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## Acts 20:17-21 “An Example for Christian Ministry”

Intro. This morning we are continuing our series of messages through the book of Acts. I am skipping over a somewhat strange story that you can read in vv. 7-12 of this chapter. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and he stopped to meet with the Christians in Troas. On a Sunday evening he was preaching all the way until midnight! An older youth name Eutychus was sitting on the window ledge during the service. After a while, he fell asleep and fell out the 3<sup>rd</sup> story window to the ground outside! He appeared to be dead. Fortunately, the story ended on a positive note. Either he was raised from the dead through Paul’s intervention or he made a quick recovery. Now I will promise not to preach a really long sermon if you will promise not to fall asleep!

When Paul concluded his ministry in Ephesus, he continued his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey by going over to Macedonia and as far as Corinth to visit the churches again to encourage them to continue to be faithful to the Lord (vv.1-2). After visiting some other areas, he began a long trip to Jerusalem. But he wanted to make several stops along the way. So he traveled to Troas, as I just mentioned. Then from Troas Paul sailed along the coast of Asia Minor and eventually reached Miletus. From there he sent for the Elders of the church in Ephesus, which was about 30 miles away. Paul had labored 3 years in Ephesus, and he was concerned about how the church would do in his absence. He wanted to talk with the leaders and encourage them to lead the church in the right way. The elders, as we can see from v.28, were the overseers and preachers of the church in Ephesus.

Now Paul seeks to challenge them by reminding them of the example he set with his life. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). He wanted these Ephesian church leaders to follow his example in ministry. So I want to share Paul’s example with you, and challenge us all to follow his example in our own lives and ministries. I want to especially encourage our church leaders like myself, deacons, Sunday School teachers, and other leaders to make every effort to follow Paul’s example that he sets for doing Christian ministry.

So first of all, I want to call upon us to:

### I. FOLLOW PAUL’S MANNER

In v.18 we read, “And when they had come to him, he said to them: ‘You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you.’”<sup>1</sup> Paul was always conscious of the fact that he should live an exemplary Christian life. Indeed, our lives ought to attract people to Christ. Jesus said, “Let your light so shine that men may be able to see your good works, and glorify your heavenly Father” (Mt. 5:16). Our lives should be winsome. It is very important how we live our daily lives. This is especially true for leaders of the church.

There are four characteristics of Paul’s manner of life that we should follow:

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<sup>1</sup> Paul was following the farewell practice of Joshua, Samuel (1 Sam. 12:3-4), and others.

A. Consistency – Paul says in the last of v.18, “You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you.” He was consistent in his life “from the first day” he entered their city until the time he was speaking to them.

Sometimes we talk about “Sunday Christians.” But Paul did not live one way on Sunday and some other way the rest of the week. The true test of a Christian is not how they act at church, but how they live day by day, in good times and in the bad times. Are you consistent in your Christian walk and service?

B. Humility – Notice in v.19 that Paul was “serving the Lord with all humility.” In the estimation of many, Paul was the greatest of the apostles. He was a great leader, missionary, and he was certainly the greatest theologian among the apostles. Yet, he was humble. There are two indications of Paul’s humility here. First, the word translated “serving” is from the Greek word (*douleuo*) which refers to the service of a slave. Far from being a religious despot, Paul considered himself a willing slave of his Lord Jesus Christ. Then, Paul specifically reminds them of the fact that he served the Lord “with all humility of mind.” “Humility of mind” is from a single compound Greek word (*tapeinophrosune*) that literally means “to think lowly” of oneself. This is just the opposite of arrogance. He did not look down on others with an air of superiority. Instead, he looked down on himself. Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:9, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle...” Yet when he said in the next verse, “I labored more abundantly than they all,” he humbly said, “I am what I am by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

George Whitefield was one of the greatest preachers of all time. But he may have been the first to humbly say, “There are many who can preach the gospel better than I can, but none can preach a better gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

Those in Christian leadership positions need to be challenged by Paul’s example. If church leaders are not careful, we can begin to feel too important. We can yield to the temptation of pride. Some church leaders become church bosses, and they seem to think the church exists to serve them and praise them. Some pastors have assumed titles like “Executive Pastor.” That doesn’t convey humility to me. Jesus taught us to be humble. He said in Mt. 23:11, “But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.”

C. Compassion – In v.19 we read that Paul served “the Lord ... with many tears.” He also said in v.31, “Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” Likewise, Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 2:4, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears... that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you.” Paul is probably not talking about tears from a painful injury he suffered from persecution. He is not talking about the tears of a sissy who is fearful. These are tears of compassion and concern for hell-bound sinners. But even in Roman culture it was supposed to be unmanly to shed tears. However, Paul was not driven by the culture of his day. He often shed tears over the lost condition of unbelievers. I think he especially shed tears over the unbelief of his Jewish brethren (Rom. 10:1).

