

The Resources for Church Leaders
Acts 20:32-38

If you turn your Bible to Acts chapter 20, we'll look together at our text this morning. We'll finish up Acts chapter 20 as we've been studying the book of Acts which is the history of the church, the history of the founding of the church and its early development. And when we arrive in Acts chapter 20, we're still in the third missionary journey. Acts 18:23-21:16 details Paul's third missionary journey which is really centered on a city known as Ephesus. Ephesus is on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. In Paul's third missionary journey, he crossed over modern-day Turkey, around the Aegean Sea, down through modern-day Greece, and now he has returned back again. So, in his heading out, he spent a long time, three years, in Ephesus. Now, he's on the return route, and he's about to end in Jerusalem. So, this section is this last part where he has returned, and he's called to the church in Ephesus for the leaders of this church. Paul is in a port city just to the south of it called Miletus, and in Miletus, he brings the leaders, the church leaders, the elders of the church of Ephesus to him. And in this, Acts 20:17-38, is a message that Paul gives to these leaders of the church of Ephesus with the central call, a central charge, to guard the flock of God. So, we're going to conclude this chapter this morning, and I really feel like we need a context. So, we're going to read the entire message that he gives to them. And this is really the one message that you'll see in the book of Acts that's delivered to the believers, to the church. So, it's kind of unique in that sense, and Luke, the author of Acts, would be there so he would be able to record this first hand.

Let me read from verses 18, and we'll go down to the end of the chapter so you get the whole context of what Paul said before we get to the last few verses and look more specifically at those; "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. 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, 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. And now, behold, bound by the 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. 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. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 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. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship."

So, this section is this teaching that he gives to the Ephesian elders. This is the context. And he's about to leave. He commits them to God. He confidently dedicates them and entrusts them to God. So, these Ephesian elders are committed to the Lord by Paul. And likewise, when our ministry is to people we entrust to God's grace to produce His intended purpose, we have responsibilities. We seek to serve people, but in the end, this is God's ministry, and we entrust people to Him for His intended purposes. Paul is able to do that. Even though he won't be with them, he knows that God will be able to build them up and deliver them to the inheritance which He has for all who are sanctified. Now the phrasing of this, I think, is meaningful. It says "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace..." So, the Scripture is the means by which the grace of God builds us up in faith.

There's so many ways that people look to get blessed by God. How to have God's grace, in what manner do we try to connect to God? And Paul, his phrasing here says, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace..." The Word, the Scripture, is the means by which God's grace is imparted to us. Or, Jesus said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) The Scripture is the means. Our ministry must be through the teaching of the Bible if we are truly to grow, if we're truly to be built up in the faith. It's able to build us up, and that is the means by which God's grace builds us up as seen in the text here.

Now, as he's telling these leaders that they can be built up, able to be built up in the grace of God, by His word, this then is to be able to be transferred from them to the church of Ephesus, and the church is able to be built up by these leaders. So, while the church leaders are called to protect those under their care, it's God who is able to work through them through His word as they teach the church to build His people up in the faith. That is the intended end of their ministry. So, the church could be built up while ultimately all believers are set apart. This phrasing, "...to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" means set apart. And all believers are set apart. They've been called to Christ, by His will. They have been delivered by the Lord from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. They have been set apart, and these are the people who are sanctified, and they have an inheritance. So, this inheritance will not be taken from them. They have it secured. Ultimately, all believers will receive the inheritance. We find that in many other Scriptures, in the gospels, in the epistles. The inheritance that we have as believers in Christ is eternal life, that we may know Him and live with Him forever in the kingdom of God. We will be delivered to this, and we can have this confidence that God has stored this up for us, and while the difficulties may come, and we have responsibilities to be faithful in ministry, all the Lord has, those who are His, will be delivered to eternal life in the kingdom of God. We can take great confidence in this. We are not to be fearful that if we're not able to be as faithful or as with people as we'd like to be, God is faithful and He will deliver people by His means and by His power and by His words. We can trust that God will deliver what He has stored up for His people, the inheritance of eternal life, and all of us who are believers in Christ have that. What a blessing.

And this is where Paul can be confident in entrusting these people that he spent three years with, delivering the messages to them, building up the church, and now he's not going to see them anymore, but yet he can entrust them to the Lord. Which then brings us to verse 33 which is kind of like, seems like, a detour. Seems like verse 32 would be a good end to his message he's delivering them. They are secure, and he will see them again in eternity. But, verse 33, he then goes on to say, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes." So, why is he now talking about his disavowing coveting? He's not been coveting anybody's stuff. Well, first off, I think he's an example. He's been an example throughout this message to the Ephesians. He says, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 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..." He gave himself as an example; "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself..." ... "I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." But beyond this, as an example of the church leaders, it's also in opposition to the enemies of God. These "...savage wolves [that] will come ... to draw away the disciples after them" they are to protect the church from people that are not followers of God, that are going to draw people away from themselves. This testimony is actually something of an example unlike what we saw with the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus.

