

Words and Deeds: Teach Them How To Say Goodbye
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 63; John 10:1-5; Acts 20:13-38

Today's final Scripture reading is Acts 20:13-38. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy and sacred Word. "But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. And sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day we touched at Samos; and the day after that we went to Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship."

George Washington had a problem. He had been president of the country for eight years after serving as the commander-in-chief of its armed forces during the Revolutionary War and acting as the head of the Constitutional Convention. He was rightly seen even in his own day as the “father of the nation.” There had been debate if he should be called “Mr. President” or “His Highness” or “His Majesty” – that was how revered he was – and the public would have had no problem with him staying in office until his death. Outside of royalty, there was no precedent for a peaceful and professional transfer of power from one head of state. How could he make the transition a smooth one for this country he had helped to found?

He turned to Alexander Hamilton, who had become known as Washington's right-hand man, to help him craft an address to the nation that would help them see that the nation could and would prosper by regularly changing its top leadership. The popular musical *Hamilton* has Washington explaining to a discouraged Hamilton that “we're going to teach them how to say goodbye.” Through their work together, Washington and Hamilton were able to coordinate and explain just exactly how Washington would step down for the new president, and because of their work and Washington's gracious nature, the feared chaos and anarchy that could have happened never took place.

Today's passage is Paul's farewell address to the leaders of the Ephesian church, and it is a doozy. Paul had spent a total of three years with the Ephesian church, longer than any other. These were dear people to him. And if Washington's farewell address was an attempt to bring the people of America together through the change of presidents, Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders shows us what faithful ministry in Jesus' name looks like and reminds us that God's will for us is our first priority, even beyond our love of friends and family.

The opening of this passage is from Luke's perspective; he reminds us he's been along for this journey, and he makes a detailed list of all the stops along the way as they sail towards Jerusalem. While this isn't a key point for our study today, the fact that Luke keeps track of their travels is important as we talk about the reliability of the Bible and its authors. The travelogue Luke gives isn't meaningful from a spiritual perspective, but it is from a historical perspective.

Luke is a historian of the first order; he makes sure to get his facts straight. The detail he gives us in their travels shows us the reliability of the rest of his book. At times, Luke's details have been in conflict with other records historians have found. But when all the facts come out, it turns out that Luke was right all along. We might be bored with all the cities we don't know that don't seem to matter, but they reflect that Luke took deliberate care in writing his history of the early church – and that we can trust the whole thing.

Now when they reach Miletus, Paul sends for the elders of the Ephesian church to come to him. This is pretty weird - it would seem just as easy for Paul's crew to go to Ephesus one final time. He loved these people so much. Scripture isn't explicit here, but I think that Paul knows he can't go back. He is heading to Jerusalem; the Holy Spirit has kept him on track to go there to face his fate. If he went to Ephesus knowing that persecution and imprisonment were ahead of him, with all of his friends around him, I don't know if they would let him go, and he might have lost his determination to do God's will. So he stays put and has them come to him.

From here, I want to look specifically at some of the things that Paul mentions and how they set the example for Christian life and leadership. Here's the first one we spot: *faithful Christians live in community*. Now I don't mean we live in communes or kibbutzes! But as Paul put it, "I lived among you the whole time." He goes on to say, "I was teaching you in public and house to house." Paul was deeply engaged with the people who were the church in Ephesus. He wasn't aloof or apart from them; he was a part of their lives.

Community is important for Christians because the church is not a building or a place but the people of God called out to gather together for His purposes. Community is how we grow. When I was growing up, there were plenty of activities in my church, but we had community. We were around each other – not only Sunday mornings, but youth group Sunday nights, choir and handbells, Bible studies, service projects, all sorts of things. We spent enough time together that we were close-knit. There are very few people from my high school that I would say are good friends today. But when I have had the rare chance to go back to my home church on Thanksgiving Sunday, and I see the people I grew up with in the church, there's a warmth and love there that we have even though we rarely see each other in person.

Christian community is different because it brings together people from all walks of life, different races and cultures, and it gels around the love of God and knowing Him through the grace of Jesus and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That community doesn't exist so that we can retreat from the world, so that we can hide away with our friends and wait for God to finally finish the march of history. We come together as community to love, to learn, to grow, to be refreshed, and to then go back into the world as God's ambassadors.

Community used to be a necessity in Israel – you had to be in a community to trade food and goods, to make a living, even to start a synagogue. Now, between Amazon and grocery delivery and Grubhub and online working-from-home, a fair number of people have no community. Suburbia is notorious for disengagement, for putting down the garage door when we get home and not stepping foot out again until we must. We as Christians can model something different – a community where people feel at home, where truly when we become believers we *are* home, wrapped in the love of Christ as brothers and sisters in relationship with each other.

Next thought: *faithful Christians don't shrink back*. This is tougher than the first point to accomplish. But this is a big deal to Paul. Near the beginning of his short address, Paul says, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable." Later he says, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God," which is why he can leave them with a clear conscience, innocent of any wrongdoing they might commit. He finally says, "Remember that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears." It was super important to Paul that he give them the fullness of the Gospel without leaving anything out, without shirking his duty to let them know everything they needed to know.

Unlike some notorious churches in Galatia and Corinth, the Ephesian church was not one riddled with theological error or bad teaching or disregard for basic sexual morality. It was not a difficult church to work with – the fact that Paul could stay there for three years suggests that his relationship with them was among the very best he ever had with a church. And yet he still needed to address them frankly and candidly, and to teach them the hard truths of Scripture.

