

Acts 20:17-38: To Jerusalem II: Speech

Introduction:

Friends, today's passage is long. It's long. Much longer than last week's. Paul's just begun his journey to Jerusalem, and he's about to set sail from Miletus. He skipped visiting Ephesus, because he simply didn't want to have to be there for long, but he's called the elders of the congregation to him, the church's leadership, because he's got stuff he wants to say.

Today's passage is a goodbye speech. A "final last words" speech. Paul does not think he'll be able to speak to them again, *at least* not face to face.

And people say important things when they say their last goodbyes. They charge those who listen, they bless--and sometimes curse. They talk about the relationship they've had with whoever they're speaking to. Paul's trying to pass along his most important things, here.

How Best?

And I've waffled about how to best focus on what Paul's communicating. Broadly, Paul makes just a few points in a lot of different ways. They boil down to this:

You know me and my character.
You know my work and my message.
Remember me.
Imitate me.

This is, basically, Paul's message here: "You know me and my character. You know my work and my message. Remember me. Imitate me." Paul says a lot to these elders, his friends and his people, but they boil down to these simple things. Keep me and my example in mind, and take it on. Take it up.

What I think makes sense is to go through Paul's speech, like, line by line, and just lift up all the claims he makes, and then simply invite us to reflect on how we relate to them. We'll keep a list of what he says, and at the end, review some of the challenging questions that we can think about it. Basic, but easy. Far, far more difficult, I think, is being honest about the ways we've recently neglected what Paul says here.

I can't promise this won't be tedious. But I can promise it'll be amazeballs! Jk: Can't promise that either. Let's pray for it, though.

Let's pray!

Prayer:

Lord!

You know:

So Paul says this to these elders who've arrived:

“You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.”

You know me.

He starts by saying: You know me. And we can ask: Do we know the people who ask us to live certain ways? And are we known?

“You know me,” Paul says. Do we know the people who ask us to live in certain ways? Are we known by others? Or are they hidden while we're hiding?

He continues: “I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.”

I am humble, earnest, and have had my

character proven.

Paul claims to be humble, to be earnest, and to have had his character proven through testing. Are we humble, earnest, and has our character been proved?

And he continues: “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”

Paul claims to have withheld nothing from them.

I’ve withheld nothing.

This matters enormously in this moment of Acts. The Roman Empire was full of what we call “Mystery Religions,” ways of being spiritual or living in certain philosophical communities that only gave little bits of their insight or belief system to those who first joined, and would dangle the promise of greater and greater insight, more friends and power and wisdom and cachet, as people leveled-up in whatever way the religion, cult, community demanded. This is a hallmark of all cults, and this attitude hasn’t gone away at all. All sorts of clubs and organizations and lifestyle-centered groups still operate this way. Paul is saying

that he's been straight with the Ephesus from the get-go. He's shared all he has to share, and he's done it out in the open. He hasn't saved secrets for those who'll "really" commit. Are we part of groups that hold things back from us until we've proven ourselves? Groups that promise us importance and power and wisdom if we just jump through a few more hoops. Groups that dangle community honor ahead of us. It can feel really good to be the one who is higher-up, who's leveled-up, and is important and special because of it. But the Church doesn't operate that way. There is nothing to withhold. There's no second Bible, no better Spirit, no secret inner circle. There's just the Church. When we align ourselves with a community, it ought to be one that doesn't promise us more secrets if we give more of ourselves.

He says, "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

I've shared Christianity's fundamental demands without bias.

There's a few things, here: A commitment to equality, to sharing with all equally--because for Paul, the world

was “jew and gentile.” He’s committed to treating all people as equal people. And what he offers them is the truth he knows: That they have to turn to God, trusting Jesus as the rightful Lord of the world, and repent from their self-centered ways of life. And again: To say Jesus is Lord is to say Caesar is not, and so allegiances and alignments have to be changed. Paul has laid out faith’s claims to all people equally. He’s been honest about Christianity’s fundamental requirements and demands and he’s shared them without prejudice. How is our repentance? Our allegiance to Jesus? Our commitment to live without prejudice? And have we declared what God’s done in Christ to anyone lately?

