipers of Diana. Demetrius headed up the silversmiths guild inciting a city wide riot against Paul and the Gospel (Acts 19:24-27). Paul was driven out of the city (Acts 20:1) Paul indicates that the Ephesian elders would face trials as well (Acts 20:29). They would face fierce wolves coming from within. Jesus said (Matt. 10:16) "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves..." Trials weren't just from the opposition of people. Paul faced financial trials and physical trials. He suffered a thorn in the flesh (2Cor. 12) He suffered poverty – he was abased, needy (Phil. 4). **I can remember people who opposed the truth** – I've been in business meetings in churches where people weren't submissive, they wanted their own way, they were factious, and opposed the work of the ministry. There was such heartbreak associated with that. **I can remember poverty** - Ministry meant my dad hitchhiking to work when we had no car. There were times we were so poor – my dad didn't have \$2.00 to put enough gas in the car to get us home. We ran out 10 miles from home he walked home, rode one of our bikes back with the gas can from the mower. **I can remember making my dad cry** one day because I complained about how he wouldn't buy me a baseball glove. It wasn't that he wouldn't... he couldn't. My family and many of you who have sought to serve the Lord and jump into a life of Christian ministry know that its not easy. Actually, it's plain hard. Paul faced great difficulty, but he didn't grow bitter; he didn't rage to God about things weren't fair. He just served with **perseverance**.

## CHRISTIAN MINISTRY REQUIRES THOROUGHNESS

It seems like so much of what is called ministry today is really just a religious form of **niche marketing**. "We are the hipster, cyclist, vegetarian, reduce your carbon footprint, home-brewed beer is cool, gages, bearded ministry for people who live in Sugar House." Or maybe "We're the homeschool, doily, KJV-only, old red hymnal, fundamentalist, coolot, patch the pirate club ministry for people transplanted from the South." Or we're the contempervant, creedal, arts and drama, tats and doobies, ancient, modern, subtle yet out there ministry for 30-somethings." These niche groups aren't all things to all people. They are all things to some people, their people, to the neglect of thorough ministry. Paul wasn't so myopic. I think if he were here, he'd foot-stomp thoroughness in ministry. He'd likely say...

1. **SERVE WITH THOROUGHNESS IN THE SCOPE OF MINISTRY (v. 21)**. Paul was very inclusive when it came to his ministry witness. He preached to everyone – Jews and Greeks – leaving no one out. Even though he was an apostle to the Gentiles, he never abandoned the synagogue. When you start looking at the spectrum of people that Paul served, you find him ministering to philosophers and fools, rich, poor, men, women, slaves, slave owners, venders, prison guards, etc. Paul proclaimed the gospel to all without ethnic, religious, social, or gender distinctions.
2. **SERVE WITH THOROUGHNESS IN THE VENUES OF MINISTRY (v. 20b)**. Paul preached both publically and from house to house. His mention of public proclamation is probably a reference to his days in the synagogue of Ephesus, the lecture hall of Tyrannus, and the agora (forum) or center of Greco-Roman cities. The reference to houses most likely refers to the house-church meetings of the Ephesian Christians. Paul would go to private homes where believers would gather new converts and curious seekers. Paul would teach there.
3. **SERVE WITH THOROUGHNESS IN THE TIMES OF MINISTRY (v. 20, 31)**. Paul labored night and day ministering to people. It wasn't really a 9-5 job, or some sort of Sunday celebrity appearance. I love the story earlier in the chapter about a why you should never fall asleep in church (actually, I saw a recent preaching book entitled "Saving Eutychus"). Well, it's a story (v. 7-12) of a dude who's attending one of Paul's teaching/preaching services and he's in the upper room and by and by Paul is preaching until midnight (v. 7) and Eutychus falls asleep and falls out the window. The reason I brought that up, is because Paul is ministering at midnight! He was thorough concerning the times of ministry – night and day. Paul served all kinds of people, in all kinds of places, at all kinds of times.

## CHRISTIAN MINISTRY REQUIRES COMMITMENT

Commitment means different things to different people. Consider the young man who waxed eloquently as he poured out his **heart's devotion in an email** to the girl of his dreams. "My dear, I would climb the highest mountain, swim the widest stream, cross the burning desert, and even die at the stake for you. P.S. I'll see you on Saturday if it doesn't rain." Friends, that wasn't the commitment of Paul. He wasn't a fair weather minister. Notice (v. 31) "*for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.*" Night or day, rain or shine, Paul was committed. And he calls us to the same sort of service. Let me see if I can express this sort of committed service in three ways. First,...

