

## Truth and Tears

### Acts 20:17-38

**Main Idea:** *Christian leaders are called to shepherd the flock of God with truthful, Christ-centered teaching and humble, Christ-like love.*

**Introduction:** Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 20. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 20 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)...

#### **Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story**

Last week we followed Paul's travel schedule as he pursued the interests of Jesus through encouraging the churches he planted in Macedonia, organizing the collection for famine relief, teaching, healing and risking it all for Christ. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, to bring the collection there as both a practical sign of God's mercy and a sign of the unity of the church (Jew/Gentile, East/West). We left off with Paul arriving in Miletus, where he calls the elders of the Ephesian church to him for one final meeting before going to Jerusalem.

Today, we will hear Paul's farewell address to this group of elders that had become so dear to him. These were the leaders Paul had evangelized, discipled, and prepared for leadership of this important church. Since he doesn't know if he will see them again, Paul offers this emotional speech about his ministry among them, warning them about the dangers ahead, and what his hopes for them are. Specifically, Paul warns the church about fierce wolves from both outside and within the church, and gives these leaders some specific instructions and an example to follow for difficult days.

I believe this passage has significant and important lessons for leaders, and for churches today – especially given the amount of division, confusion, controversy over what it means to follow Jesus in our culture today.

#### **Exposition of Acts 20:17-38**

##### *Paul's example - Acts 20:17-21*

The first thing to note is Paul's own example, and how he served the Lord with humility, tears, and devotion. He didn't just teach publicly, but went house to house, working with individuals, families, communities, calling them to turn away from self (or false gods) and to Jesus.

##### *Paul's commitment - Acts 20:22-24*

Paul anticipates troubled waters ahead, and that his upcoming trip to Jerusalem may prove perilous. As we will see over the next couple of weeks, that's exactly what it will be. But note his commitment: he doesn't count his life dear to himself, but only that he finishes the race the Living Jesus Christ gives him and the calling to testify and witness to the grace of God in Jesus. When I first became a Christian and started reading the Bible, this was one of my favorite verses, and still is today – I hope that it would be how all of you would want to live!

##### *Paul's charge - Acts 20:25-31*

Now, we get to the heart of the passage as Paul gives the elders a charge: watch over the flock (the church, which Jesus bought with His own blood), and prepare for the wolves. This can be translated as "fierce" or "savage" beasts that will seek to devour and tear apart the church. In the gospel accounts, Jesus warns His followers about "sheep in wolves clothing" who sneak about pretending to be sheep. Here the language is more aggressive – they will prey upon the flock. Paul doesn't specify exactly what sort of manifestation these wolves will take, but we can surmise from his other letters that it will likely be political attacks from the outside, or possibly false teaching the flock falls prey too. But he also warns that false teachers ("wolves in disguise"?) will rise up within the church. And look at the motive: they will distort the truth and lead people away to themselves. In other words, false teachers will seek to establish their own authority, and their own disciples and community, apart from the true church. So therefore, be alert!

##### *Paul's prayer - Acts 20:32-38*

Paul commits them to God's grace, and the word of grace which is able to build them up to the inheritance promised for them in Christ. The inheritance here draws from the Old Testament blessings of land and God's promise given in Abraham – now found in Christ; Christ is the new inheritance, the location where we experience the fulness of God. I will say more in a moment about Paul's quotation from Jesus.

But what I want us to notice now is the way in which Paul models what Christian leadership in the church (or anywhere!) should be like. Specifically, we see Paul striking a balance between the truthfulness and urgency of his message (the gospel!), what we might call *Christ-centered truth*, and a life modelled after the sacrificial love and humility of the Lord Jesus Himself, or what we might call *Christ-like love*. So here is the main idea...

**Main Idea:** *Christian leaders are called to shepherd the flock of God with truthful, Christ-centered teaching and humble, Christ-like love.*

### **Application: Finding Jesus in a Den of Wolves**

So, how might Paul's words for the Ephesian elders help and encourage Christian leaders and churches today? I called this message finding Jesus in a Den of wolves because there are real wolves out there that the church faces and must be aware of and deal with, and I believe Paul gives us a way to do it.

I want to suggest that, broadly speaking, there are two groups of ravenous wolves attacking the church from both without and within. And the tendency of these wolves is to push Christians into different extremes between LOVE and TRUTH. I am sure many of you have heard the analogy of how doctrine is like walking on a mountain top and we are always in danger of going off one side or another; one extreme or another. I think one of Satan's strategies is to push Christians into one side or another. So I want to address these extremes with you and suggest some Pauline advice on how to deal with them. The first den of wolves which the church faces could be summarized this way:

### **The Dangers of Love/Compassion without the Truth of Christ**

Danger: today, we see a push from the broader culture to be a good "loving" human (show picture). The good "loving" human is one who is loving, accepting, affirming, non-judgmental, kind, and not authoritarian in any kind of way.

This is the spirit of our age. So, what cannot be tolerated is any individual or group who appears to be "unloving". And so, any perceived threat to this basic idea of human goodness is severely punished with shaming, exclusion, name-calling, and in some cases, legal action.

