

Scripture Reading:

Acts 18:8 “Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized. **9** Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; **10** for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city." **11** And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. ...

18 So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow. **19** And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. **20** When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, **21** but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus. **22** And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch. **23** After he had spent some time there, he departed and went over the region of Galatia & Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.

"Strengthening the Churches"

After giving us some details about Paul's lengthy stay in Corinth, Luke in his orderly account now brings Paul's second missionary journey to an end in just a few short verses.

- We see here at the end of the second journey and the opening comments about his next journey an Apostle who is dedicated to strengthening the churches that God has allowed him to plant, what we might call today, discipleship.
- What I want us to consider this morning are three principles that Paul follows and how they are important for us today:
 - 1) Paul shows proper leadership by being a good example and making sure these new Saints had the proper guidance they needed to grow.
 - 2) Paul was ready and willing to make follow-up visits to see if the proper lessons have been learned and to encourage them in their walk with Jesus.
 - 3) And Paul knew there would come a time to leave, giving them the opportunities to grow into mature Saints that would be ready and willing to lead and train the next generation!

We have seen all of these in much of the Book of Acts, but I think it is good to review them as Luke brings Paul's missionary journeys to a close.

As we discussed last week, Luke no longer gives us any details about the messages that Paul brings to the Jews or the Gentiles because he continues to preach the same basic message:

- Proving to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ and challenging the Gentiles to see the risen Jesus as the creator and sustainer of all there is & the just judge of the entire world.

We spent a great deal of time studying this message for the Gentiles because it is largely our message for today.

Here in chapter 18, I have tried to focus on some practical areas that give us important lessons for today...

- We considered how Aquila and Priscilla as tent-makers worked with Paul in that trade because in today's world we struggle to see the importance of our vocations.

- Last week we considered the lessons Gallio taught us about civil magistrates and the flow of history because again, there is so much confusion in the modern church when it comes to these areas.
- This morning I want to consider these principles of discipleship that Paul follows so that we can become better shepherds or parents or disciplers ourselves.

Paul spends at least a year and a half in Corinth because God had revealed to him that there would be a great harvest in that city.

Paul shows his leadership by first confronting the Jews and then the Gentiles. Paul was ready to defend himself before the Roman magistrate.

- We know that Paul had the proper follow-up with these Saints with his various letters, two of which come down to us in the New Testaments and other visits.

Paul was also unafraid to leave when the time had come, something we often struggle to properly discern.

Luke now moves rapidly through Paul's first visit to Ephesus, where he will return in his next mission journey. Paul then travels back to Jerusalem via Caesaria to report on his work, and then returns to Antioch where he began his journey. Paul spends time with these Saints and then is sent off on his 3rd missionary journey.

- All of this in six short verses!

In the midst of this Paul has taken a vow and left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, both of which we will consider in more detail as we move on. Again, we see Paul's leadership as he makes the important trip to Jerusalem, finishes this journey and begins his next mission journey.

- All the while continuing his pattern of taking the Gospel to the Jews first and then the Gentiles.

We also see Paul's concern for proper follow-up in the trip back to Jerusalem to keep the Apostles informed of his work, his revisiting the churches that he planted in Galatia and even from the letters that he wrote to the Church in Thessalonica while he was at Corinth. And of course it is easy to see that Paul is often leaving...

- Sometimes after an extended stay and sometimes in what seems like short order.

The Apostle Paul always strove to follow the Spirit's leading... Remember he was prevented from going to the region where Ephesus is located and now he goes there to plant a church. Sometimes Paul would flee persecution and at other times he would stand and fight.

Again, we must remember that Luke is now moving very rapidly through the events that his orderly account chronicles... The reason for this is that Acts is the story of how the Spirit fills the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus, not the story of Paul or any of the other characters that we encounter.