If you were here last Sunday we were taught from Mark 11 this story of Jesus in the temple, and He comes to the temple, and what does He find? That the Jewish leaders had allowed people, on their bidding, to be changing money for the people that were coming to give sacrifices because they come from different places with different money and they're going to need sacrifices. And, oh, just so happens that these sacrifices are now available for sale by these Jewish leaders in the temple, and Jesus describes this as a "...robbers' den..." that they had set up a business in God's temple that has been designed for worship of Him, and they're making money off of all this. This money that they change over they make a profit off of that, and then they take this money and they sell them the sacrifices, and Jesus denounces this with judgment. Well, we learned about that last week. Well, unlike this kind of leadership, Paul's leadership was he "...coveted no one's silver or

gold or clothes.” He did not come to gain this from them. He came for another purpose.

So, part of guarding the flock of God includes protecting the church from people who seek to use church members for their own personal gain. We are the “...temple of God...” (1 Corinthians 6:19), and we as the church are designed by God to serve Him, not be served by Him, and when we have people looking to serve themselves off other people, looking to gain monetarily from one another, this is a blight upon the church, and when you have this from the church leaders, how in the world is the flock of God to be protected from people looking to use people for their own gain? And unfortunately, Christendom seems to have no lack of people who are going to set up shop in a church, as a leader, to gain for themselves and to try and enrich themselves off of the people of God. And this is indeed a blight on the church. Paul was not like this. He’s an example to the Ephesian elders to not be like this, and then he goes on to describe why they shouldn’t be like this, and it ends with “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

So, we’re going to look at this kind of movement that Paul’s giving them at the bitter end of his message, the final minute here, that “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” These are the kind of leaders that they need to be to guide the Ephesian church into the future without him. So, looking at verse 34, Paul writes “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.” So, what’s he talking about in verse 34? Well, if you recall back in Acts chapter 18, when Paul arrived in Corinth he met up with believers Aquilla and Priscilla who had a tent making business in Corinth, and so they served in this capacity to make money, not from God’s people but just as a way of life to earn a living. And toward the end of Acts chapter 18, in Acts chapter 18,19, Paul then departs Corinth with Aquilla and Priscilla, leaves them in Ephesus, and then when he comes back again, they are still there. And undoubtedly, this is what he’s talking about in verse 34. This work he’s doing with his own hands is the same thing he was doing in Corinth, and he earned a living to support himself in this manner.

So, unlike what many people kind of can think, working to provide for your own needs and sharing with others is really an unappreciated means of serving the Lord, like Colossians 3:23; “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men...” It’s the Lord Christ whom

we serve when we work and we do a job. We are serving the Lord, and we shouldn't be thinking that those people that have an occupation are second class to the people who are supported in full time ministry by the church, who are gaining their income by people giving. The professional ministers are the top shelf, and everybody else is second to that. That's not the truth. If you were going to look to rank people, you'd think the apostle Paul would be pretty high up there, right? And what he was doing was working to support his own self and having enough to help other people who were with him. And this is a noble thing. This is an honorable thing. And I think in Christendom, this is an unappreciated thing, of the value of being able to do this. This is respectable and unappreciated, and we should not be propping up people that do ministry and are doing it full time because of their income coming from the church over against other people. We fortunately are blessed with many people in leadership, of elders and the leadership of the church of deacons, and throughout the church, who are doing this without being paid, and we are able to propagate ministry all over the place through their labor. This is what Paul did, and it is honorable and should be respected.

So, this leads to these words of Jesus in verse 35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Now, if you're familiar with the gospels, you don't find those words in the gospels, so you're kind of wondering, where does this come from? These words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" that's not recorded anywhere else in Scripture. It's undoubtedly a well-known teaching of Jesus. That these were known, that He taught them, and there's many things that He did and He said, we find in the gospel of John 21:25; "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written." Jesus did many things that are not recorded for us. Here we see there are many things that Jesus said that were recorded in the gospels. This was now recorded here in the book of Acts. All that is recorded, all that we do have, we can conclude this, that we have as sufficient as what God intended for us to be built up in faith. So, what we do have, we are able to practice the Christian life fully. This is what God has intended us to have, and these words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" are found here in the book of Acts, and we can learn from here in this context. So, let's do that because I don't know what your experience has been in your religious background with this concept. In fact, this isn't unique to even Christianity. People who are non-Christians will say, oh, it's better

“...to give than to receive.” And there’s this kind of sense of why that is. So, let’s look at this for a minute.

