

Four Habits of Highly Effective Christians

Acts 20:17-27

Introduction

Before we begin our study today, I want to tell you something interesting that happened. As you know, our church parking lot is jammed on Sunday mornings, and that is quite a testimony to our city that in fact, something is going on here. Well, a friend in our church told me the story of one of his co-workers who had to work one Sunday morning instead of attending his own church.

The friend was feeling guilty about having to work on Sunday morning, and in addition, he realized he would be traveling down the road past our church. He looked at his watch and thought, "Oh no, I'm going to be stuck in the church traffic jam for fifteen minutes."

Unbeknownst to him, however, we were having an outdoor service on the land where our new building will be located. We built a stage on our property and that morning, we all came and got sunburned, I mean, had a service.

This guy drives by our church and sees that except for three cars, the parking lot is empty. He immediately thought, "Oh no, the rapture!"

The place was deserted, and he thought, "I've been left behind!"

I guess the moral of the story is, whether there is a traffic jam or an empty parking lot on Sunday morning, you would be surprised to know what kind of message is communicated to people who drive by.

Viewing the Past

The message of the apostle Paul has been clearly communicated to the city of Ephesus. For nearly three years, he has served in this city, establishing the church and developing leaders.

Now, in Acts, chapter 20, Paul bids farewell to the beloved elders. It is a long farewell. In fact, it is the only time Luke records the message of Paul to Christians for us. No other sermon to Christians is recorded for us but this one. And, for that reason alone, it is a fascinating study.

His message to the Christians; namely, the leaders of the church, is one of the most transparent, emotional moments in the life of Paul recorded in the New Testament. If you think that a mature man is someone who never sheds tears, you are not prepared for what you are about to learn. If you think a true man should never become emotional or tender or affectionate toward others, you are not ready for Paul.

If you think that a mature Christian is someone who moves stoically through life, never troubled and never concerned about problems or people, you have not experienced life like the apostle Paul. In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 16, Paul wrote,

Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.

Literally, he is saying, "Imitate my life."

Furthermore, if you think that a mature Christian is someone who is always aware of what God is doing in his life; someone who is always confident of what God has in store and why God is doing what God is doing, you are not ready to hear the message of Paul.

What Paul provides for us in this long farewell is nothing short of an exposé on Christian living, the character of Christianity, and what Christianity looks like and sounds like.

Four elements of effective Christianity

We will discuss a few verses of Paul's long farewell today, and as we work through them, I will pull from them four elements of effective Christianity. By that I mean, Christianity that is truly and distinctively Christ-like. So, let us rejoin our study through this book of "action," in chapter 20.

Look at verse 17.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

In our next discussion, we will deal with the challenge and responsibility that Paul delivers to the elders, or the "presbuteroi". These are the leaders and administrators of the church who are to warn the body concerning false teachers who seek to deceive the body. They are also to protect the flock from, what Paul calls in verse 29, the savage wolves who seek to destroy the flock.

By the way, in this passage we discover the agenda of Satan, the enemy of the true church. He rotates between attempts to destroy and, where he cannot destroy, to deceive. Those whom he cannot deceive, he attempts to destroy . . . and so on and so forth. We will look closer at this later.

Now look at verse 18.

And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,"

In other words, "You, elders, have been able to carefully watch me for some three years now."

This is another way of saying, "If anyone knows the real Paul, and how Paul operates, and what Paul is moved by and troubled over, it is you, elders."

So, what have the elders observed? Continue to verses 19 through 21.

... serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the end of the sentence – one of Paul's typical, long sentences. This sentence is Paul's summary of the past. Paul says, "You've seen me over the past three years, serving the Lord."

The word "serving" could be rendered, as a noun, to mean, "the slave of the Lord". It is one of Paul's

favorite descriptions of his life. He considered himself to be Christ's slave, or "doulos" in the Greek, meaning, "bond-servant". This was someone who often voluntarily attached himself to a household for lifetime service, never to own anything or have anything other than what the master of the house gave him. That is the way Paul viewed himself – as a bond-servant attached to the household of God.

Paul wrote in:

- Romans 1:1a – "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus . . ."
- Galatians 1:10b – "... a bond-servant of Christ."
- Philippians 1:1a – "Paul . . . a bond-servant of Christ Jesus . . ."

So, just how did Paul perform as Christ's servant? Let me give three ways.

A stable perspective (humility)

1. The first element of effective Christianity is a stable perspective.

Look at verse 19a again.

... serving the Lord with all humility . . .

First of all, Paul says, "I serve the Lord with *all* humility."

Now wait a second! That sounds like a very proud thing to say – "You've seen me, men, how I've served the Lord with all humility."

Doesn't that statement prove that Paul is proud? How can a person say he serves Christ with all humility and not be incredibly self-promoting at the same time?

