Sunday Session 1
Reflecting on a Life Worth Imitating
(Acts 20:17–38) Pastor Greg Hauser

Summary:
- The book of Acts records theological history as the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' disciples to take the good news to the world.
- In the gospel of Luke and Acts, Luke tells the story of Jesus, from the one who prepared the way for Jesus, to Jesus' birth, death, burial, and resurrection, culminating in the church's founding. Luke describes Peter's ministry, primarily to a Jewish audience, "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria" (1–12). He then records Paul's ministry, mostly to Gentiles, "to the end of the earth" (13–28).
- In Acts, Luke emphasizes the resurrected, living Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the church's growth through faithful proclamation.
- Acts 9 communicates Paul's conversion as a decisive, life-altering encounter with the risen Christ that redirects Paul's purpose and launches the apostle to the Gentiles.
- Jesus transformed Paul from a violent persecutor of the church into a bold proclaimer of the gospel, from an enemy of the cross to an ambassador of Christ.
- Ephesus during Paul's ministry (circa AD 52–55): o Major commercial and political center: Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. It was a busy port city where trade routes from Asia Minor met the Aegean. Its economy thrived on maritime commerce, local crafts, and especially pilgrimage-related business tied to the Artemis cult. o Dominance of the Artemis cult: The city was famous for the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Artemis worship shaped civic identity, politics, and daily life; the temple functioned not only as a religious center, but also as an economic and social hub, supporting guilds that produced silver shrines and other religious goods.
    - Religiously diverse and spiritually active: Besides Artemis worship, Ephesus was known for magic, sorcery, and various religious practices. The spread of the gospel there led to dramatic confrontations with idolatry and the occult, including mass burning of magic books and a citywide riot when Paul's teaching threatened the Artemis-based economy.
- Paul spent about three years in and around Ephesus (Acts 20:31), longer than in any other city recorded in Acts.
- Acts 20 describes Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Like all relationships, it includes a past, present, and future perspective.

In Acts 20:17–38, let's learn from Paul's life through eight principles for ministry: Humble Serving, Authoritative Teaching, Future Suffering, Ministry Calling, Watchful Guarding, Gracious Commending, Sacrificial Laboring, and Prayerful Embracing. As we apply these, may we imitate Paul, who imitated the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Why imitate Paul? We all imitate someone, whether we know it or not.
- Paul invites us to "imitate me, as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). He models Christlikeness!
- In Acts 20, Paul delivered his farewell address to the Ephesian elders. It included a charge to the elders and a pattern for us to recognize and follow.
- This message focuses on:
    - Personal life change: How the gospel transforms the way we live. o Love: How the gospel produces sacrificial love and care for others.
    - What life patterns to look for in an elder: How to recognize and pray for godly leadership in the church.
- Verse 17: Paul called the elders. Plural leadership, not one man exercising unchecked authority.

Principle 1. Humble Serving (vv. 18–19)
- Paul was "with you the whole time" (v. 18). He did not lead from a distance, so he knew their burdens, temptations, and needs. He identified with the people.
- He served "with all humility and with tears and with trials" (v. 19). The Jews hated Paul's teaching and plotted against him. He understood himself as a slave of Christ rather than a people-pleaser. His goal was to please God as he humbly shepherded the people.
- His ministry was visible, present, accessible, and emotionally invested. He did not serve from a distance; he lived among the people.
- His "tears" show love for people, not weakness.

- He depended upon God's sufficiency while experiencing opposition.
- Humility is the foundational character trait for all effective ministries.
- Do you serve to be seen, or to honor Christ? Do you invest time in relationship, or do you remain isolated? Are you dependent on God's strength?
- Application: A life worth imitating serves humbly and loves deeply.

Principle 2. Authoritative Teaching (vv. 20–21)

- Paul did not shrink from declaring anything profitable (v. 20). Profitable refers to the ultimate good and necessarily the good of the present situation. It focuses on the eternal (biblical truth and God) rather than the temporal.
- He taught publicly and privately. He brought biblical truth into the lives of people.
    - Public teaching: He frequently did this in synagogues to the Jews. He also brought the Word of God to the church. He led, fed, and protected the church through the Word.
    - Private teaching: He brought people to the Word of God through visitation, counsel, discipleship, and household ministry. This could have been house churches.
- He called Jews and Gentiles to "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 21). A gospel-centered ministry!
- He did this authoritatively and boldly, never shrinking back.
- Jesus chose Paul as His apostle to the Gentiles; thus, he started to fulfill "the Great Commission" of making disciples of the nations (Matt 28:18–20).
- Do you bring biblical truth into your daily relationships? Is your life marked by ongoing repentance and faith? Do you share the message with others?
- Application: A life worth imitating proclaims the whole gospel without shrinking back.

Principle 3. Future Suffering (vv. 22–23)

- Paul heads to Jerusalem "bound by the Spirit" (v. 22). He obeyed God even in the face of impending affliction and uncertainty. Follow God faithfully even when that path is costly or uncertain.
- The Holy Spirit revealed, "chains and afflictions await" (v. 23). Paul counted the cost and pressed on.
- He accepted imprisonment and afflictions as part of his calling.
- His love for Jesus Christ and the mission surpassed his desire for safety.
- Are you willing to follow God even when it's hard or unclear?
- Application: A life worth imitating sacrifices comfort, ease, and security for Christ and others. It follows God's leading even into suffering.