Perhaps a very common way of thinking about this is if I give, then the Lord is going to bless me, and I’ll be better off monetarily because I’ve given, and more money will come my way. That’s unfortunately very common, and the Scripture doesn’t really give credibility to that because you look at the lives of these people who follow Jesus, you can look to Jesus Himself who was not rich, who was not wealthy, then His followers were not rich and wealthy, yet they were giving. So, that doesn’t seem to play itself out in the lives of the people as we see in the book of Acts. There is another way of thinking of this. Well, when you give, you feel good about yourself, and you’re blessed because of how much joy that brings to you in giving to people, and, you know, there’s truth to that. But I don’t think that’s the focus of why “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Why is it “...more blessed to give than to receive”? The reason “It is more blessed to give than to receive” is because resources on earth are temporary while resources in heaven are eternal. They’re eternal. Matthew 6 records part of the Sermon on the Mount. It goes from Matthew 5 through Matthew 7, and Jesus is talking about lots of stuff, and He includes about giving, and what does He say about that? He talks about “But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you.” So, there is some recompense.

So, when is this happening? When is this repayment? Because it’s not happening at the moment. Because nobody’s seeing this. And He instructs us to not sound a trumpet and let everybody know what we do and how much we give. He says when you do that you have your “...reward in full.” So, that concludes that. If you don’t do that, your reward is delayed. Well, that takes us then to Matthew 6:19-20 where Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal...” So, there’s a sense of this repayment; this reward is coming, not on earth but in heaven. So, that’s pretty good because that’s eternal.

You’ll have to bear with me here. I’m a little into this stuff, I was an accounting major in college. Right? There is so much that Jesus says about

money, and it's not because it's so important to God, it's because it's so important to us, and we feel like we care about it so much. It really speaks to what we really feel and think. Or, as Jesus says Matthew 6:21, "...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." So, we look to money. I remember one of the classes I took was a finance class, and in that class, we were, on paper only, not with real money, we were supposed to chose a couple of companies that we were to invest in, and I liked Wendy's Hamburgers. So, I picked that company, and I thought, Apple Computer, that's cool, especially back in 1984. That was when they had cool commercials and stuff like that. And my stock did well that semester, and I got a good grade for that. If instead of going home and stopping and getting my chocolate shake, just imagine if I would have taken that money and would've actually invested in Apple Computer in 1984. That would've done me pretty good about now, don't you think? Well, unfortunately for me (right?), I chose to drink my chocolate shake on my way home, and you can do that. I enjoyed that, and I consumed that. So, if you take your resources for the moment and you consume them, you get some benefit out of them probably. If you delay that and you save it up, you might get more benefit out into the future. Extrapolate that by eternity, and we can just imagine what will happen when, instead of consuming our resources for the moment, we store them up in heaven. Instead of receiving resources from people, we are giving resources to people. We're givers rather than takers; "...and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." And we are legitimately storing up our treasure in heaven when we do this.

Now, I know people want to listen to the words of Jesus, and they want to believe them, but if you really believed that it would make a big difference in your life, you would make decisions based on your money that would really pay off a lot out into the future, like eternity. So now, there's people who'll teach what I just said, and they get very excited about teaching that to the church because then the church can be giving. Right? I want to make a note here for you. Note - Paul directs these words to church leaders. That's who he's talking to, the Ephesian elders. He's not saying, oh, hey, all you church people, give money to the church so the church's richer now. All that's true; "It is more blessed to give than to receive." That applies to everybody, every single person, but he's specifically in the context addressing church leaders. So, I would say churches ought to be more concerned with their giving than they are with their receiving. We should be more concerned as leaders that we are faithful with the money that the Lord

has entrusted to us, not just spending it on our own pleasures but looking to give so that people can be blessed. So, that's our end. That's our intent. This is why, like we start our AWANA ministry tonight, we don't charge for this. We want people to come and be served by this. We have a VBS in the summer. We don't charge for that. We want people to come and be blessed. The more we can be giving, the more the Lord will bless us, and ultimately, when those blessings are stored up in heaven, they are secure. They are locked down. They are not going away, and we will reap what we have sowed. So, let's be a church like that. Let's not be a church looking to just please ourselves and get for ourselves. Let's be a church that's looking to be giving and serving in so many ways.

Now, having said that, what is our end? What are we looking to serve? Who are the people we're trying to serve? Because the text tells us - so, as we read verse 35, "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" So, who are we giving to? "...the weak..." We're to "...help the weak..." and certainly that's monetarily because of the context; "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes." ... "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Okay, so the intent of giving to the church leaders was to help the weak. This exhortation just so happens to be repeated by Paul when he wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, same phrasing, "...help the weak..." so who are the weak? Is it like the physical weak, the people that are like sick? And did Paul start a hospital? No, I think if he did, Luke would be all into that. He was a medical doctor. He was a physician. Well, that's not what Paul did. He helped the weak, the spiritual weak.

