THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD’S GRACE

Acts 20:17–38

Key Verse: 20:24

“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”

Happy New Year! It’s a good time to review what we’ve been doing with our lives and to find the direction our lives should take in the new year. In Apostle Paul’s life we find an amazing example. Today we want to learn why he looked at life the way he did, and on what he resolved to focus. We especially want to think about what his life’s task was, and what this means to us as Christians.

In Acts 20 Paul is on his way to Jerusalem to take an offering from the Gentile churches. He’s bringing some Gentile converts, and he’s working to build unity among believers and to inspire the Jewish Christians to see God’s vision for the Gentile world. On his way, at a place called Miletus, Paul calls for a meeting with the church elders from Ephesus, the place he’d most recently lived and worked. In his final words to these people we learn how to live with integrity and do something with our lives that’s truly worthwhile.

Look at verses 17,18. Here Paul mentions the time he’d lived in Ephesus. In verse 31 we learn that it was three whole years, the longest time Paul had lived in any one city on all his missionary journeys. From the beginning of his time there, he lived with transparency and faithfulness. What had he been doing, practically? In chapter 19 we see that he’d been meeting with people daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, teaching the Bible. But more important than what he was doing outwardly was his inner life. Some people serve superficially, with complaints, or resentments, or in a big huff. But not Paul. Read verse 19. Though he was working with people, Paul says he was serving the Lord. And he says it was “with great humility and with tears.” Wow, what a statement! What did he mean, and why was he saying this? He wasn’t bragging; he wanted these friends to follow his example of living as an authentic servant of God. By saying he’d served the Lord with great humility and with tears, Paul was teaching them and us how to stay aware of God’s grace in our lives. Before he was changed, Paul used to persecute Christians. But God chose, saved and appointed him to his service by his one-sided grace. Paul didn’t think he was doing anybody a favor; he was serving with a deep appreciation of God’s grace. Whatever he did, he did it as if he were serving Jesus, who’d poured out such grace on him. As he kept his eyes fixed on Jesus, his heart was filled with great humility and his eyes were filled with tears. Living in the presence of Jesus, staying connected to his grace, enabled him to serve with great humility, even with tears. This came as no surprise to his coworkers in Ephesus; they themselves had witnessed Paul’s great humility and tears, and it no doubt left a great impact on them. It was rare to see a man serve with great humility and with tears. But what does it really mean that he served “with tears”? Was he miserable? No, his tears came from his sincere love, love for Jesus but also love for the people he was serving. Ministry was not just a business for him; it really involved his blood, sweat and tears. His tears show that he was pouring his whole life, his very self into it. In verse 31 Paul says that he was warning people day and night with tears. He really didn’t want to see these new, young Christians led astray. Paul’s situation in Ephesus had not been peaceful and easy. Despite his great humility and tears, his Jewish opponents severely tested him by plotting against him. In their sinful nature they wanted to see him fail, and they worked to derail his ministry. Yet even in the midst of that, Paul kept serving with great humility and with tears.

How else does Paul describe his life and ministry? Read verse 20. He says he didn’t “hesitate.” He repeats “hesitate” in verse 27. Why would anybody hesitate, especially to preach or teach something helpful? There might be many reasons, but the main one is fear. Some people are afraid of speaking truth, afraid of offending, afraid of being persecuted. But Paul taught with boldness, believing what he was teaching about Jesus would help people. He also says he taught both publicly and from house to house. He didn’t change what he was teaching, to get benefit for himself; he was consistent. He also was very diligent. What was Paul mainly teaching? Read verse 21. He gave the same message to both Jews and Greeks. Why? Because Paul was deeply convinced: Everybody needs to turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Nobody is too good for this message, and nobody is too far gone for it. If we want to start living a spiritual life, it’s what we need to do: turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus. If we want to keep living a spiritual life, it’s what we need to come back to again and again: repentance toward God and faith in Jesus.

Look at verses 22,23. Here Paul shares that personally, he’s facing an uncertain future, a future that includes prison and hardships. He’s not just having a bout of dark thinking; he says the Holy Spirit has been warning him about it in every city he visits. At the same time, he says the Spirit is compelling him to do it, to go to Jerusalem. It tells us that God doesn’t always lead his servants into a safe, comfortable life; sometimes he leads us to do hard, risky things. What does Paul think about this? Read verse 24. The first part of this verse is especially jarring, and hard to understand. What did Paul mean that he considered his life worth nothing? Wasn’t Paul’s life so precious, so valuable? Hadn’t God been using him? What he meant was that basically, he was ready to give his life, even to die, to do what God called him to do. We live in a culture of self-focus and self-preservation. People are obsessed with self. But Paul shows us here that real Christian life is just the opposite. It reminds us of Jesus’ words: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:35). When Paul said, “I consider my life worth nothing to me,” he was showing us how to live with the spirit of martyrdom. It’s this life-giving spirit that enables us to really serve God. If we lose this spirit, even though we may know many things, we start to spiritually die.

