

Part 37: A Gospel Worth Working For

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On April 13th, 2016 two losing teams faced off in what would be the last game of the season for both of them. Both had losing records, both would miss the playoffs, both seasons were huge disappointments.

However, nosebleed tickets to the game were selling for \$550 each. Courtside seats were selling for nearly \$40,000. Why such interest in an otherwise uninteresting game? Because it was the final home game for the NBA legend, Kobe Bryant.

Kobe's farewell tour, as it was called, was a hot ticket for every arena he played in. Everyone wanted to see the last glimpse of one of the game's greatest. People cancelled vacations, sold their possessions and crammed themselves amidst thousands of others just to watch Kobe.

We know what it's like when something demands our attention. There are some things worth watching. Kobe's final game, one in which he put up 62 points to close out his legacy—was certainly worth the watch.

Our passage today includes another home crowd farewell. However it's not an NBA superstar—instead it's the Apostle Paul himself. And while he's not on his home court in Ephesus—he's invited the leaders of the church in Ephesus to join him for one final address.

But the biggest difference is here: Kobe's farewell tour was designed to gather spectators, but Paul's farewell tour was designed to produce laborers. Those who attended Kobe's finale left the game and went back home to their own lives—but Paul's finale sent these men back into the game to carry on what Paul had started. Paul's not saying, "Thanks for watching, we had quite the run." Instead he's saying, "I'm gone—but the game is still going on and you've got to fill the gap. I worked hard, now it's your turn."

We know what it's like to arrange our lives to watch significant moments—but the gospel Paul preached calls us to arrange our lives to work for a significant movement. That's why the title of this sermon today is, **A Gospel worth working for.**

We can break up Paul's final address to the Ephesian elders in three ways: first he's going to call us to consider his own work (**Apostolic Work**) then he's going to charge the elders fulfill their own duty (**Pastoral Work**), and then he's going to commend all of us to **God's Work**.

I have one final **map** for us this morning as our passage opens this morning with Paul moving on from Troas to Miletus. This is important because you'll notice that as Paul rounds the Asia Minor peninsula, he sails past Ephesus and lands in Miletus. Ephesus was the town in which Paul stayed the longest, it was the place in which his jersey would be retired—yet he passes it up.

Why? Luke tells us in **Acts 20:16**, "Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be a Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost."

For whatever reason, Paul was on a deadline and it was faster for him to port in Miletus. But because of the affection he had with Ephesus he summoned the elders to meet in Miletus for his final address. Our passage is Luke's sparknotes version of Paul's final public sermon.

If you got one shot to give a legacy speech, what would you want it to center on? Given that this is an apostle—we might expect it to center on the gospel, but we'd probably also expect it to be laced with humility.

But what's odd is that Paul opens up almost boasting about himself—but it's actually in doing this that he shifts the attention off of himself and back onto the work of the Holy Spirit in ongoing mission of the church. This is our first point this morning: **Apostolic Work**.

He begins saying this, **Acts 20:18-21**, "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."

I wonder if you ever had a "career day" at school where you had to bring one of your parents and explain what they did for a job. While I've seen these portrayed in movies, I've never been part of one. I'm grateful for that in one sense because my dad was a "clinical neuropsychologist." That's a large word, and a scary word—but I've always known that word well. And I know it well because that's all I know. If you were ever to ask me what my dad did for work, I would say he's a "clinical neuropsychologist." If you asked me what kind of work such a person did I would probably just tell you that he clinically neuropsychologized.

Paul was an apostle. That's a big word and important sounding word. But here, Paul helps us out for career day. If you brought Paul to school, and your teacher asked you to explain what an apostle did—now we know. That's why Paul opens saying to these men, "You yourselves know how I worked among you."

What did Paul's apostolic life look like to the Ephesian church? Paul tells us of his apostolic labor and his apostolic message. When it comes to his labor he says I was a servant of the Lord and a servant of the church.

He calls his service a humble service—but we should read it as a humiliating service. Why? He draws our attention to it (vs. 19). He served the Lord through tears and trials.

It's possible you've had bad days at work—but Paul had worse. Paul's service got him forced out of the Synagogue in Ephesus. Paul's service inspired pagan knockoffs who tried to use Paul's name for their own gain. Paul's service led to the entire city violently rioting and taking his own friends hostage. And this was just Paul's service in *Ephesus*.

Paul did this because he was appointed by the Lord, but he was appointed by the Lord to serve the church. In the face of all this difficulty he reminds the church how he did not shrink back from declaring to them anything that was profitable.

That's an interesting word choice isn't it? What does Paul mean by that? It certainly wasn't profitable for him.

Paul made no profit off of his service to the Lord. He didn't get YouTube clicks that fueled his platform. He didn't get book deals which offset his travel expenses. We learn later that he didn't even take money from the church in Ephesus but worked a day job and then went house to house teaching the church and writing sermons for free. Paul didn't endure such hardships because it profited him—he did it because it profited the church.

What Paul was preaching was not chicken soup for the soul. It was profitable. It was gold for the church. He was willing to suffer because he saw how deeply the church needed and was benefitted by the message he declared.