1. **SERVE WITH A COMMITMENT TO SHARING GOD'S WORD (v. 20a)**. Whatever was true to the gospel and helpful to the faithful, he preached. He kept no secrets, held nothing back. In Christian ministry, there is often a temptation to water down the message, to soften the truth, or to ignore difficult topics. But Paul refused to do that. It requires the courage to tell people what they need to hear, instead of what they want to hear. Paul didn't cower away from, shrink back, withhold what needed to be preached. **Paul was not a people pleaser** – He was compelled to minister the Word of God. That was part of the **Galatians** issue – there were Judaizers who were claiming that Paul was promoting a weak message not requiring circumcision and not mandating all the obligations of the law. "Paul, you are just pleasing people." (Gal. 1:10) "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. But I certify you, brethren, that the

gospel which was preached of me is not after man.” Friends, it is not easy to preach the truth week in and week out. It is not easy to tell people what they need to hear. In Paul’s letters to Timothy he said that people would be “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” They would “not endure sound doctrine.” They will have “itching ears.” They will “turn away from the truth and be turned aside to fables.” **But Paul wouldn’t dilute the truth or delete the difficult.** He majored on themes like (v. 21) “*repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Paul didn’t preach easy-believism or prosperity gospel, He proclaimed the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation, which results in a changed life. He preached the “whole counsel of God” (v. 27) not shrinking back. He preached (v. 25), he taught (v. 20), and he counseled (v. 31) so that Christ would be formed in them (Col. 1:28) “*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil...*”

2. **SERVE WITH A COMMITMENT TO VIEWING MINISTRY AS A GIFT (v. 24).** Paul says, “*The ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus.*” He doesn’t speak of ministry as a burden or an obligation. He says that he received it, like a gift. Now don’t get me wrong, he worked hard (v. 35), he labored with his hands making tents in addition to preaching and teaching. He supported others to make sure their needs were met (v. 34). But he felt blessed in doing it – (v. 35) for “*it is more blessed to give than to receive*” as Jesus said.
  - a. (2Cor. 4:17) “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”
  - b. (Gal. 6:9) “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”
  - c. (1Cor. 15:58) “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”
  - d. (Matt. 5:11-12) “Blessed are you when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven:”
  
3. **SERVE WITH A COMMITMENT TO COMPLETING THE COURSE (v. 24-25).** Paul had a race to run, a ministry to accomplish. What Paul wanted most was that Christ would be magnified in his body, “whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:20). Self-promotion wasn’t his highest goal. Self-preservation wasn’t his main concern. Paul was ready to surrender his liberty and his life if needed for the sake of Christ and his church (v. 22-24). **James Calvert** was a young pioneer missionary to the cannibals of the Fiji Islands. En route the ship captain tried to dissuade him. After trying to reason and argue his point, the frustrated captain blurted out, “You’ll lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages!” Calvert paused and calmly replied, “we died before we came.” What did he mean by that? Well he had given up his rights and his ideals and his comforts. He had already died to those things, because mission was more valuable than life itself. Paul had a commitment to ministry that transcended his concern for self. He had a gospel passion that would make most of us blush. My friends, if we’ll only do that which is easy, we may never do that which is worth doing. **John G. Paton** was born in Scotland in 1824. He was reared in a godly home and came to personal faith in Christ. As a young man, he worked in an inner city mission in Scotland. But the Lord put it upon his heart to go as a missionary to the fierce cannibals of the New Hebrides