I remember hearing of George Truitt, long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, TX. In the last days of his life, He knelt by his hospital bed and looked out the window and said, “Oh Dallas, Dallas, come to Jesus, Dallas.” He probably shed tears over a city which was mostly lost without Jesus Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Ironside, p.471. I could not verify any other source of this quote.

Have you ever shed tears of concern over a lost soul? Do you have a burden for the lost? We should feel deep compassion over the lost all around us. When you think about the reality of hell, it should break your heart. We all personally know of at least some people who are on their way to that terrible place. Psa. 126:5, 6 is a Scripture passage I memorized in evangelism class. “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (KJV). When we preach, or teach, or bear witness to the gospel, people need to be able to sense that we really care about them. We ought to pray even to the point of tears for unsaved loved ones!

D. Endurance – Notice in v.19 that Paul kept “serving the Lord ... with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews.” I said “kept serving” because “serving” is a present tense. It can be translated, “I kept on serving the Lord... with trials...” Even severe trials did not cause Paul to quit the ministry. Paul actually had people who were out to kill him. His Jewish opponents chased him down like a hound dog after a rabbit! In Ephesus Paul faced strong opposition from the pagans also, as we discussed in our last message (19:23-41). You may think that you have it pretty bad, but Paul faced worse difficulties, and yet he didn’t quit. If he had, most of us could not have blamed him. Yet in spite of the many trials Paul went through, he kept on living for Jesus! He kept on serving Jesus.

He was just following the example of his Lord. Aren’t you glad that Jesus did not quit as He faced opposition and persecution? Aren’t you glad that He didn’t quit as He was going through the scourging? He could have called 10,000 angels to rescue Him, but He didn’t. He is our greatest example of endurance. (Cf. Lk. 8:13 - parable of the sower).

What would it take to get you to drop out of the Lord’s service? What would it take to get you to drop out even from attending church? I challenge you to keep on living for Jesus no matter what comes your way. We ought to follow the example of Jesus and the apostle Paul. For over 40 years I have persevered in the ministry that God has called me to. I am still preaching and pastoring a flock of God’s people.

Next, I want to encourage you to:

## II. FOLLOW PAUL’S METHODS<sup>3</sup>

Here I especially want preachers and S.S. teachers to take note. Notice what characterized Paul’s preaching and teaching:

A. Be Well-rounded in Teaching – He said in v.20, “how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you.” Paul preached pure doctrine, everything necessary for salvation and growth in grace. He gave them what they *needed*, not just what they wanted. “Kept back” (*upostello* in Greek middle voice) means, “to shrink from, avoid; keep silent.”

Next look at v.27, “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” There are some preachers and S.S. teachers that talk mostly about just part of the Bible. There are certain parts that they do not want to preach or teach. Some denominational preachers preach mainly about their own doctrinal distinctives (baptism, speaking in tongues, etc.). Other churches talk mostly of prophecy. Others major on one or two key moral issues, or so-called practical issues like how to be successful in your family, career, and social life. Social justice has become a major

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<sup>3</sup> One method not dealt with here but is found in the context is the ministry of encouragement (v.2). Fernando says, “Encouragement is the major theme of this chapter. This is why Paul visits each city....”

topic in some churches today. There are some popular preachers on TV. Often what they say is fine. My problem with them is what they *don't* say. They don't preach about sin. They don't preach about hell. They won't take a stand on certain moral issues. You are not going to get a balanced spiritual diet from them for they are not preaching the whole counsel of God.

But Paul gives us the right example. He shared the whole truth. That's because all of the Word of God is profitable, according to 2 Tim. 3:16, and should be preached whether some people like it or not!

This is one reason why I prefer to preach through books of the Bible. I am more likely to preach the whole counsel of God that way. I probably would not preach about hell if I were picking out the sermon topics. But I *will* preach about topics such as hell as I preach through a book of the Bible. I'm not going to hold back on preaching part of the Word of God just because it is unpopular.

B. Preach Publicly – Notice in v.20 that Paul says he “taught you publicly.” In Acts 19:9 we read of Paul's public teaching ministry in the school of Tyrannus. This was an open forum for anyone who would be interested in hearing Paul.

I preach publicly on Sundays. Our doors are open and the public is welcome to come and hear God's Word. For my public preaching to reach people, you must help me invite people to our worship services. And when visitors come, be sure to make them feel welcome. I am hoping that our TV and Internet ministry will give the Gospel greater exposure out in the general public. Perhaps I need to look for other ways to do more public preaching. In my Bible College days I even did some street preaching in Dallas, TX!