There are some Christian groups, and churches who have adopted this spirit of the age, and in the name of love and inclusion (both of which are biblical concepts!), have redefined the gospel and the message of Jesus to be exclusively about love, acceptance, and inclusion (those are the key terms). Now, on the one hand, this is really nothing new. A generation ago, the fault line in the culture was over faith and modern science. And so, you had rationalistic people trying to explain the supernatural in rationalistic ways. And they said, "If the gospel is going to be relevant today for rationalistic, scientific, enlightened people, we can't have a virgin birth, a Jesus who is actually God, who does miracles, who raises from the dead; what we need is a good moral teacher, to give us principles by which to create a just and peaceful world." Today, many progressive Christians don't have any issue with the supernatural so much, but the emphasis now is in the area of sexual ethics, gender, and inclusion. So the message of *\*this gospel\** is since Christ loves you, and accepts you as you are, you then should love and accept others as you are, and become an activist and fight against anyone or any group who appears to be unloving.

But it's the same thing: it is changing and fitting Jesus to fit into the cultural box. And sadly, in many churches and denominations, there are savage wolves – false teachers – who gain power, influence, and seek to draw away disciples unto themselves, and push anyone who disagrees out of their fellowship.

But look at how Paul defines the heart of what love is supposed to be about: Acts 20:21. True love is defined by the God of love; and how did God show His love to us? While we were still enemies, Christ died for the ungodly, that they too might receive new life through Him. So if God is love, then Jesus is the face of love, and the most loving thing we can do

is what we see Paul doing here: testifying to the grace of God in Jesus Christ by calling people to continuously turn to Jesus.

Beware of being squeezed in by our culture and by defining love as anything other than the Jesus we meet in the gospels, in Acts, in the epistles, and in the historic church. This isn't to say that Christians haven't made mistakes or been un-Christ like to others – we have, and we need to own that. But in those cases, its not a failure of the love of Jesus, but a failure of the church to live into that love. Which brings me to the other side of the mountain...

### **The Dangers of Truth without the Love/Compassion of Christ**

Danger: on the one hand, there is another danger and one that I think most of us may be susceptible to: its declaring truth without love. Because of the growing hostility and negativity in our culture towards evangelicals, there is a deep sense of fear and anxiety about anything that might be in danger of becoming some kind of a slippery slope into wokeness. Now, there are slippery slopes – however, one person's slippery slope is another person's straight path to the Lord – it all depends on what the slippery slope is determined to be. In such an environment, savage wolves - who want a following for themselves – emerge and tear churches and ministries apart by sowing seeds of division, slander, controversy, all in the name of biblical truth. Now make no mistake, there are times when the integrity of the gospel is at stake; but too often we find Christian groups attacking one another not over what we could call the absolutes of the faith (Trinity, divinity of Christ, salvation by faith alone through Christ alone, authority of the bible), but instead most of the divisions that I see are over what we might call secondary issues or biblical convictions (partisan politics, spiritual gifts, end-times, and other things).

But look at the rotten fruit these divisions have produced! Think about what we have seen in the evangelical church just over the last few years: financial scandals, cover up of sexual abuse, patterns of abusive leadership, shunning, and exclusion of anyone who dares to ask questions or bring up issues related to godliness, integrity, biblical justice. All from pastors or leaders who prided themselves on being “biblical”. Is it any wonder that so many in our culture look at the landscape of evangelicalism today and scoff? Or ridicule us? Or become jaded and cynical and become ex-evangelicals or leave the faith altogether?

But let's look at how Paul describes what kind of character and posture is to accompany the truthfulness of the gospel we are to proclaim:

Acts 20:18b-19; 31; 33 - Where can we find evangelical leaders like this? Churches like this? Who not only proclaim the truth about Jesus, but in their personal lives and their corporate witness, display the love of Jesus and the passion of Jesus, with nail pierced hands and a spear-pierced side, bleeding on a cross for the world He came to die for?

This is the balance we need to see in our day: *radical Christ-centeredness* coupled and merged with *radical Christlikeness*. Truth and tears! Uncompromising commitment to the scriptural testimony of Jesus, and an uncompromising commitment to live and love as the Savior Himself did.

**Conclusion:** So how do we stay in the balance? Again, Paul tells us:

- 1) Teach the whole counsel of God

Each week we are here, we will open the bible and go through it chapter by chapter, and verse by verse, and humbly, boldly, testify to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It's our safeguard, and our guide.

- 2) Live in accordance with the Jesus-ethic of “giving” over “receiving”

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#### **Exposition of Acts 20:17-38**

*Paul's example* - Acts 20:17-21

*Paul's commitment* - Acts 20:22-24

*Paul's charge* - Acts 20:25-31

*Paul's prayer* - Acts 20:32-38

#### **Application: Finding Jesus in a Den of Wolves**

The Dangers of Love/Compassion without the Truth of Christ

The Dangers of Truth without the Love/Compassion of Christ

Paul's solution?

- 1) Teach the whole counsel of God
  
- 2) Live in accordance with the Jesus-ethic of "giving" over "receiving"

#### **Questions for Small Groups:**

- 1) What is the core message Paul preaches about Jesus?
  
- 2) What impresses you about Paul's character/devotion in Acts 20?
  
- 3) What "wolves" do you see in the church today?
  
- 4) How are you walking the line between "truth" and "love" in your daily witness? What's been challenging? Encouraging?