Now, specifically, who are the spiritual weak? Helping involves financial assistance, but who must be helped? Well, fortunately, Dale in 1997 taught through the book of 1 Thessalonians, and when he got to this phrase, "...admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak..." he helped us understand who the weak were by just looking at the Scripture and looking at how Paul uses the term "weak," who he's meaning, and he does this. So, I basically lifted this right from Dale's notes. The weak Christians live by unnecessary rules and regulations; that's "...the weak..." And we find that in 1 Corinthians chapters 8-10, those chapters. We find that in Romans chapters 14-15. There's people. There's many people. This is so common - they have religious baggage that they come with, whether it's

because they were Jews from the first century, and they've been taught all this stuff by the Jewish leaders about how they ought to act, and Jesus taught against all that. Or, there are people today who have been taught by who knows who about what religion ought to be like and what should be done and what responsibilities they have. And all this manmade stuff that they come feeling guilty about. And I'm sure that's some of you that are here this morning. And we're all in the process of trying to understand better and better what the Bible really says, verses what we've heard or what we might think, and we want to "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27), and not just practice religion because there's some expectations of doing certain obligations and rituals and whatever it is. We're looking to follow Jesus, and as we do that, we serve people, helping these people who are weak in faith to be built up so they can be strong, not burdened by these unnecessary, external, religious rules that they're trying to live up to, to be freed from all this stuff and to be delivered, to be able to serve God from the heart rather than from the external pressures around them.

So, our responsibility as a church is to use the resources that God has entrusted to us to minister to those who are weak in faith. And I can support that because Paul said, "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak..." Who are the people that Paul's looking to help? These are the people that are spiritually in need, and that's where he poured his life into. That's what his epistles are all about, and that's what our ministries should be all about, and that's where our resources must be poured into because that's what the Bible instructs us to do, and that should be what our priorities are. So, let's do that as a church and prioritize helping deliver people from the trappings of external religion to the true knowledge from the heart, teaching what Paul taught and what the gospels teach and what the rest of the New Testament teaches to "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And doing this fulfills the Law.

So, this end moment here that the leaders are instructed to be givers not receivers, not takers. They serve the church. They'll guard the flock by acting in this way, and that should be us. This leads to the end of this passage verses 36-38, and what is the response; "When he had said these

things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken..." This is a real compelling departure. Before he gets accompanied to the ship, there's an emotional bond here. This emotional farewell comes not just because they really care about him, and they really like him, but they're also concerned for his wellbeing because he just told them in verse 23, "...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..." He has told them that difficulty is coming his way, and they're grieving because they know they're not only going to see his face again but he is destined for afflictions. And we are about to see this as we go through the rest of the book of Acts what's coming his way

In fact, there's a contrast here between the affection that we feel, we see, by the gentile Christians. It's a contrast to what we're going to find in Jerusalem with the Jerusalem Jews that are going to oppose him. So, this is why we have this emotional bond here, not just they like him so much, but they're concerned about him. They do have a great emotional attachment because he knew "It is more blessed to give than to receive." He came to them as one who is a giver rather than a taker, and he blessed them so much, they were attached to him. So, as we live our lives, that should be us. We should not be looking to gain from people. We should be looking to give to people. We should not be a taker. We should be blessing them and giving to them and serving them. That's what Jesus did. He "...did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." When we do this, what will happen is we'll have a close affection for people, and they will have a close affection for us. So, when you live your life, I hope that when you are no longer here, because that's coming if the Lord delays in His return, we're going to have a church that's not going to have you here or me here, and does anybody even care, and we're just going to forget about each other, and time goes on, or are we going to actually remember? I suspect your family will remember you unless you've conducted yourself so badly that they want to forget about you, but what about everybody else? Everybody else, hopefully, will miss you when you're gone, and they're more likely to miss you when you're gone if you've been serving them, if you've been giving rather than taking.

So my suggestion here is to be caring for your fellow believers in such a way that they will genuinely miss you. Like Paul, when you're gone they'll have an emotional affinity for you because you weren't one of these people that were looking to get from people. You're one of these people that are looking to give to people, and you will be a blessing, and then when people look back at your life, they'll actually miss that you weren't here. We've had that at our church. Thankfully, we've had people that are no longer with us that we miss because they serve not for their own gain, but because of the Lord. And let's have more and more people like that, and our church will be stronger for it, and our church will be a church that is not a taker but a giver.