

The book of Acts is a fast-moving account of the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire in the 30 years that follow Christ’s resurrection. But now and then Luke stops his fast-moving story and lets us hear a sermon. He inspires us with the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and to Samaria and to the far reaches of the empire. But he also stops to teach us what kind of preaching and leadership was behind the expansion of God’s kingdom.

In Acts 18 Paul sets out from Antioch on his third and final missionary journey. He travels through Galatia and Phrygia (today’s Turkey) strengthening the disciples that he made on his first journey. In Acts 19 he arrives in Ephesus where God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. Paul’s success in evangelism was so great that the silversmiths who made silver shrines for the goddess Artemis feared their business and even the temple of Artemis itself was in danger of being ruined. So, they stirred up a riot and Paul leaves Ephesus after more than two years of ministry which he calls three years in Acts 20:31.

He goes through Macedonia and down to Greece and spends three winter months probably in Corinth (20:3). Then he heads through Macedonia in the spring, crosses over to Troas, where he preaches all night long and in 20:9 Eutychus falls asleep and falls out of the window. Paul immediately raises from the dead and he sails south and passing Ephesus because he is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost if possible (20:16). But he puts in at Miletus about 20 miles south of Ephesus and sends for the elders of the church at Ephesus (v. 17). This travelogue places Paul’s words here in chapter 20 in the right light.

The fact that Paul would go to this much trouble to give this personal message to the elders of the church and the fact that Luke would pause in his story of the expansion of the church and record the words for us make them wonderful words to me. I am deeply moved by this speech. They show us much of Paul’s heart as well as his theology and his leadership style. The ending of his message is heart wrenching as Paul weeps with these friends and kisses them because he will never see them again—at least not in this lifetime.

Why were his words so important? One answer—the one that I am focusing on today—is that the future of the Ephesian church hangs on how its elders *serve the Lord*, which is what Paul talks about. No doubt Paul would have loved to see the *whole* church at Ephesus. But his strength and schedule dictate that he limits himself to the one thing that was indispensable: talking with the church elders. As the elders go, so goes the rest of the church at Ephesus.

Before Paul gives any instruction or warnings, he simply reminds them how he *served the Lord* in the three years they had together. He says in verse 18: “*You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.*” The first thing that Paul wants to say about his work is that he was *serving the Lord*. That seems to be a simple enough idea—serving the Lord. But think about it for a minute. What comes to mind when you hear the word “serving”? Doing what you’re told? Submissiveness? Compliance? Deference? But then what comes to mind when we add, “the” Lord? Not “a” Lord or “my” Lord, but “the” Lord! Authority? Sovereignty? Power?

When we put these two together there is a specific kind of leadership that is created. Some characteristics of this leadership come from the fact that the leader is first a *servant*. And some characteristics come from the fact that he or she is serving “the” Lord, and when the Lord tells us to say or do something, we say it and do it with amazing confidence and authority. Can you picture what that would look like in the elders of the church?

Paul spells out his priorities going forward in verses 22-25. Look closely at them. Are these the priorities of Christian people that you know who are about to “finish their race?” I guess this is why I have very little confidence in people who claim to be speaking biblically when they simply take a biblical theme (let’s say “justice” or “peace” or “serving” or “equality”) and, having identified this theme, they shut their Bibles and start expounding on the topic as though what they were saying had all the authority of the Bible behind it.

Honestly, the Scriptures are so full of surprises and unexpected notions and uncommon ideas of reality that we must be very careful. For example, right

here instead of thinking that we know what *servicing the Lord* should look like, we ought to slow down and first get serious and focus on what Paul says about his own service. Everything he writes from verse 18 through verse 21 is one sentence in the original Greek. It is Paul's way of clearly spelling out how he served the Lord. In fact, there are at least thirteen (13) characteristics of serving the Lord mentioned here. What a shame if we were to just say, "Elders should serve the Lord," and then close our Bibles and tell stories about what we think that means in our own experience. Keeping our eyes focused on verse 19 and following let's consider three of the ways Paul describes *servicing*:

#1. Humility. Serving the Lord means genuine *lowliness*. This service is encompassed by "*great humility*." Paul says that being a servant of the Lord means being humble and lowly. Humility is recognizing that God has absolute right over our lives—that he can do with us as he pleases and that he has absolute authority to tell us what is best—and we'll be OK with that. It's a spirit of submissiveness to the Lord as Master. We're clay in the Potter's hands.