C. Give Small Group Instruction - Notice in v.20 that Paul also “taught ...from house to house.” Paul also carried on a ministry to individuals and smaller groups. We certainly need the public preaching of the Word of God, but cannot rely on public preaching alone! We also need instruction and witnessing to individuals and small groups. Some have seen here an example of door to door witnessing. I believe the early church did that to some degree (cf. Acts 5:42). This is what some have called the Acts 20:20 vision that we need. But if you look carefully, Paul's activity was more a matter of *teaching* in various homes, though v.21 makes it clear that he shared the gospel both publicly and in home groups. I Cor. 16:19 makes reference to the church that was meeting in the home of Aquila and Priscilla there in Ephesus. We come close to following this example by having home Bible studies and invited unsaved people to the teaching of God's Word in the home. Sunday School classes provide a similar small group teaching setting. Paul may have taught individuals or individual families the truth of the gospel in their home. Pastors and deacons could do this to some degree.

So we need to share the gospel and teach God's word both publicly and in homes. Now it's one thing to have public preaching and teaching, and to teach and witness in homes, but we also need to make sure we are giving out the right message. So the final appeal I want to bring out from this text is this:

### III. PROCLAIM PAUL'S GOSPEL MESSAGE

His Gospel message is found in v.21, “testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” I said earlier that Paul preached the whole truth. Paul's message was not merely a soft discourse on the love of God. The word “testifying”

(*diamarturomai*) means “to charge, warn; testify, bear witness” (note intensive use of *dia*). This is certainly not descriptive of many preachers today! What Paul gives here is one of the best statements of the core requirements of how to be saved. So after we have shared the gospel that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead, what is required of people to be saved? First, Paul preached that you must:

A. Repent of Your Sins - Again I remind you that repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of life. Paul preached that we must turn from our sin if we are going to turn to Jesus Christ. Let us make sure we do not leave out repentance from our gospel witness. Notice something we see here. Repentance is:

1. Required for the Moral - Notice “both” Jews and Greeks needed repentance. Most Jews were very religious and lived by high moral standards. Yet no matter how religious or moral a person is, he still needs to repent. To the religious Jews of His day, Jesus said, “Except you repent, you shall all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3).

Notice there is emphasis upon the words “toward God.” True repentance is judging oneself in the presence of God. It wasn’t until Job came face to face with God that he repented. He said, “Now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5-6). My friend, if a righteous man like Job needed to make a confession like that, surely you and I need it. Then, we must be willing to be delivered from our sin. Only God can give us the strength to do this.

Of course, repentance is also for:

2. Required for the Immoral – Of course the Jews believed that the Greeks needed to repent. Many came from pagan backgrounds. They worshipped idols. They lived immoral lives. They certainly needed to repent as well.

Years ago Governor Neff of Texas visited the penitentiary and spoke to the assembled convicts. When he had finished he said that he would remain behind, and talk with anyone who wanted to speak with him. When the meeting was over, a large group of men remained, many of them life-termers. One by one they passed by, each telling the governor that they were framed, or some miscarriage of justice was imposed upon them. They all asked to be freed. Finally one man came up and said, “Mr. Governor, I just want to say that I am guilty. I did what they sent me here for. But I believe I have paid for it, and if I were granted the right to go out, I would do everything I could to be a good citizen and prove myself worthy of your mercy.” This, of course, was the man whom the governor pardoned.<sup>4</sup>

Repentance alone is not enough. It’s not enough to turn from sin and seek to live better. We must also make sure we have done the second requirement of salvation:

B. Put Your Faith in Christ – That’s what Paul says in the last of v.21. Faith is toward the Lord Jesus Christ because it is what He did for us that saves. He died for our sins on the cross. And when you look to Him in faith, then He takes you up in grace, puts away all the sins of the past, gives you a new life and a new standing before Him. Don’t trust in your own works or religious deeds. Trust in Christ.

Conclusion: It is clear to me that Paul expected the leaders of the Ephesian Church to go back and follow his example in his manner of life and his methods of ministry. They must also never forsake

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse in Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #4967* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979), page 1130.

the Gospel message. As Jude said, it is “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (1:3).

Will you make a commitment to follow Paul’s example in your own life? Will you seek to live a consistent Christian life? Will you serve the Lord with humility and compassion for the lost? Will you follow Jesus, and never quit, no matter how difficult it is to serve the Lord? If you are a teacher, will you trust God to enable you to teach all the Word of God, even the more difficult or unpopular Scriptures? Will you take the Word of God into the homes of our community? That is what we must do to reach our community for Christ.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). No message available from Maclaren. Fernando read, but nothing added for this message.

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