And Now:

Paul Continues, of course, letting his people know his intentions and his motivations:

He says: 22 “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. 24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of

testifying to the good news of God's grace.

We see things we've seen elsewhere: Paul's commitment to doing what God asks of him, despite its costs.

I am obedient to God's compelling guidance.

He understands what his way of life will bring.

I recognize the costs of doing what God asks of me.

His goal is faithfulness to the task Jesus has given him. For Paul, of course, that's bearing witness to the good news of God's grace.

I will complete what God has tasked me with.

And for us...I don't know. I'd ask us if we're obedient to God's compelling guidance, if we recognize what it costs to do as God asks, if we're as resolute as Paul is in completing the tasks that Jesus asks of us, but...my wise guess is that most of us are unsure about these things in some measure. In my experience, clarity of life purpose--or, heck, clarity of this afternoon's

purpose--is one of the more difficult things that those who follow Christ today have a handle on. Maybe for us, a question is simply: What is Jesus asking of me now? What is the Spirit compelling to me to work toward?

And then Paul lays down the thing that breaks his friends:

None Of You:

25 “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. 26 Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you.

Paul has a relationship with these elders, and within that relationship, they’ve had different parts to play. Paul has been responsible to share with them what he knows about God; their responsibility has been to respond to it. Paul calls; they have to respond. And knowing that he’s not coming back by this way again, Paul wants to make a very, very clear claim on his own integrity. He has done his part. He has acted with integrity.

I have acted with integrity.

And then he explains why he believes this: “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.”

Paul has faithfully executed his charge. And so something hangs in the air in this moment. Paul is innocent. Paul has acted with integrity that cannot be disproven. Paul knows he’s done his part; he’s called, and so far they’ve responded. But there’s a question of will they act with integrity in the future? And we can ask: Am I like Paul here, or not? Can I claim integrity? In the relationships I have with people, and the ways I relate to them, am I innocent or guilty when it comes to doing what I’m supposed to do in each particular relationship I’m in?

For the Ephesians, they hear him: He’s innocent. He’s proclaimed the will of God to us. He’s acted with integrity. What about me?

And in case his rhetoric is too subtle, Paul just lays it out:

28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be

shepherds of the church of God,[a] which he bought with his own blood.[b] 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Be on your guard.

Be on your guard, Paul says. And they have to be on their guard against the threat of their own accidental failure, against the threat of outside antagonists, and against the threat of insider betrayers. Paul needs them to understand that they are threatened. And, again, we can consider this from both directions: If we imagine ourselves standing alongside Paul, we can ask: Do I wisely communicate the threats people face? The ones that have to do with their walk with God, but just generally: When I am invited to guide someone, do I do what a good guide does, which is point out dangers? Or we can step across and stand with Ephesus' elders, and wonder: Do I realize the threats that face me? Do I realize the threats against mine? And in those relationships in which I have

responsibility to guard people, do I guard them? From what, and from who? As a parent, I keep thinking of the ways I myself fail Bo, more than any other adult does. But we are all responsible for someone, including and at least ourselves.

Paul is essentially saying “I haven’t failed in my work. How will you ensure you don’t fail in yours?”

I haven’t failed in my work. How will you ensure you don’t fail in yours?

Passing On Things:

And Paul powerfully brings these charges to a close. He says “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

This is enormously important. Paul is formally passing on his responsibilities to them. He’s blessing them, but in blessing them, he’s setting them apart. Standing them up, dusting them off, “It’s up to you. But you aren’t alone.” And at the same time, Paul’s subtly emphasizing the humility that’s so important for them if they are to lead well: The promises they hope to

receive are the same ones all those they serve will receive.

It's up to you, but you aren't alone. Be humble in this.

