

The Gospel Life

Acts 20:17-36

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Good morning. It's great to be back with you. I'm glad to see that the flowers survived their tumble from last week. I will try not to dump those into the communion table. Today, it's a day where we come again to prepare for the Lord's Supper, and we also are coming again to the Book of Acts. And no, I'm not trying to see how many people were here last week or how many were paying attention. We are in the same text as we were last week, but we're preaching it differently. I'm just going to keep preaching from this text to see if any of you actually notice. We'll see how long it takes. So we turn again to Acts chapter twenty, verses seventeen to thirty-eight. And I'll be reading it again simply to give you context, but I'll be focusing solely on one verse this morning. It is verse twenty-four. So let's look again.

This is Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders. It is Paul's only speech recorded in the Book of Acts that are delivered to Christians. And so it is instruction for, yes, the officers of the church elders and teachers as they seek to shepherd the church, but it is also so much more than just looking at ecclesiology or the government of the church or the different duties therein. But it is also, in seed form, many of the themes that Paul will unpack at greater length in his coming epistles to the church, particularly two of those that we will hear in seed form. In verse twenty-four, what he will elaborate in the Book of First Corinthians, as well as in his writing to Timothy. So we'll get to that in due time. But now hear God's Word drawn from Acts chapter twenty.

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them:

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. 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. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watching over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

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. I have not coveted

anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. 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.' "

When he had said this he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would take this Word and you would open up for us the great truths of the gospel that has remade Paul, the same gospel that you call us to trust in, and that is to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, in relationship with him. And in so doing, our lives are reshaped because of the power of the gospel. Lord, may the gospel life that is demonstrated here in the life of Paul draw us again and again and again to the power of the gospel itself to remake our lives, how we view ourselves, how we view you, how we view our work, and that to which you have called us. So Lord, we pray that you would do this, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So in verse twenty-four, it is some of the most important seeds of what Paul would use as a reason for his ministry, the ground upon which he would defend his ministry, because he would need to defend his ministry against the very wolves that he warns the church leaders here in Acts chapter twenty, as they would come into the various churches which he would plant in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Galatia. They would come in after his teaching, and after the teachings of those church planters, and they would come in and preach another gospel. And in so doing, they would also seek to deconstruct who Paul was, of his office, of the gospel which he taught. And he would have to defend himself back again to the very churches which he had a hand in preaching.

So what we find here, in seed form, particularly in verse twenty-four, is very important to the ministry of the gospel. But in so doing, it helps us not only see the ground upon which or the motives and the fuel upon which Paul would go about his ministry — it tells us something about the gospel and how it remade Paul, and therefore how it ought to remake us. So let's look together at something through nothing, finish the race — oh, isn't that timely after watching a race go by us this morning — finish the race, and testify. Something through nothing, finish the race, testify.

So, something through nothing. Verse twenty-four again: "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." When Paul says, particularly, "I consider my life worth nothing to me," he is saying here in seed form what he will say later in the Book of First Corinthians chapter four, as he is now defending himself against the division that had happened in the church because of false teachers, even among those who were made leaders of the church. He says:

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive his praise from God. [1 Corinthians 4:3-5]

This is also, in seed form, what Paul would later unpack as he looks at his own life, as he seeks to give a reason for why he above all other teachers in the church should have reason to boast. And he says, "I am the chief of sinners." And then he also says of that which he boasts, he says, "Even after I have boasted of all the things that ought to, humanly speaking, make me a sterling example of performance, I say it is pure rubbish before the Lord." So when Paul says, "I am the chief of sinners," when he says that, as I look at my life, it is worth nothing — as he says here, I am nothing — does Paul have a problem with self-esteem? Now, you laugh, but hang with me.

Does Paul have a problem, and does he seem to promote that the gospel calls you and me to have a sense of self-degradation? To make so little of ourselves? I will tell you that in a culture that believes that many of our personal problems are the result of poor self-esteem, that is precisely what this sounds like. Indeed, when Christians say, and as we profess even in this very service — I am a worm. I am a sinner. In fact, I have disobeyed God in the worst ways possible in my very heart. I am guilty of all sin if I am guilty of one sin. That when Christians speak like this, the world, who believes that many of our personal problems are the result of a lack of self-esteem, hears the gospel promoting low self-esteem, self-degradation. And in fact, they might even have an argument to make in that regard, because there are some Christians — though not all — there are some Christians who speak of themselves so poorly, who says, I am nothing but a worm, I am the chief of sinners — not because they really believe it, but because for them it's become a form of spiritual hyperbole, a form of pride, that if I make myself sound bad enough, then that's a form of humility.