Read verse 24 again. Paul says his only aim is to “finish the race” and “complete the task” the Lord Jesus had given him. What is his “race,” his “task”? He says it’s to testify to the good news of God’s grace. Some people are checked out of life. Some are just meandering or living haphazardly. But many people do live as if they were running a race or working on a great task. They are so focused and so hardworking. But their life’s race or task may not be what God wanted of them. Paul says here that his race and task were given to him by the Lord Jesus. He wasn’t just headstrong; he was listening to Jesus. To live well, we need to discover what God really wants of us, and then we need to do it with all our hearts, no holding back, no deviation, with the focus and spirit of the best worker, the best marathon runner.

Let’s read verse 24 once more. Paul’s life work given to him by God is to testify to the good news of God’s grace. In a sense, it’s the life’s work of every Christian. So, what *is* the good news of God’s grace? It’s the good news that no matter who we are or what we’ve done, by God’s grace we can be saved (Ac15: 11). We can be justified freely by his grace, the grace that’s in Christ Jesus (Ro3: 24). We lived in our transgressions and sins and were spiritually dead. But God, in his great love and rich mercy, makes us alive in Christ and saves us by his grace (Eph2:1–5). God gives us faith and saves us, not by our works but by the faith he gives us, by his grace (Eph2:8,9). In life, so many people try to be good and try hard to deserve good things. Many try to be religiously strict, thinking it’ll please God. But none of these things really give us peace. The good news is that in Jesus we’re forgiven of all our sins and set free from every sin (Ac13:38,39). All we need to do is repent and believe the good news. This good news is for everybody; every person today really needs to hear the good news of God’s grace. Paul explained to people based on the Bible that Jesus came to bring us God’s grace (Ac10:43). Like him, we shouldn’t be teaching people other things; we should be sharing the good news of God’s grace. It’s a task that’s truly worthy to be giving our lives to.

Paul knows his friends from Ephesus will never see his face again (25). But he’d been telling them about the kingdom of God, their ultimate destination, where they’ll never be separated again. Paul leaves them in good conscience because he’d told them the whole will of God (26,27); what they choose to do with what he said, how they respond to it, isn’t his responsibility; it’s between them and God. Read verse 28. This is what Paul really wants them to do, now that he’ll be gone. The first thing to do is actually to keep watch over themselves. It’s the opposite of being cocky and self-confident. It means to admit I’m a sinner, I’m vulnerable and weak and susceptible to temptation. It means to depend on God and ask his help always, and to be vigilant about not letting sin creep into my heart. To keep watch over ourselves means to be spiritually alert and quick to repent.

After watching over themselves, Paul then urges them to watch over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers. It means not to live selfishly, but to be concerned about the spiritual lives of others. We learn here that it’s the Holy Spirit who brings people into our lives, and it’s our opportunity to pray for them and spiritually encourage them. Paul is saying it’s a solemn obligation. To be an overseer means to be like a watchdog, ready to protect people. It’s basically the same as being a shepherd. Apostle Peter also tells us how to be shepherds. He writes: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1Pe5:2,3). Paul writes in the last part of verse 28 that these people were “bought with [God’s] own blood,” the precious blood of Jesus. It’s to tell us how valuable these people are to God, and so, how valuable they should be to us.

Next, Paul warns about “savage wolves” (29–31). They’re those who come into a Christian fellowship and distort the truth to draw people away from Christ to follow after them. It’s a constant possibility. We need to be aware and vigilant about it. Despite this threat, Paul has confidence. Read verse 32. The real hope for these people, and for all people, Paul says, is God and “the word of his grace.” Again, it’s the good news of God’s grace found in the Bible. Whatever they do, sinful people basically tear others down, but this is what builds people up. We can’t humanly protect people or hold onto them; like Paul we need to commit them to God and to the word of his grace, believing this is what will lead them to live holy lives and inherit God’s kingdom. To contrast with the “savage wolves,” Paul concludes by again mentioning the integrity of his own life among them (33–35). He kept his heart and life free from materialism. He worked hard with his own hands to support himself and others, and to give rather than receive.

Let’s read verse 24 again. At the outset of 2016 may God grant us Paul’s view of life, and his focus. In this new year may God especially inspire us to engage in the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.