If we confess that our strength and our ability are inadequate, but that God's strength and God's ability never fail, then we will discover why Jesus says the humble and the meek are blessed. Christian humility is not cowardice. It's not a way to live like a doormat. Rather it is an invitation to work behind the scenes in an enterprise greater than any of us could ever accomplish on our own. It is an invitation to appreciate the simple blessings in life. Humility empties itself and takes the form a servant and becomes obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2). Primarily serving the Lord means humility.

#2. Tears. Verse 19 says, Paul "*served the Lord with great humility and with tears*." Tears can come from physical pain or from heart-rending loss or from unbearable frustrations and discouragements or from intense yearning or from overwhelming joy. I don't know precisely which Paul had in mind here. In verse 31 he says, "*Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears*." So his tears were the tears of intense yearning for their faithfulness and holiness.

But he doesn't say here in verse 19 why he cried so often. What should we learn then? If these tears were simply owing to a kind of emotional weakness in Paul, they wouldn't have too much meaning. He wouldn't mention them as part of his credentials. No, I think what we should learn is that serving the Lord means getting so intensely involved in people's struggles that you cry over them.

So that you don't take what I'm about to say wrongly—as if I was looking for pity—I happen to have the greatest job in the world. I love what I do. But between the time I left home to go to college and the time I became a Minister of Word and Sacrament; I could have counted on one hand the number of times I cried. But since becoming one of the shepherds of God's flock, I have cried many times, and more times as the years go by. I am not the apostle Paul. But the second mark of service is this: Serving the Lord as a minister in God's church will mean tears, because it means getting personally involved in people's struggles to find faith, hope, love, and purpose.

#3. Testing. Serving the Lord means serving “*in the midst of severe testing*” in trials and troubles. Why does Paul remind the elders about these dangers that he went through? The answer is that they will have to go through them too. What did he mean by this? Let's compare verse 29: “*I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.*” Paul bluntly says that the Ephesian elders will have to fight with savage wolves. His point is the same as Jesus' warning in Matthew 10:16, when he says, “*I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.*” There are people who hear the truth claims of Jesus Christ and they become so angry they are like deadly predators.

And the tragic thing is that in verse 29 Paul says these wolves will even come from “*among*” their own number! In other words, some these same elders in the church at Ephesus could become the enemies of truth and righteousness. They may speak perverse things about the message and life of other elders. They may even plot against them like Paul's kinsmen plotted against him (20:3; 19:9). Paul says he served “*in the midst of severe testing,*” a terrible ordeal.

It's not fair to make a neat analysis of a farewell speech so charged with emotion as this speech was, but certain notes sound out so loudly we cannot ignore them. Serving the Lord means at minimum these three things: It means *humility, tears, and testing*. I want to challenge everyone to serve the Lord in this way in your sphere of influence, whether as a church elder, a deacon, a member of this body, or as part of the wider fellowship of believers:

- **WITH HUMILITY.** Be yielded to the Lord. Be submissive to his absolute right to control the life we live. Be willing clay in the Potter's hands. Empty yourself and take the form a servant. Don't dwell on what people owe you. Think about how God's grace puts us in the debt of others.
- **WITH TEARS.** If you are shedding them, for whatever reason, be comforted. You are in good company with Paul; and with the Lord. And if you are not, perhaps you can look for someone who needs you amidst their tears. Or perhaps pray that God would help you see what is at stake in the battle for faith and hope and life.
- **WITH TESTING.** If you are even now being tested and tried, hear these words of James: "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything*" (James 1:2-4).

The Lord's will is that we become all that he intends us to be. God's grace is given for our good and for our growth. And let's be honest. We're not what we used to be. We're not what we ought to be. But thank the Lord, we're on the way to becoming all that he intends us to be.

How do we serve the Lord? In three essential ways: With humility, with tears, and with testing. God bless this simple witness to his word! Amen.