But is that what Paul is saying? Is Paul saying that the gospel has made him one who degrades himself, or says that he himself or his life has no value at all? It's important, because Paul is not using hyperbole, nor is he saying that the gospel promotes low self-esteem. Rather, he is saying something far more radical — that only the gospel can hold in tension. Because only the gospel and that which it brings about in a human life, that is, gospel humility, can hold two things in tension: I am the chief of sinners, but now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Only the gospel can say, I am nothing, but also can say with great confidence that God so loved the world that he died for me. Only the gospel can say, I am nothing, yet I am also completely and utterly loved by God the Father in Jesus Christ.

How is that so? It is so because we hear it in Paul's defense to the Corinthian church when he says, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court." So on one sense, that begins to resonate with us. Right? He's saying, I don't care what you think. And oftentimes when people have a problem with what other people think, isn't that how we often encourage them? It doesn't really matter what other people think. It really only matters what you think. You have value. And so we oftentimes, even those who profess faith in Christ, we believe that the answer to low self-esteem is to say, well, it doesn't matter what other people think. It only matters who you are. Is that what the gospel teaches? No.

Listen to what Paul says in the very next sentence. He says, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself." What he's saying is, I don't even care what I think of me. He then says, "Indeed, my conscience is clear." So he's saying, before you, I don't have anything to defend. My conscience is clear.

But then he goes one step further. Then he says, but guess what? Even the fact that I may be innocent before you doesn't justify me before a holy God. Boom. This is, like, so completely off of our radar, how he can say these things. How is it possible? It is possible because, for Paul, he can say, I am nothing. I don't care what you think. In fact, I don't even care what I think of me. Why? Because all that really matters is what one person in the universe actually thinks, and that is, who Jesus Christ is.

You see, this is the whole point for why Paul goes into such long arguments about the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, that God who so loved the world did not see equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, made himself a servant — Philippians chapter two — going to the point of death on a cross. What? To proclaim God's love to you. And then Christ on the cross, taking our place, the substitute, the atonement, making payment for sin, making us one with God — at-one-ment — because God came to die for me, Christ in my place. So if that is what God has done, the substitutionary atonement has made a judgment about me: it is finished. But it goes further.

So in the one sense, the substitutionary atonement brings me to a place of utter, on-my-knees humility. The gospel then tells us what happened on the third day, that Christ rose from the dead, victorious over sin and death. That then clothes me with incredibly confidence, not in myself, but in Christ. So therefore, through Christ's substitutionary atonement, God's judgment has been rendered, and

in Christ I am one with the Lord. Therefore, I do not receive his wrath because Christ has taken it. And if death is no longer the end, but life is, and I can be victorious over sin and death through Christ, I can have radical humility and radical confidence together. So when Paul says, I am nothing, he's not talking about degrading himself. He's not talking about — he doesn't care what other people think. He's saying, no, my foundation is sure — it's Christ alone.

Timothy Keller, a number of years ago, took a sermon and wrote it into a small pamphlet for college students. And he wrote this when he was speaking about this very subject, when he was thinking about C.S. Lewis. And here's what he says:

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* makes a brilliant observation about gospel-humility at the very end of his chapter on pride. If we were to meet a truly humble person, Lewis says, we would never come away from meeting them thinking they were humble. They would not be always telling us they were a nobody (because a person who keeps saying they are a nobody is actually a self-obsessed person). The thing we would remember from meeting a truly gospel-humble person is how much they seemed to be totally interested in us. Because the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less.

It's not inflating myself. It's not degrading myself. It's thinking of myself less. And so when Paul says here, I am nothing, he is radically free because of who he is in Christ, because Christ is the one that he is interested in. His judgment is what matters. And that is the only way that Paul is enabled to take the massive amounts of criticism that are about to come his way in the next few chapters as he goes into Jerusalem.

And that is, indeed, one test for us of how we're doing in terms of gospel humility, of whether we're becoming something through becoming nothing in Christ. It's this: how have you dealt with criticism over the next week? Does criticism undo you? Does it ignite anger? Does it ignite defensiveness? Does it ignite your inner competitive pride, going, well that's what you think, but you know what? Yeah? Well you're this. Right? You might not say that out loud, but you're thinking it, right? You're totally in court, and you're so the judge and the lawyer when you're receiving criticism. And when you receive criticism, you may not be undone, but you may be greatly angered.

Gospel humility begins to move in and change us and free us to receive criticism by being able to embrace the blade when someone comes after you with criticism. By embracing the blade, my mentor once taught me — Randy, embracing the blade is this: criticism hurts, no matter who says it, or when, or how. But gospel humility begins to move in on you when you're able to say, is there any shred of truth in what this person is saying about me? That doesn't mean you're always going to agree, but it means if you're able to begin asking that question when someone criticizes you, you know that might be a way of telling whether gospel humility is really beginning to seep down into your soul. But if criticism ignites you into defensiveness or attack, I encourage you as I encourage myself in that very test, to ask the question: then whose righteousness am I really trusting in? Am I really nothing in that moment? No. My pride is offended. Or am I able to trust in another and say, you're right.

That's hard, and the only way to get there is not by thinking your way there. The only way to get there is not by propositions. The only way to get there is through relationship with Christ, to recognize his beauty, to recognize his glory, to recognize how, in all of that, he humbled himself to the point of the cross, to taking the ultimate criticism, to taking the ultimate wrath, to taking the ultimate punishment for our sin. And then on the third day, rising up and saying, no more. And if I and you can find our home in that, there is such radical freedom and joy, which is why Paul is able to say, then, because he can become something through nothing, that is, becoming in who he is meant to be through Christ, he is then able to finish the race, which is why he says next, "if only I may finish the race and complete the task that the Lord Jesus has given me."

This is in seed form what he will say later to Timothy when he writes to him. He says to Timothy:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for me to depart. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. [2 Timothy 4:6-8]

What I want you to hear is, I want you to hear the endurance, the commitment, the focus, the excellence, the faithfulness, the effort, the hard work, the goal to which Paul was given, because he had a foundation in Jesus Christ. Now, in the work that God has called him uniquely to do, he's now getting himself to performance, not because he's trying to earn anything from God. He's not trying to prove anything else to anyone else. No, he's been freed by God's judgment to give himself radically to the work of the gospel, and to whatever end that may lead him. And he will do so hard and fast and committed with excellence, and he will run the race.

Here in Acts twenty he's saying, I'm going to finish the race. To Timothy, he says, I've finished the race — I've done what God has called me to do. Do you hear the confidence? But it's not a confidence of having a self-inflated ego. It's a confidence in who he is in Christ Jesus. There is so much joy, so much energy, so much beauty in that kind of thing. It's so attractive, is it not? I want more of that. I want us to have more of that.

And the only way — we're getting ready to have the Lord's Supper here in a few minutes. And to this table we come in humility, to take bread and juice as a symbol of Christ's substitutionary atonement for our sin. When we come, we're invited by him as friends to come with our sin and receive grace. Do you hear that? Receive grace, receive grace, receive grace. And when we receive that grace, we are filled with the fuel of his grace to run the race. That's how Paul was able to do it. God's judgment wasn't a proposition. It was a relationship. And in the confidence of that, he could finish the race. So can we, and so are we called to do, with the fuel of the work of Christ.

But finally, testify. He says, he's called to witness. He tells us in verse twenty-four, "the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." His calling, being freed up by the judgment of God in Christ, being free through his death and resurrection with the radical grace that it calls him to, to finish the race, he now knows his calling is to testify to that radical grace in everything he does. We know this because Paul was doing more than preaching. Paul was also working very hard with his hands. He wasn't just testifying to grace when he opened his mouth and preached the gospel. He was testifying to grace when he was working hard with his hands. He tells us as much, because he saw that his work was also being done for another, and for those who had need.

That means that each of you is called to testify to the gospel — not in the same way I am, the calling that I have here. Your calling may be an engineer. Your calling may be a lawyer. Your calling may be whatever it is you're doing — this is where God has you. And if that's where he has you, that means that's precisely the place where you are then enabled to testify to that grace, the grace of God, through your hard work.

I witnessed that this past week as I met a young Christian man, twenty-seven years old. His name is David Simnick. He started a company called SoapBox. He graduated from an American university. He wanted help those who had need around the world. He was working as a contractor for the United States government with other NGOs around the world, supplying those who had need in third world countries and countries that could not provide food and water for their people. He was then offered a full-time job, a good paying job, and he realized in that moment that he wanted to go and to do this work, but he wasn't willing to do it in the job he was being offered, and so he said, no.

And so he sat down with a friend of his, and he says, you know what we're going to do? We want to provide for those who have need, and here's how we're going to do it. We're going to start a soap company. So he called his parents, and he said, I did not accept the job. Me and my friend, we're going to start a soap company. And he said, his parents yelled through the phone. And he hung up the phone. He called back and they were still yelling. And they were like, what are you thinking? And he's like, I know this is the work that God has called me to do. Over three thousand children die every day because they do not have a bar of soap to wash their hands with. Twelve thousand children die a day around the world, not only because they don't have a bar of soap, but because they also deal with very dirty water. And he said, I have a skill set that God has given me, and we're going to start a soap company. We're going to call it SoapBox. And that Soapbox is going to have a byline: soap with hope. Every time you buy a bar of soap or you buy any product from them, they give one away.

And now they're in 60 countries around the world. They're in virtually every WholeFoods up and down the East Coast, when nobody would even pay attention to them, because they're not Procter & Gamble, they don't have all the great name recognition, but here was the purpose. And on Thursday night he gave his testimony. And he was talking about how God had called him to testify, how God had given him the gifts of being able to have a great education, a heart for providing for those who had need. And he said, I don't know how we're going to do it — let's start a soap company. And then he said, here's what we sought to do — we didn't just want to be a soap company. We wanted to be the best soap company. He wanted to be excellent at what he did. We want to make as much money as we possibly can, because every time we make a dollar, we give money away.

And then, as he's giving this testimony, it was so inspiring. He's like, you know, he's working seventy or eighty hours a week. Only eight people work in his company. He doesn't know which end is up, oftentimes. But he knows, I can't do anything else. The company started because he and this guy had a vision, and he literally stalked the buyers at WholeFoods. Would they please buy his product? And then finally they said, we'll give you one store. And for two weeks he popped in and around isles to say, remember me? Buy my soap. That's literally, he said, what he did for two weeks. And then they gave him two stores. And then they gave him the whole region. He worked hard. Why? Because he had been given a calling to testify to the glory of God's grace, to provide for those who had need. That was his calling.

But then, after his dynamic speech, he came up to a few of us, and he said — he didn't even know us — he said, did what I say make any sense? How could it have been better? Would you please tell me? And I was taken aback. What I saw in that moment was somebody who was ready and willing to receive criticism and feedback — open to it — but also so completely confident in what God had called him to do. And I was so thankful. And I thought, that's it, that's gospel humility, someone who's willing to testify to God's grace in the place that God has him. What could God be doing in you through radical gospel humility? The race which he has called you to finish, not by your own strength, but by his radical grace — to testify to that grace wherever God has you, in whatever you're doing. Isn't there contentment in that? Isn't there joy in that? Isn't there fun in that? Yes and amen. I'll say it to myself.

Now we get to prepare to come to a table. A table that is not for grovelers. A table that is for worshippers. A table that is not for the perfect, but a table that is for sinners to receive, in bread and juice, the symbol of our Savior in his substitutionary atonement. But we still celebrate it in hope, because that substitutionary atonement was wedded to the gospel victory and the resurrection. And so, therefore, we have hope — hope to which we work towards, to finish the race, to testify to this grace. May God receive all the glory and prepare our hearts to celebrate God's people, to celebrate Christ. Let's do so.

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would fill us with your radical grace, to give us the calling into relationship with you who loves us so much. That's beyond our comprehension. We cannot think our way into the gospel. We can only recognize it and receive it. Lord, help us to do that this morning. Rescue us from over-inflated egos. Rescue us from false self-degradation. But rescue us through the radical gospel humility of Jesus Christ, who knew no sin, but became sin for us, and who was raised on the third day that

we might be able to finish the race and testify wherever we are in word and deed to the glorious gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.