Principle 4. Ministry Calling (vv. 24–27)

- Paul's ambition was to "finish my course and the ministry" Jesus gave him (v. 24). He didn't count his life as precious in comparison to finishing the ministry received from Jesus.
- He defined his work "to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." • This reflects Christ's pattern: the Son of Man came to serve and give His life.
- "The gospel of grace" changes everything!
- In addition to repentance and faith, we notice that Paul also "went about preaching the kingdom" (v. 25; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31). This currently means the gracious reign of Jesus in the hearts of man. A future earthly kingdom will come.
- His words carry the weight of a final charge because he believed they "will no longer see my face." He knows he won't be physically present to correct or protect them. This intensifies the urgency of his message.
- He faithfully proclaimed and taught (vv. 26–27). Paul declared his "innocence of the blood of all men" because he courageously and patiently taught "the whole purpose of God." He had a clear conscience because of the teaching and preaching he did in Ephesus.
- He warned and declared. He taught doctrines and Scripture that reveal God's truth and purpose. The whole counsel protects from imbalance and immaturity.
- Do you learn and grow in your faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ? Do you seek to teach others biblical truth?
- Application: A life worth imitating endures in ministry so that God's truth and purposes can be taught.

Principle 5. Watchful Guarding (vv. 28–31)

- Paul knows the dangers and problems that threaten the church. Therefore, he warned about the imminent future.

- "Be on guard!" First, "for yourselves" and then" for all the flock." Paul commanded that these elders guard themselves from threats. Elders cannot faithfully guard others while neglecting their own doctrine, character, marriages, motives, and walk with God.
- These elders (presbuteros) were made overseers (episkopos) by the Holy Spirit to "shepherd (poimainō) the church of God." They didn't seize power; the Holy Spirit assigned them to shepherd God's church, with Christ the head. It's not theirs.
- Elder, overseer, and shepherd refer to the same biblical office in church leadership, emphasizing different aspects of the role. The New Testament uses these terms interchangeably to describe those responsible for leading, feeding, and protecting the church.
- The church belongs to God, purchased by Christ's blood. The church's price reveals the preciousness of Jesus' saving work, "He purchased with His own blood" (v. 28).
- Verses 29–30: The elders take responsibility to lead, feed, and protect the flock of God! False teachers (savage wolves) desire to destroy and deceive, just like Satan their father. They seek to pervert the truth (liars) and persuade believers to follow them (counterfeit discipleship). Notice that it is an internal threat.
- Verse 31: "Be on the alert!" (Greek word, grēgoreō). Be like Paul, who taught them night and day for three years, "with tears." Love admonishes; it does not ignore sin or error.
- Paul's warnings were continuous ("night and day for three years"), personal ("each one"), and emotional ("with tears").
- Are you guarding your own walk with God? Are you prepared to combat false teachers with God's truth? Do you know error when you see or hear it?
- Application: A life worth imitating guards personal holiness and stays alert to dangerous threats to the flock.

Principle 6. Gracious Commending (v. 32)

- Paul entrusted the elders to God's care, "to God and the word of His grace." While Paul needed to go, God would never leave or forsake His own. They were safe with God!
- The message they learned and responded to will enable them to stay close to God and grow in Christlike behavior.
- "The word of His grace" is able to:
  - "Build them up" today. It would mature and strengthen them.
  - "Give you the inheritance" in the future. God would continue to sanctify them with eternity in mind, "among all those who are sanctified."
- Paul served earnestly, warned honestly, and entrusted people to God, who cannot lie and is more faithful than any human shepherd.
- Are you dependent on God's grace? Are you a student of His Word, knowing and trusting it can transform you?
- Application: A life worth imitating depends on God's grace and the transforming Word.

Principle 7. Sacrificial Laboring (vv. 33–35)

- Paul worked hard to provide for himself and others. He was not a greedy charlatan seeking monetary gain (1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7,11; 1 Pet 5:2) or personal praise.
- He followed Jesus' instruction, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."
- He worked hard for his living expenses and spent himself in ministry building up God's church, with Jesus Christ as the head.
- A loving elder doesn't use spiritual authority to obtain money, status, or power.
- Application: A life worth imitating works hard and generously gives to God's work.

Principle 8. Prayerful Parting (vv. 36–38)

- Paul ended with prayer, modeling dependence on God, and a loving embrace.
- The Ephesian elders' response showed how much they loved Paul. He pointed these elders to God and His Word, not to himself.
- Paul's ministry produced spiritual fruit, a love for God and love for others.
- People received Paul's love and returned the same to him! Paul loved people deeply because Christ loves them deeply.
- God's Word had its effect on God's people!
- Do people experience genuine love through you? Are you forming deep, Christ-centered relationships?
- Application: A life worth imitating remembers prayer and loves others.

Concluding thoughts: We serve the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.

- We should imitate Paul, as he imitated Jesus.
- Where do you need growth in humility, truth, endurance, vigilance, and generosity?
- What steps can you take to grow in your walk with the Lord?
- Pray for godly elders who seek to embody these principles.
- Serve the Lord with faithfulness, urgency, and entrustment.

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