Islands in the South Pacific. In 1839, the first missionaries to these islands had been clubbed to death, cooked, and eaten within a few minutes of landing. About ten years later, some other missionaries had landed on another of the islands where the natives showed an interest in their teachings, and the Lord gave them about 3,500 converts in a short period of time. They needed help in the work. So in 1857, just 18 years after the first martyrs had shed their blood on the beach of the New Hebrides, Paton strongly sensed God's call on his life to offer himself for missionary service there. He immediately met with strong opposition from many that knew him. They argued that he was leaving a certain ministry that God had obviously blessed for an uncertain future where he might throw his life away among the cannibals. His converts needed him and besides, there were plenty of heathen at home to reach. Why go half way around the world to reach these savages? He was even offered a free house and was told to name his salary, on condition that he would stay at home! But these temptations only served to confirm his calling to go to the South Seas. Among the many who sought to deter him was one old Christian gentleman, whose crowning argument was always, "The Cannibals! You will be eaten by Cannibals!" Finally, Paton replied, "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms. I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer" (John G. Paton Autobiography [Banner of Truth], p. 56). Paton lost his wife and infant son within a few months of their arrival. He lived in almost daily danger of his life. But God spared him and he lived to age 83, spending his final years traveling around the world publicizing and raising support for the mission. Late in life he said, "Oh that I had my life to begin again! I would consecrate it anew to Jesus in seeking the conversion of the remaining Cannibals on the New Hebrides" (p. 496). John Paton finished his course because he put the ministry that he received from the Lord Jesus above even life itself.

## CONCLUSION

You know, Paul served with **character, thoroughness, and commitment**. But I think its because he saw the church as God sees it. He realized that (Acts 20:28) it is the flock of God the Father, supervised by overseers appointed by God the Holy Spirit, purchased by the blood of God the Son.

I was surprised to learn that in religious art, the **pelican** has long been a symbol of self-sacrifice. If you were to observe these strange birds firsthand while fishing along the west coast of Florida, you would probably feel like they were more like lazy freeloaders than self-denying saints. With hearts full of envy, they sit and lust after every fish caught along the pier. Once in a while they even try to intercept one before it is reeled in.

Their behavior, however, is not why they symbolize self-sacrifice. The association is made because of their **red-tipped beak**. According to legend, when a mother pelican cannot find food for her young, she thrusts her beak into her breast and nourishes her little ones with her own blood. The early church saw in this story a beautiful picture of what Christ did for us.

In the words of Richard Baxter 1656, "Oh then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for them, and will you not look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth your labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth to seek and

to save the lost; and will you not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is your labor and condescension as to mine?”

My friends, the call from our text this morning is one of Christian ministry – that which has character, thoroughness, and commitment. May the Lord add his blessing to the study of his word this morning.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(1) Is ministry the calling of every Christian or only some? Give biblical support for your answer?

(2) Why do you think Paul mentions his tears in Acts 20:19, 31? And then why do you think Luke (the author of Acts) mentions the tears of the elders in Acts 20:37?

- What can you learn from these verses about the relationship Paul had with these men?
- What do you think Acts 20:17-38 says about discipleship at large? List some principles of discipleship you derive from the text.

(3) We learn far more from models than we imagine. Paul’s reflection on his ministry at Ephesus provides a model to be followed then and now. In what particular areas would ministers today be challenged by this apostolic model?

(4) Since the elders from the church of Ephesus in Acts 20 are shepherds of God’s people, what must they do first and foremost? Where do you find that in the text?

- What must they recognize according to Acts 20:28?
- What must they be wary of according to Acts 20:29-31?
- What do you know about the relationship of sheep and shepherds that would parallel the relationship of the church and her leaders?

(5) In Acts 20:28, who does Paul tell the elders they must care for before they can minister to others? Why is this an important lesson for church workers?

(6) As Paul leaves, where is the confidence of these elders to reside according to Acts 20:32?

- What could God’s Word do for them?
- Can you relate a specific time when the study and understanding of Scripture did that for you? If so, be ready to share an example with your group.

(7) The Ephesian church was planted in AD 53-54. The letter to the church in Ephesus recorded in Revelation 2:1-7 dates from about AD 95-98. What lessons can we learn from the final mention of this church in the book of Revelation? What are the factors which may lead a church to such a state described in Revelation 2:4? If it were happening in a church you were a part of, what should you do about it?

(8) In Acts 20:17-38 Paul is saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders. He indicates that he won’t see them again. What does this text teach you about saying goodbye?

- Who is in your spiritual care, and how are you preparing them for your departure? What would you say to them if you had to leave them now?
- How will lessons from this text help you the next time separation is inevitable?

(9) There are three key concepts connected with ministry that are emphasized in Acts 20:17-38 – character, thoroughness, and commitment. What are some ways you could grow in one or more areas?