Paul reiterates his motives. His motives were never, ever selfish gain, but gain for others. He quotes Jesus-- words, incidentally, that we don't have written anywhere else. Paul's motive is obedience to Jesus and service to those who need it. He says, "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. 34 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.35 In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

My motive is obedience to Jesus and service to those who need it.

This last word wraps up all Paul's points: I have been faithful; Will you be faithful? I serve the Lord; Will you serve the Lord? I showed you, worked with you, lived for you; Will you do the same for others? And we're

left, I hope, wondering: Do I know it's more blessed to give than to receive? Have I realized that? Can I believe I will realize it in God's time?

The moment ends.

What Grieved Them Most:

36 When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. 37 They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. 38 What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

And we can't help but focus on Paul, here. And we should. But if we forget who Paul is talking to, then we've sort of lost the plot. Because if Paul's the call, there's a response to him. And it's grief. These people have come to love Paul. He is theirs, and they are his. United in Christ, of course, but in all the rest, too: years of time together, of troubles, of miracles, of solidarity and the fellowship that comes when you work alongside others in a shared task. Paul has been a mentor and a friend and a brother to them. And he's not just leaving, but leaving for good. Leaving forever.

And if we've loved someone who's left, then we get their grief. To be in a relationship with someone is to open yourself up to the grief of their inevitable loss. But to discover that goodbye comes sooner than you planned on is the worst thing.

And yet, Paul's last gift to them was bringing them together for a goodbye.

So we could ask ourselves, if we're ever in Paul's shoes, how do we offer people the chance to say goodbye. Most of us would rather just ghost, just disappear. Goodbyes are too hard. But I think, if we're doing what we can to mimic Paul's character, giving someone the chance to say goodbye to us might be a Christian obligation, not a social nicety. And if we're in these elders' shoes, grieving because this is goodbye, and what else can we do, then I'd suggest we actually do the only thing we can do, which is pray for and with the people who go, embrace them spiritually and physically, even as we send them off, and, in the end, weep.

Conclusion:

This long passage, today, begins and ends in tears. Paul first reminds his people that he's cried for the

gospel; they end crying for him. It's poetic, but it's more than poetic. It's...right. It's fitting. These people were born out of Paul's tears, his effort, his work. They were made as a community because of Paul's labor; and to lose him is worth crying about.

Goodbyes are easy when someone's has the character of a snake. You're glad to see them go. You'll hold the door, even if they try to pinch your fingers in it, because you're finally rid of them. What a gift it is to have someone terrible leave. But to have someone we care for go away is...the basic human loss, and still the hardest one.

But in this passage about leaving, we're reminded that its context is relationship, and all the obligations that being in a relationship with others brings.

We're reminded to consider so many things: Do we know the people who ask us to live in certain ways? Can we trust their integrity? And are we known? Or are we hiding ourselves from others? Unable to be a model to others, much less honest before the Lord.

Paul's returns over and over again to this claim: "I have character. I have integrity. I've acted humbly. I've

been obedient. Will you, my people.” He’s talking to those whom he is charged to continue his guarding and shepherding role; we’re not them. But we ourselves have been given tasks and have welcomed the responsibilities our relationships obligate us with. We have to ask in these obligations, in these relationships we move, are we humble, are we working for others' good? Is our integrity impeccable, and if not what needs to change? Is our character evident? And if not...why not? What’s up with that?

Paul reminds these elders: I have not failed you or the Lord. And they’re forced to consider: How will we keep from failing the work we ourselves have been called to? And I recognize that we live in a time where passion, and calling, and purpose, and meaning are all in flux all the time, and we can be on our deathbeds after a long, rich life, and still wonder, “Lord, what should I do when I grow up?” But: We are all doing right now. We’re all in the middle of work, someplace and of some kind. And we have to consider what it means to not fail the work that is immediately in front of us, not in our daydreams or far down the line.

If you had to say goodbye tomorrow to a whole pile of people you’ve loved, what would you say? What could

you not say? What does Paul's review of his time, his purpose, his character, and his calling cause you to think about?