Paul's labor was to serve the Lord and the church, but we also see his apostolic message. What was the message he did not shrink back from declaring: **Acts 20:20-21**, "teaching you in public and house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul kept preaching, and he kept suffering, because the church kept needing to hear the message of the gospel. While Christ alone accomplished redemption, God chose to designate apostles who through words and wonders declared the saving message abroad. That message is the simple and sweet message of "repent and believe." How are sinners reconciled to God? By faith in Jesus Christ. Notice how it is both repentance toward God and faith in Jesus. It's not either or. Repentance towards God without faith in Jesus is nothing. Your sins still stand. Faith in Jesus without repentance is nothing. Because biblical faith admits that we are sinful and unable to save ourselves. So to confess faith means we must repent of our sins.

And having reminded them of his apostolic message and his apostolic labor he pulls the rug out from under them. **Acts 20:22-27**, "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, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."

It is true that there is one Savior of the church: Jesus Christ. He is the head, he is the sole hope, he is the King, the only one by whom we will be saved. But having one savior--the church has many heroes. We shouldn't worship those heroes—but we also shouldn't act like we don't have heroes. Paul is certainly one of those.

My wife and I just watched a movie where the main hero looks at his team and says, "I can't promise you that you won't be in danger. But I can promise you that I will always put your life ahead of my own." Stripped of the glamor of Hollywood--do you hear the heart of Paul's heroism: "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course."

Paul says, "I suffered then, and I'm about to suffer some more--but I refuse to account my life as valuable or precious to myself." That's an important clause. Paul is not fatalistic. Paul is not saying his life

is not precious or valuable. But he's saying in true reality what that actor said with fake conviction: My life is of value, and my life is precious when lived not for myself but for the glory of God.

That kind of accounting changes things. It's that kind of accounting that sends heroes into burning buildings. It's that kind of accounting that motivates parents to die for their kids. And it's that kind of accounting that moves a Christian into places where all we know are tears, trials and troubles.

Paul endured all of those in order to preach Christ to the Ephesian elders and he says, "I didn't shrink back, I endured, I endured for you, I endured for the glory of God. And while I never shrunk back—I am going away. But now it's time for you to step up."

Like a flower that blooms with beauty in its season then passes away to spread its seeds—so the age of the Apostles bloomed with beauty and splendor in order to seed the ongoing labor of pastoral ministry inside local churches. Here's our second point. **Pastoral Work.**

Paul now charges these men: **Acts 20:28-31**, "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 every one with tears."

Before I go on, I want to address the audiences in here. This is Paul's message to elders in the church at Ephesus. He's not giving this sermon to church members. So elders, or those who aspire to be an elder—listen up. This is for you.

But also, Paul is addressing the elders of the church because he knows the health of the church is tied to the health of the elders. So church members, you should listen for two reasons. Number one, it's the duty of the congregation to appoint and encourage godly elders. Number two, it's the duty of the congregation to submit to the elders they have appointed. So listen up—if you want a profitable experience, and if you want to avoid the bloodshed that we will see in a bit—you need to be aware of what godly leadership and ministry looks like. If we want to send out church plants, pastors and missionaries—we all need to know what church leadership looks like.

In addressing the elders, Paul gives two commands with two justifications. The first command is "Pay careful attention." That word was actually used in the nautical world to describe the care needed when turning a ship into harbor. When you are swinging a massive ship controlled by the wind into a tight dock while trying to miss other expensive boats—you pay careful attention. When you are trying to parallel park your fancy rental car—you pay careful attention. You hold the wheel firmly and you look carefully at everything around.

But here the elders are first to pay careful attention to themselves. This is important because it's in the nature of the title of a pastor to do such a thing. There are many churches who make distinctions based off of three Greek words: *presbyteros* (which is often translated elder), *episkopos* (which is often translated overseer or bishop), and *poimaino* (which literally means to shepherd, or more commonly to pastor). While each communicate a distinct emphasis—wisdom, leadership and care—they Bible doesn't present them as three offices. It presents them as three names for the same role. And we see that here.

The one who “shepherds” (translated “care for” in vs. 28), is the one who was made “overseer,” and the overseers Paul is speaking to are the “elders” from verse 17.

A pastor is to oversee, shepherd and lead others—but here Paul says he must first do all those things to himself. He must be a man under authority—he must submit himself to the Lord and to other fellow elders. A pastor’s public ministry is dependent upon his private character.

John Owen says it this way, “A pastor’s life should be vocal; sermons must be practiced as well as preached.” He goes on to say, “If a pastor teaches uprightly but walks crookedly, more people may stumble because of the pastor’s life than are built up by the pastor’s words.”

It’s often said that elders must be men of the four C’s: calling, competency, capacity and character. But far more men are ruined by poor character than weaknesses in any other area. Pastors will not be perfect. But they should have the character of a servant that makes them last out of the burning building but first to the table of grace.

But, the pastor is also to pay careful attention to their flock. A pastor, to be a biblical pastor, must be a visible pastor. He must know his sheep and know their particular needs.