The word for "humility" is a compound word. In fact, "humility" is such a long word that I will not attempt to pronounce it, lest I hurt my pride. Fifteen letters make up this word. It means to recognize your own personal weakness on one hand; yet, on the other hand, recognize the power of God.

That is true humility – a recognition that what Jesus Christ said about us is true. Jesus said, as recorded in John, chapter 15, verse 5a,

... apart from Me you can do nothing.

Our need for Jesus Christ is not partial, it is total. Our need for His strength is not intermittent, it is permanent. True biblical humility is nothing more or less than recognizing how needy we are and how great God is.

Paul says, “I served the Lord with an overwhelming understanding that I was totally dependent upon His strength for ministry effectiveness.”

So, the first element of effective Christianity then, is a stable perspective.

By the way, the person who goes around saying, “Oh I’m nothing; I can’t do that; I can’t teach that class or serve the Lord in that area; I’m nothing,” is not a humble person. He is, in fact, a very proud person seeking to enlist supporters in his self-pitying hunger for compliments.

Sensitive spirit (tears)

2. The second element of effective Christianity is a sensitive spirit.

Paul says he serves as the slave of Christ secondly, in the next surprising expression in verse 19a.

... serving the Lord with all humility and with tears ...

Paul characterized his ministry in Ephesus as a ministry of emotion, resulting in tears. What made the great apostle the great defender of God’s sovereign cry?

Other verses shed light for us and reveal that Paul was deeply moved over at least three things. Let me give them to you.

- Paul wept over the unbelieving lost.

Romans, chapter 9, verses 2 and 3, record Paul’s “great sorrow and unceasing grief” in his heart. Why? Because, as he wrote in verse 3a,

... I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren ...

Imagine – he felt such deep remorse for his unsaved Jewish nation that he would have been willing to exchange his place in heaven for their eternity in hell. And he shed tears of grief over their lost souls.

- Paul wept over the rebellious, sinning believers.

In II Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 4, Paul wrote, *For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.*

- Paul wept over the vulnerability of the church to the enemies of the gospel.

In Acts, chapter 20, verses 29 through 31, which we will study in more detail, Paul wrote,

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Paul invested in the church, his very soul, bathing his teaching with tears.

Have you ever cried for the sake of the church?

In order to effectively live true Christianity, you and I are to be stable in our perspective, yet at the same time, sensitive in our spirit.

Selfless in persevering (trials)

3. Thirdly, we are to be selfless in persevering. Notice verse 19 of Acts, chapter 20, again.

... serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;

The same people that Paul was weeping over and willing to exchange his safety for their destruction, were trying to snuff him out.

Paul summarized, in one almost unbelievable passage, his trials. In II Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 23b through 28, he just rolls out the things he has endured.

... I [have been] ... beaten times without number, often in danger of death.

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.

Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;

I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger

and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.

Paul, surely God would not allow such suffering; surely He would not put you through all that . . . but God did.

How did Paul not only survive, but selflessly persevere? In the same way that James Calvert, a young pioneer missionary, persevered. He and his team were headed to minister among the cannibals of the Fiji Islands. While en route, the ship captain tried to dissuade him, finally crying in desperation, “Son, you will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go there.”

Calvert replied, “We died before we came.”

We died before we came!

Steadfast ministry (instruction)

4. Selfless perseverance led to the final element of effective Christianity, which is steadfast ministry.

Paul goes on to say, in verses 20 and 21 of Acts, chapter 20.

how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice verse 27.

For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

In other words, there was reason to want to hold back some of the truth, because sometimes the truth is not only painful to hear, but painful to deliver. However, Paul says, “I didn’t pull any punches.”

In fact:

- In spite of personal discomfort, Paul delivered the whole council of God; the truth that demanded repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ; the truth that becoming a Christian means a radical change in ownership. You once belonged to yourself – your desires, your plans, your will; now you are a slave of Christ – to do His will and fulfill His plans.

- Paul not only remained steadfast in ministry, in spite of any personal discomfort, but also in spite of a prejudiced culture. Verse 21 tells us that Paul delivered the truth to the Jew and the Gentile. That ran counter to the culture of Judaism in his day, a culture that considered the Gentiles a corrupt, defiled people.

This is not so in the church, however, the ground is level for any and all.

The well known Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, wrote an interesting fact in his autobiography. During his student days in England, he was deeply touched by reading the gospels and seriously considered becoming a convert to Christianity.

Can you imagine the difference that Gandhi could have made for Christ in India to convert from Hinduism to Christianity?

He wrote that it seemed clear from the gospels that Christianity offered a real solution to the caste system that divided the people of India.