We sometimes think of Paul as a fiery preacher, but every evidence in Scripture says he had become a gentle, even meek speaker in person. Like everyone born with a social bone in their body, he wanted to be liked. He wanted to be respected. He did not want to slap people in the face and say, “Get with the program!” That’s why he admonished the Ephesians with tears. He wanted the best for them; he wanted them in a true and holy relationship with the Lord. That couldn’t happen without giving them the full council of God, including the tough stuff.

But there was a lot of tough stuff. Ephesus was a pagan culture with pagan rules – just like today, we live in a pagan culture with pagan rules. They weren’t any more interested than we are in learning God’s designs for marriage and family and sexuality. They weren’t keen on learning that there is no salvation without repentance and turning away from sin; they weren’t loving that faith without works is dead; they didn’t say “tell me more” when Paul insisted as Jesus did that real believers had to become disciples who would die to their own passions and lusts and desires everyday in order to follow Him.

Just because God gives us grace doesn’t mean it comes easily. In our own times, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it this way: “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” Grace without Jesus Christ is worse than nothing; it’s a false grace that will not save us come Judgment Day. And so we must speak of the full, rich grace of God that does require everything of us, just as Paul preached.

And we need that, because here’s our next bullet point: *Christians live watchful of each other, alert to evil, joyful in God’s grace.* Paul’s like, “You’ve got to watch out for one another because wolves are coming.” Wolves from outside – the unbelievers from all sides that want to tear apart God’s people – and wolves from inside – those who preach a different gospel so that they’ll have followers to pay them, to fawn over them, to obey them. Same is true today. Plenty of people both inside and outside the church who hate that the church will love them dearly but won’t accommodate their sin. Plenty of people looking to sell you on an easy Jesus, a happy never sad never angry Jesus so you’ll buy their books and attend their churches and put money in their plates.

Paul said we have to watch over each other. The elders are to be like shepherds watching the sheep, and everyone who is spiritually mature is in that role, whether or not we have some official title. As shepherds, we look to help the sheep avoid dangers. Might be, “Don’t run into the snare of lust over there in that show or book.” Might be, “Watch out for unforgiveness when you’ve been wronged.” Might be, “Look out for that trap of envy when you see someone else who has the cash or the husband or the house or the family you wish you had.”

We watch out for each other, alert to evil, but also joyful in God’s grace. We know that it’s God alone who saves us, God alone who hears us, God alone who gave us the faith in Him by which we are saved. Paul said the word of grace “is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Living in God’s grace, listening to the word of grace as we hear it and read it and believe it each day, it is sufficient for us.

We're joyful because God's grace makes us strong. It makes us spiritually healthy. It prepares us for God's Kingdom to come and it readies us for service in God's Kingdom today. God's grace is what gets us through each day, and there's always more for tomorrow. Knowing that he was heading towards imprisonment and affliction, Paul didn't care about anything else but sharing the gospel of the grace of God that brings such joy and fulfillment.

In a few minutes, we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper together. It started with the celebration of Passover, how God passed over His people during the final plague on Egypt. It remembered the manna God gave His people in the wilderness. Now, our manna is the grace of God shown to us through Jesus and given to us through His death and resurrection.

The Lord's Supper is a spiritual meeting with Jesus where He fills us with that grace that we need, that spiritual food. This meal has been passed down through the ages because we believe that Jesus is genuinely present with us, providing us with that grace we need, that grace that is always more than sufficient for us. We can come to the table joyfully because God's grace builds us into the people God always intended for us to be.

Final thought about the Christian life from this passage: *We do it out of the love God has poured into us, not for financial gain.* A big question skeptics ask of pastors is, "What's in it for you?" Many people have never had a conversation with a down-to-earth pastor, and so they read about these hucksters with mansions and private jets and luxury cars and they assume that we're all in it for the cash. The priestly classes were often quite wealthy in ancient religions too. Paul warned his prodigy Timothy of teachers who distorted God's word for financial gain.

Paul never said that he shouldn't be compensated; in fact, he told the Corinthian church that a student should reward his teacher, and Paul accepted financial support as he needed it in various places where he taught. But it's also clear Paul wasn't spending his money on a luxury yacht or a summer home. He worked hard making tents so that, when he was living in an area where he could sell them and make a living that way, he did so without burdening the church.

In different churches and different situations, I've heard people say, "We've got to get more members so we can pay for the building." "We need more people in the seats so we can afford XYZ." But that's not the right reason for trying to bring people into the fellowship. If that's our aim, we ought to give up now, because that's not godly. My desire is not for the church to grow so I can quit my day job and be a full-time pastor again. My desire is that the church would grow because people are coming to know the Lord and wanting to learn more about the God who has reached out His hand to save them. We don't want their money; we want their salvation. And when people know and understand this, they are more receptive to the Gospel. God opens their hearts as they see that God is really moving among us.

Of course, the Ephesians elders are saddened by Paul's farewell; they will never see their dear friend again. But even in this difficult moment, Paul has taught them as he's said goodbye: he's reminded them of their responsibility to their flock, he's given them confidence that they have heard the full message of the gospel, and he's encouraged them that the grace of God will see them through the rough days ahead. May we take this goodbye to heart as we learn from it how to say "hello" to new believers in Christ and to welcome them into the family of faith.