There is a great deal of Acts that covers the life and ministry of Paul but it is by no means exhaustive: We are given examples of his sermons, but by no means all of those he gave and certainly not the lengthiest ones... We are given examples of his trials and tribulations, but certainly not all of them: Consider this list that Paul recounts to the Church at Corinth in his second letter to them:

II Corinthians 11:24: "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches."

- This is a good list to ponder when we think life is pretty much over because our car has broken down!

- So what does all of this mean for us today?

Luke has shown Paul's leadership in strengthening the new converts, his follow-up to make sure they are being faithful and his ability to let go at the proper time so those he has disciplined can continue to grow in the Lord. Well, obviously, this is an important set of lessons for pastors and elders in Christ's Church to learn well...

- This is what it means to be good shepherds of the sheep!

But these are not just lessons for Church leaders: For example we know that the Book of Proverbs was primarily written to train Kings, men who would mature as Godly leaders in the Church or civil realm.

It ends with a chapter that we read often where the Proverbs woman is described...

- A woman who is primarily a picture of the Church, the Bride of Jesus as we serve in His Kingdom.

BUT, we all know that the lessons of wisdom that are found in proverbs apply to all of life:

- A baker or butcher has the same responsibility as a King or Pastor to be honest, trustworthy and ready to help those in need.
- Any woman can and should look to the wisdom of Proverbs chapter thirty-one as she builds and makes decisions about her household, or plans her future household.
- So whether one is a pastor, an employer, a parent or just a friend there are places where you must show proper leadership.

In the workplace, even if you are only an employee, we, as Christians, should not be those who move only when told to do something.

- We should be great examples of diligence and innovation, ready to do what others might try to avoid.

In the home, fathers are not to set aside many of their responsibilities because Mom spends more time with the kids and handles money better than he does.

Sure moms do handle much of the training of our covenant children and she may be the better person to keep the checkbook, but that does not mean that Dad does not still show leadership.

- Sometimes the most important part of leadership is giving the proper support to those who are doing the laborious work!
- And children, you don't get a pass because leadership sounds like something for only the adults to worry about!

Your training in leadership began the first moment that your parents started to teach you about sharing your toys...

- Or not throwing fits when you did not get your way
[and Lord willing many of those lessons were learned before you could remember the painful process!]

Yes, it is a sin to try and take leadership before the time is right and sadly we have too many homes today run by children...

- Children who will, as a result of such failed leadership on the part of their parents, be very poor leaders in the future.

But it is never too early for our covenant children to take seriously the call that God will have upon their lives and to be learning the leadership principles and skills they will need.

There are many great leaders from the pages of Scriptures we can have our children learn from and as they grow they should learn to know them well...

- **Learning about their successes AND their failures & how they handled both!**

The next thing that Luke makes clear from his account of Paul's life is that he would often follow-up on the work that he had begun.

- **Again these are not just lessons for pastor and elders.**

As employers, Christians must not just train someone to do a job and then never bother check back to see if the lessons were learned well or if they need additional guidance.

If we are employees, then we have others that we can assist as well.

Perhaps one of the most frustrating parts of parenting is the need for follow-up:

- **Those repeated lessons that you are sure you have given a hundred times!**

We see that in the early years when it seems like no amount of corrections is going to translate from the bottom to the brain...

- **Will they ever learn to obey???**

BUT proper follow-up here is staying on the task no matter how many times it takes so your child becomes the disciple who looks to the eyes and words of Jesus as He guides them through their life rather than needing the much harsher discipline that might be necessary later in life.

- **And again, just as with employees, you children can hold each other responsible with good examples and "follow-up" reminders that obedience is a very good thing!**

When the Apostle Paul instructs the older women to teach the younger women, he does not have in mind a simple one-time class or stack of books to read...

- **He is talking about those who have led Godly lives coming alongside those who are younger!**
- **He is talking about giving them proper examples and instruction, but also all the follow-up they need to make sure those lessons are able to be applied in their lives.**

In our modern world old age is something to be avoided... When we can no longer look and act young we get shuffled off to the retirement home!