So, one Sunday morning, Gandhi attended church services and decided to ask the minister for enlightenment on salvation. But, when Gandhi entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat and said that he should go elsewhere to worship with his own people. Gandhi left and never came back.

He wrote, “If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu!”

Edwin Markham wrote this poem:

*Some draw a circle that shuts men out;
Race and position are what they flout;
But Christ in love seeks them to win,
He draws a circle that takes them in!*

Facing the Future

Paul now turns from viewing the past to facing the future. Let me give two points about what he will say.

Paul leaves with an uncertain path before him

1. Paul leaves with an uncertain path before him.

Notice verses 22 through 24.

And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city,

saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

Isn't this encouraging? Did you catch the fact that even the great apostle; the one who was chosen by God to introduce the Gentiles to the glory of the gospel, does not know the details of his future! Look at verse 22a again.

. . . I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,

His path is as uncertain as yours is. We have the misconception that when one signs on to be an effective Christian, a servant of the living Lord, God just unrolls the red carpet and says, "Well now, for the choice servants of Mine, here's what I'm going to do next; here's what you're going to be doing next week; here's what's coming around the corner."

Being a servant of our Lord may mean obeying without understanding; trusting without ever seeing into the future.

Paul leaves with an uncertain path before him.

Paul leaves with a clear conscience within him

2. Paul not only leaves with an uncertain path before him, but he also leaves with a clear conscience within him.

Notice verses 25 and 26.

And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

Paul seems to draw from the analogy of the watchman from Ezekiel, chapter 33, verses 1 through 6. The watchman was responsible to blow the warning trumpet in the face of danger. Once he sounded his warning, he was no longer responsible for the lives the people he had been appointed to warn. Paul says, in effect, I have sounded the warning of God's coming judgement. I have sounded the gospel of the grace of God. All of Ephesus has heard!

What a challenge to us Paul's example is – as a church in a city that needs to hear; as individuals with families, friends, co-workers, and fellow students who need to hear from us.

Can you imagine an interview with Paul. Let us listen in on that dock. Imagine someone from a Christian organization or magazine arriving with cameras and lights.

"Hey Paul, can I interview you before you leave?"

"I guess."

"Say Paul, you've just finished a successful ministry in Ephesus. You've planted churches that are flourishing. Hundreds of people now believe in Jesus Christ. We've also heard that you've written a few letters while you were here to people in Corinth and Rome. We'd like to talk about copyrighting those. You could retire rich, Paul! What do you say?"

"I'm not interesting in selling what God's Spirit has moved me to write – the copyright belongs to Him."

"Oh . . . well, for our article, how would you summarize your ministry in Ephesus? We understand literally everyone in that city heard you preach and teach at some time. You're a household name, Paul! If you could come up with just two words to summarize your successful ministry here, what two words would you choose?"

"Two words? That's easy – tears and trials."

"What did you say?"

"Tears and trials. Those two words capture the last three years."

"Uh, Paul, could you change that a little bit? You know . . . could you change it to excitement and success, or victory and miracles, or health and wealth? C'mon Paul, we're trying to get people to serve the Lord, like you. This won't read very well. Can you change something?"

"No, I wouldn't change those two words, but I could add two more."

"Great! What are they?"

"Uncertainty and, at the same time, urgency to continue on."

Application

Let me close with two summary statements of application.

Characteristics of effective Christians

Two characteristics of effective Christians are:

- they are willing to stand for the truth regardless of any outcome;

- they are willing to follow the Spirit regardless of any guarantee.

It was simply the passion of Paul to share the gospel of the grace of God – even though the Spirit of God did not fill in all the blanks; even though the Spirit of God did not guarantee safety or comfort; even though the Spirit of God did not illuminate his path but a few feet at a time. Paul will follow on.

Louis Pasteur, the pioneer of immunology, lived at a time when thousands of people died each year of rabies. Pasteur had worked for years on a vaccine. He was planning to experiment on himself, when a nine year old boy named Joseph Meister, was bitten by a rabid dog. The boy's mother knew of Pasteur and begged him to use the vaccine on her son, even though it still had not yet been proven. Pasteur was convinced his vaccine would work, and therefore

injected Joseph for a period of ten days – and the boy lived. Decades later, before Pasteur died, he made final preparations for his burial and headstone. Of all the things Louis Pasteur could have had etched on his headstone, he simply asked for three words: Joseph Meister Lived. He considered that his greatest legacy. His work had caused someone to survive the effects of disease.

Can we be any less impassioned to see that people who are threatened by the infection of sin are given the antidote – the gospel of Jesus Christ?

When all is said and done, *that* will be our greatest achievement. In the face of tears and trials and articles that will not sell many magazines, the gospel we deliver and the lives we live are the legacy of those who call themselves the slaves of Christ.

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