Pastors shepherd. One pastor encouraged others saying this: “It is the duty of a shepherd to know the state of his flock; and unless he do so, he will never feed them profitably.” We want a membership who moves towards each other—but this must be led by pastors who are committed to this.

This is why every member who joins our church will sit with an elder. Charles Spurgeon never forgot this even when membership in his church grew into the thousands. He would sit in with every applying member to hear their profession of faith and to meet them. Despite the time it took—he never stopped. Once, after he had concluded 40 membership interviews in a single day he says, “I thought that if I had many days of that sort I must die, but I also would be lucky to die in that fashion.”

Do you remember Paul’s apostolic job description? He saw himself first and foremost as a servant of the Lord and of the church. Well, notice why Paul is calling elders to do this work?

The first reason is because it is Jesus’ church! Do you see the weight Paul puts on this (**vs. 28**)? He says we they are to shepherd the flock of God, because they have been appointed by the Holy Spirit, to care for the flock that Jesus bought with his own blood. Pastoral ministry is caring for God’s crown possession. Jesus died for the church—and therefore Christians find themselves in it—and therefore elders must soberly care for it as Christ himself does.

But secondly, it’s a service to the church! Just as Paul labored to serve the Lord and did not shrink back in preaching what was profitable to the church even at great cost—so the pastor is to serve the Lord and love the church.

Why? Paul already told us (**Acts 20:29**): wolves are coming. And those wolves will not spare the flock. They will devour whom you love. They will destroy those whom you aim to protect. They will deceive and call after themselves those whom you call to follow Jesus.

The stakes are just as high. Kobe left, and no one was expected to fill his shoes. But Paul just said, “Do what I do.” Keep preaching, even though it will be through tears and trials. Keep working, even though it will be hard and difficult.

And we might feel both as church members and as church leaders that this is an impossible task. We are not apostles. We were not given a special anointing by the Holy Spirit. We are just believers.

But this is where Paul encourages all of us next, our final point: **God’s Work**.

Notice how Paul encourages them in this monumental task: **Acts 20:32**, “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.”

When Paul wrote to Corinth saying, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” he really meant it. Dear pastor, dear church member, dear non-believer what you need is a good God who has given you his gracious word. And I’m here to tell you, you have such a God and he has given us such a word.

The apostles were a unique witness—but they didn’t have a unique word. They didn’t have a more apostolic God. Paul says, “You churchmen, you have the same God and the same message of grace in Jesus Christ. Lean into that.” You don’t need to be an apostle of God—you’ve got something better—the God of the apostles.

Lean into him. Trust him. And we see what it looks like to walk in powerful fellowship—we are commended to his word. His word which is powerful and able to equip us.

Paul doesn't say, "Listen, you've got to try and understand culture" though that's not bad. He doesn't say, "I commend you to seminaries and sending agencies," though those do much good. He writes to a group of men who are losing their leader, a group of men who are living in a town that has a history of persecution, a group of men who are trying to lead a church struggling with racial tensions, a group of men who are counseling broken marriages, who are grieving with mom's who lost their children and husbands who are burying their wives, widows with no resources, children with unbelieving parents and he commends to them with unashamed hope to God and the word of his grace.

Ministry is overwhelming--but so is God's word. Pastors are weak, fallen, and will die. But God's word is perfect, true and eternal. Ministry must be based in God's character revealed in God's word because that builds up--that secures an inheritance. That is a ministry that lasts. And if you are here in church today--then let me do as God has called me to as a pastor and a Christian--you need this word. You must hear that there is no hope for you here on earth, there is no hope for you here in this church, unless that hope is in the word of grace given to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do not take my word for it--take God's word for it. That’s where Paul ends **Acts 20:33-35**, “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.’”

Notice Paul’s argument again—ministry is hard work! Paul actually boasts in 1 Corinthians saying, “I worked harder than any of you!” He didn’t shrink back, he kept preaching amidst persecution, he had

long nights, he had difficult days. But how did Paul do this? He tells us: **1 Corinthians 15:10**, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is in me."

Paul worked hard. But God worked harder.

And that's the point he makes here isn't it. That's what he says when he says, "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.'"

God works in us for ministry—and we work hard because we know that's how he's working today. But we work hard in ministry—as elders or as members—because Jesus worked harder to minister to us. We have been blessed by his labors—and it was for the joy set before him that he served us as such. So we, knowing Jesus stands behind us, seek to stand both in the burden of his work—but also in the blessing of it. For there is no greater joy than serving the Lord, preaching Christ to the lost, and helping our brothers and sisters cross that threshold into the gates of glory.

That's what we count as precious. That's what we count as worthy. And that's a gospel worth working for.

Paul isn't sending fans away with nostalgic warmth--he's sending laborers to the field with Jesus loving and people serving hearts. We will give up much as Christians in the church and as leaders in the church. But we always get more. We get the joy of finding the strength of Christ when we are at the bottom of our own. We get the peace of resting in him when the world rages around us. We get the assurance that what stands out before us is the call of Jesus, "Well done, good and faithful servant."