- **This stands in stark contrast to the Biblical commands to respect our elders and a desire to obtain the wisdom they have to share.**

And finally, we saw in the life of Paul another principle that might seem to contradict the concept of follow-up.

Paul demonstrates a willingness and ability to LEAVE those he has brought to the Lord and trained.

- **These are not contradictory, but another one of those areas where we are to have the proper tension in our Christian walk.**

When I prayed for Jason and Ellen Friday morning with Al and Linda I asked the Lord to give them calm in the final hours before the wedding and also that He would give them a real excitement about the vows they would take and their new life together.

When I finished, Linda looked over and said, "calm & excitement, you don't think of those going together!"

She is right, they seem contradictory, but such is the nature of the abundant life that Jesus has promised.

- In Jesus we can have the calm we need in times like those leading up to a wedding...
- AND still enjoy and experience the excitement that should be there as well.

Think about it this way: The fact that Paul was ready and willing to leave did not mean that he was abandoning these young converts:

- We do see him follow-up at later times with more visits and the letters that he wrote to many of the Churches, several of which continue to bless us as part of the canon of Scripture.
- We also know that Paul left others, like Aquila and Priscilla here in Ephesus, who would continue to disciple the Saints.

This balance is important, but it is only balanced if we remember that there is a leaving element as well as follow-up.

- We see this most clearly with children, who Paul even uses as an example when speaking about those he has brought to salvation as his children in the Lord.

As much as we want to hold on to our children, the creational ordinance of marriage makes it clear that there comes a time for them to leave: They are to leave and cleave to their husband or wife!

--Does this mean that once they are out the door, there is no more follow-up?

--Does this mean that the parents have no more wisdom to impart?

--Does this mean the child cannot or should not return to the parent for advice or counsel?

- Of course not!

No more so than how Paul was able to return for follow-up visits or how they were allowed to seek his counsel as the Church at Corinth did on many issues.

That is the Godly tension that I spoke about:

- Lord willing the relationship that has been nurtured between the young person and their parents will now be the blessing it should be.

The new husband and wife are now one flesh and must establish their own household.

And yes, this even includes allowing them enough space to make a few of their own mistakes or take more time than they should to learn some of life's important lessons.

- At the same time we should see the friendship and respect in the new relationship that we see with Paul and these Saints where he is welcomed back and sought out for wisdom when it is needed.

Obviously we could consider the concept of leaving and the balance between leaving and follow-up in many of our other relationships as well: Certainly with employers and employees; and with teachers and students; or even brothers and sisters within a family.

- So whether we are called to be an elder or deacon ministering in God's Church...
- Called as a parent or grandparent
- Or just given the opportunity and blessing of discipling a new convert, these are important lessons for us to remember:

- 1) We must show proper leadership by being good examples & making sure they have the guidance they need.
- 2) We must always be ready and willing to follow-up to see if the proper lessons have been learned and to encourage them as they continue on in their walk with Jesus

- 3) And we must be sure that we leave, or get out of the way at the proper times as well, giving them the opportunities to grow into mature Saints that will be ready to lead and train the next generation!

As we prepare to approach the Lord's Table and sing about the glorious things He has done, let us reflect on the words of the Psalmist Asaph as he encourages us to take such covenant faithfulness to at least five generations!

- Remembering of course, as Luke tells us in our morning text, that even the Apostle Paul had to say, Lord willing!

Psalm 78:1 "Give ear, O my people, to my law; Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. 2 I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, 3 Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us. 4 We will not hide them from their children, Telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, And His strength and His wonderful works that He has done. 5 For He established a testimony in Jacob, And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers, That they should make them known to their children; 6 That the generation to come might know them, The children who would be born, That they may arise and declare them to their children, 7 That they may set their hope in God, And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments; 8 And may not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not set its heart aright, And whose spirit was not faithful to God."

- May we always be those who
"set their hope in God...
And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments!"

Communion Meditation:

Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod & Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever."