

Sermon 64, Paul's Sevenfold Ministry, Acts 20:18-27

Proposition: Paul, working harder than anyone to build the Kingdom, sets a permanent example of what true ministry ought to be.

- I. Being With God's People, v. 18
- II. Slaving for God, v. 19
 - A. The Slave: Directed by Another
 - B. The Slave: Humble
 - C. The Slave: Tearful
 - D. The Slave: Attacked
- III. Teaching About God, vv. 20-21
 - A. Its Description: The Profitable, v. 20a
 - B. Its Location: In Public & In Homes, v. 20b
 - C. Its Content: Repentance & Faith, v. 21
- IV. Suffering for God, vv. 22-23
- V. Living for God, v. 24
- VI. Preaching the Kingdom of God, v. 25
- VII. Being Right With God, vv. 26-27
 - A. Failure to Teach Brings Bloodguilt, v. 26
 - B. Every Part of God's Plan Is Profitable, vv. 20, 27

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the passage before us is a mini-summary of Paul's ministry work. He highlights for us seven facets of his work, to set an example to all elders and to emphasize that the Christian message is true. After all, if someone is preaching love and obedience to God, but his own life is characterized by hatred and disobedience to God, that discredits his message. Paul, though, brings credit on his message by emphasizing how righteously he proclaimed it. So let's look at his example of kingdom-building work, for it is an example of what true ministry ought to be. One note: All of us are ministers in the Kingdom. Yes, some are formally ordained "ministers of the gospel," but most of the things Paul describes here are things that every Christian is called on to do at one level or another. We don't all build the Kingdom like Paul did — we are not all wise master builders. But we all have some place of obedience to Jesus' rule, and that is our ministry. Wherever your place, whatever your calling, you need to imitate Paul's example according to your place and calling.

I. Being With God's People, v. 18

The first thing you and I need to recognize is that ministry involves being with God's people. Paul says "I was with you the whole time." Not part of the time, not most of the time, not off having non-Christian fun with non-Christian friends occasionally, but the whole time. Of course, Paul doesn't mean that he was never alone, and we know that he spent a lot of time with

unbelievers who were in the process of becoming believers. But like Jesus, whom we see in the gospel as always being with people, always doing ministry with the disciples and the crowds, so Paul too saw being with the people as the first piece of his ministry. He doesn't start with "I preached to you." He starts with "I was with you."

This is the calling of every Christian — to be with the people of God. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together! Jesus loves His people to gather, and He loves to gather with them.

Do you devote sufficient time to being with God's people? Would you call it a major part of your life? An occasional part of your life? Or a nonexistent part of your life?

II. Slaving for God, v. 19

But Paul didn't just hang out with Christians to watch the game, play a little pool, enjoy some TV, and generally just relax. He describes what he did while he was with God's Ephesian people with the verb "slaving." Yes, that's right: While he was with the Ephesians the whole time he was in Asia, he was a servant of God who obeyed God without stopping.

A. The Slave: Directed by Another

When we think about "slaving," we mentally add the words "over a hot stove," the old cliché that mothers use just as fathers use the one about walking uphill both ways to school. But if we think about what "slaving," or working as a slave, really means, we come out with this: the slave works for someone else and is directed in that work by someone else.

Aristotle called the slave a "living tool" and defined the natural slave as the person who is incapable of directing himself. With this definition, then, we can understand that a slave is someone who does not have the power to live on his own. He cannot direct himself; he needs direction from outside. In modern terms, Aristotle's definition tells us that convicted felons, the mentally ill, and the developmentally disabled are in some sense slaves. They cannot direct their own behavior and their own lives. They cannot live on their own, either because they commit acts of great evil (the felons) or because they cannot figure out how to direct themselves sufficiently to have a home and job and life of their own.

Now, we instinctively recoil from that. We stand with Abe Lincoln and his statement that "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master." Being directed by another sounds like my worst nightmare! But being directed by another sums up what Paul did in Asia. He was not mentally ill or felonious. He was just bought with a price; rather than being Aristotle's slave by nature, he was what Aristotle would call a slave by custom, or what Scripture would call a slave by purchase. Paul knew himself to be bought with a price, to belong not to himself but to the Lord, and therefore he dedicated his life to slaving for Jesus. Whatever he did was directed by another — by the Lord whom he served.

B. The Slave: Humble

Paul further describes his slaving for Jesus in three ways. The first is humility, the condition of being low instead of exalted. He did not serve God as one of the Asiarchs, or as a proconsul. He served God humbly. We think of Paul as occupying an exalted position; believe me, that is not how he saw himself, or how most of contemporaries saw him. When people looked at Paul, they

saw a weak, strange blue-collar guy. They did not think of him as the greatest of the apostles and the author of thirteen letters, the least of which (Philemon) is worth more than a pile of every *New York Times* bestseller for the past century. They thought of him as more of a nonentity. That's because Paul was willing to be humble in the service of Jesus Christ.

C. The Slave: Tearful

He also tells us that his slaving took an emotional toll. It hurt to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He sobbed, regularly.

Men, when was the last time you cried? I don't think I've cried over a church situation since 1998, when my beloved pastor announced that he was leaving our church. I sobbed openly then, mostly because his oldest son was my closest friend and I was going to miss him a lot.

Paul was not afraid to be emotional and to suffer emotionally in his service to Jesus. He served God not only with his mind and body, but with his heart and feelings as well. He didn't wall himself off from others' problems, or his own. He allowed himself to feel.

D. The Slave: Attacked

Finally, the slave of Jesus meets with all the hostility that's directed against his Master. People who are opposed to Jesus Christ are opposed to His servants, too. In Paul's context, that was above all his fellow Jews. They plotted against him time and time again, because just as they did not want to listen to Jesus, but killed Him, so they did not want to listen to Paul, but tried to kill him too.

Notice, then, that Paul doesn't start by listing ministry activities. He's about to get to that. But his first words are not "I taught you," but "I was with you," and then a description of how he was with them. The primary character in which he appeared was as a slave of Jesus, one directed by Jesus. He walked in humility and pain, the victim of endlessly multiplied plots.

Brothers and sisters, what does this tell us about our ministry paradigm? That if it is primarily about being honored, respected, and happy, it is about the wrong things. Paul was lowly and he cried a lot.

Imagine a church putting that in its ad for a pastor: "Come here to be lowly, do whatever Jesus wants, and cry all the time."

Now, I'm not saying that you should go cry all the time, or that you should pull a Jussie Smollett and hire some people to attack you so you can be extra-spiritual like Paul. That's not it at all. Rather, I'm saying that this is how Paul described his own ministry. This is how the Kingdom came. As we have already seen, it frequently advances through suffering, with Exhibit A being our king, who won His throne by dying on a cross.

Jesus was a man of sorrows. Paul was a man of tears. How many pastors do you know whom you would characterize that way? Certainly not me. Nor many of my pastoral colleagues here in Gillette, or in our presbytery. Suffering is countercultural in our age of instant gratification. But suffering is what characterizes the greatest saints, the ministers who have done the most for the kingdom of God. Again, I'm not saying we all need to go seek suffering. But I am saying that perhaps the lack of suffering in the church is related to the present weakness of the church. Just a thought.

III. Teaching About God, vv. 20-21

Well, Paul finally gets to the part we really remember. Lots of people have slaved for Jesus, with tears. But Paul also testified, teaching publicly and especially in his letters, in a way that the church has never forgotten.

A. Its Description: The Profitable, v. 20a

What was it that Paul taught as an exemplary minister of Jesus Christ and builder on the foundation? He says that he taught anything profitable. There was no subject that Paul was afraid to tackle.

Oh, brothers and sisters, what a woeful departure from this attitude is seen in the church today! Many preachers simply will not speak about key issues. Now, I agree that it is not the place of the preacher to tell others how to do their job. Don't tell politicians how to vote; don't tell machinists how to shape steel; don't tell librarians how to catalog books. Fair enough. But at the same time, politicians need to know that laws that support death and laziness and theft are contrary to God's design. Machinists need to know that creating weapons for gang members is not an acceptable use of one's skill in shaping steel. Librarians need to know that some books say evil things and should not be published or shelved. And so on. A preacher who says "I can't address genetic engineering or sexuality or drug use because Scripture doesn't say anything directly about them" is not following Paul's example. He is holding back from what is profitable.

God's people need to know everything that can profit them in their faith and life. Where is the boundary on that? Well, Paul gives us a few hints. He says, for instance, that k

So Paul taught anything profitable, which, in his telling in Titus, boils down to whatever empowers good works, while the unprofitable is whatever generates talk with no possibility of action or making any difference. Do you not hear in this the words of our Lord, who told the church to teach disciples to observe everything, whatever He commanded?

In short, Paul obeyed the Great Commission and taught every particle of doctrine that was useful for helping Christians obey God. He was not afraid to address reproduction, birth control, and other disputed questions in Christian ethics, because his whole goal was to help God's people obey Him.

So it is my responsibility, as your pastor, to know how to help you through the ethical quandaries that come up in daily life. It is your responsibility, as a follower of Jesus, to do your best to obey Him no matter how tricky and complicated the situation in which you find yourself.

B. Its Location: In Public & In Homes, v. 20b

Paul didn't just teach the profitable in one place, the hall of Tyrannus. He taught in public and in private homes — essentially, wherever people would listen to him. Again, this is something that it would not hurt pastors to do today. I do very little teaching in homes; I am very rarely asked to do it by anyone but my parents. But Paul was invited into homes to teach there, and he accepted those invitations. He made sure that the people of God knew everything they needed to know to obey God in their places and callings. He went where they were, rather than waiting for them to come to Him.

C. Its Content: Repentance & Faith, v. 21

In particular, the major profitable things on which he focused were repentance and faith. If you want to summarize the Christian message, you cannot do better than these two. “The profitable” describes Paul’s content in general; but “repentance and faith” describes his content in particular. Brothers and sisters, if any preacher moves off these two for very long, look out! Every sermon needs to say something about trusting Jesus Christ. Every conversation needs to include an invitation to turn from sin, and indeed, encouragement to do so. Paul majored on repentance and faith, in public and from house to house. These are the most profitable things any person can do — to turn from sin to God, and to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners.

Is this what you major on as a parent? Do you want more than anything to teach your children how to turn away from sin and how to trust in Jesus as Savior? Or are you more interested in teaching conformity to moral rules? Paul was not opposed to morality and obedience; he considered those things very profitable. But he knew that morality and obedience were not possible unless they were built on a foundation of repentance and faith. Bluntly stated, you can’t be good unless you turn away from your sin and believe in Jesus Christ.

IV. Suffering for God, vv. 22-23

Though his letters major on the content he proclaimed, Paul, in this part of his speech especially, majors instead on recounting his lifestyle and the example he set of a faithful minister of Jesus Christ. He tells the Ephesians that the Holy Spirit has compelled him to head to Jerusalem, and that he knows he is going to suffer there. But, he quickly adds, suffering is nothing to him. He is not afraid of death, or even worried about it. His goal is not survival. He doesn’t care whether he lives or dies; he cares whether he finishes the mission. What was his mission? To testify solemnly about the good news that God is gracious to us in Jesus Christ. That was what Paul wanted to do. He wanted to go as far as he could, to as many new places as he could, sowing in fields where no one else had planted the gospel seed, and there tell the good news about what God had graciously done in His Son.

He knew better than anyone how much suffering that mission had brought upon him. And he talked about it again and again to remind the Ephesian elders that now the mantle had passed to them and they should expect suffering.

Do you expect suffering? Do you think that following Jesus is going to get you into trouble? Or do you expect no suffering? Brothers and sisters, we expect no suffering. We haven’t seen anyone actually lose anything for their faith in Jesus, and we don’t expect it to start with us — not really. But we should. The Kingdom is entered through many tribulations, not through one or two tribulations decades apart.

V. Living for God, v. 24

Paul adds that he lives entirely for God. His life is not precious to him for his own sake; he values his life so that he can be pleasing to God by doing what God has called him to do.

Do you value your life for God’s sake? Or more for your own sake?

By the way, Paul succeeded in this mission. In 2 Timothy, he says that he has indeed finished the course, just as he was hoping to do. Praise God! And pray that the same grace may be granted to you.

VI. Preaching the Kingdom of God, v. 25

Paul goes back to specifying the content of his teaching. He had said that it was repentance and faith; now he adds that he was preaching the Kingdom of God. What is the relation between those two parts of the message? Simply this: God is taking over the world once again, prising it out of Satan's grasp. Satan took over when Adam fell into sin, and he rules all fallen people. But whenever someone repents of sin and believes in Jesus, that person is freed from Satan's dominion. Sin is the power that Satan has over individuals — and those whose sin is wiped away by Christ through repentance pass out of Satan's dominion forever. They are no longer subjects in the Kingdom of Darkness, but citizens in the Kingdom of Light. Thus, Paul proclaimed that Jesus was conquering territory, taking people back from Satan every single day with the ultimate goal of reclaiming the cosmos for His Father. Paul preached that, he taught that in his letters, and he did it all over Ephesus as he went in and out for three years.

VII. Being Right With God, vv. 26-27

Finally, Paul wraps up this section of his speech about his ministry by saying that he personally is right with God.

A. Failure to Teach Brings Bloodguilt, v. 26

Had he disobeyed God, he would have brought bloodguilt on himself. But since he obeyed, he is not guilty.

What does this mean? That God requires His ministers to warn as many as they can. If you keep silent, you may be guilty, at least in part, of someone else's damnation. That is a scary thought, and for that reason one we refuse to think about. But it's true nonetheless. Knowing that someone will reject it doesn't mean that you shouldn't say something, because part of what you're doing is protecting yourself as much as you're evangelizing them. If we actually believed that, what would we do? We would certainly talk about Jesus whenever we decently could.

B. Every Part of God's Plan Is Profitable, vv. 20, 27

Paul concludes by saying that he taught the whole plan of God. Pair that with his other statement, and you find that everything in the Bible is indeed profitable — genealogy or not. It's not the genealogy that's the problem; it's the foolish arguments about it.

Imitate Paul's ministry. You don't have to be Paul. You do have to be faithful where you are, living for God, and making disciples as you can in your place and your calling. Amen.