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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
August 30, 2015
14th after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 12:1-10, Matthew 5:13-19
Hymns: 394; 410; 413; 401; (243:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Acts 20:17-38

17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. 18 And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, 19 serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; 20 how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, 21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. 24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

25 "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from

among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

32 “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. 34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. 35 I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him, 38 sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: We are going to look at our text as a Mission Statement.

Mission statements are considered very important in the world today. Most corporations have them, and certainly most if not all nonprofit organizations will have them. They are usually pithy, short statements of what the organization is about or hopes to achieve. They are intended to do two things: first they are to keep the organization focused, and second they are to make the nature of the organization evident for any and all who may wonder what they are really all about.

Sometimes churches fail to comprehend the mission that the Lord has given us that is to remain our focus. They may begin to see social or economic justice as their mission. They may set their focus on people feeling good about themselves and their

community. If you drive back and forth a few times between here and the Twin Cities you are probably familiar with one church's mission statement set out for all to see on a giant billboard: "Love God, Love People!" While that is appealing to many, it could take one down a wrong path. It is a clear summary of the law, but says nothing of the gospel. So what is there to celebrate, as the church name suggests?

The Apostle Paul wanted the elders of the church in Ephesus to be very clear about what they were to be about. The church needed to keep its focus. Our text today was intended to set the tone for the early church after Paul and the other apostles. As a mission statement it gives clear focus, but it doesn't fit the modern criteria of being short and sweet. We can bring summarize it with one statement --

**THEME: Paul's Charge to Congregation Leaders:
Testify to the Gospel of the Grace of God!**

Start with this central message:

I. Testify to All Repentance Toward God and Faith toward Jesus.

This was an emotionally charged meeting that Paul was having with these congregation elders of Asia Minor. He knew that this was the last time he was going to see them. He wanted to make a deep and lasting impression upon them concerning the ministry of the gospel. In the opening verses of our text Paul took them back in time to when he first came to Ephesus, reminding them how he brought the Word of God to them. He didn't allow the opposition of the Jews to stop him. He worked hard teaching them the truth of God's Word. He didn't only teach on Sabbath days, but went from house to house teaching them all of God's Word, not holding anything back.

This was the ministry that was being entrusted to the leaders of the congregation. This was the ministry that was to characterize this, and every Christian congregation throughout the world. The first point that Paul made regarding their mission as a Christian congregation was the need to preach to **all people** repentance toward God and faith toward Jesus. People make these artificial

divisions according to color and ethnic background, or nationality. Paul reminded them that when he taught the Word of God he taught both Jews and Greeks. Both Jews and Greeks needed to repent.

The Jews needed to understand that they could not achieve righteousness and salvation by their own futile efforts at fulfilling the law. They needed to confess their sins and unrighteousness before the Lord, and then turn in faith to Jesus as their only Savior from sin and death.

The Greeks needed to turn away from their vain idols, and their love of reason and wisdom, and confess their sin to the one true God, the Almighty Creator of all things, before whom they would stand on that last day. They also needed to understand that this Jesus who was crucified, was the only begotten Son of God who died for them, and for their salvation. He also rose again from the dead, that we might know the truth of the resurrection unto everlasting life. Paul didn't hold back anything: he taught them the truth of life and salvation.

That is the first point for us also. We dare not hold back sharing the gospel from anyone! People of every race and language need to know the one true God, and be brought to repentance and faith in Jesus. It doesn't matter if they live right here in Austin, Minnesota, or in Kenya, Africa, as is reported in our mission newsletter this morning. That remains the mission of Christ's Church on earth. That is our reason for being. As a congregation, this is our mission, and as individuals who are still in this life, this remains our God given purpose for being here on earth.

Paul was adamant that he would be faithful to the end, that he might finish his "race" that he was running in life with **joy**. He was determined to finish "the ministry which *he* received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (v.24). And that was his joy in life. So as we each run our race in this earthly life, may we also realize this as our mission! May this also be our joy! May all we do and say be a clear testimony to Jesus and the saving grace which He brings us all in the forgiveness of our sins.

Paul's second point for understanding the mission God gave them was that they were to –

II. Declare the Whole Counsel of God.

Again Paul emphasized the significance of this message by reminding them that this was the last time he would be talking to them face to face. So of course they would pay attention to his every word!

Acts 20: 25-31 “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

That line about “being innocent of the blood of all men” is a powerful line. It has nothing to do with his life before the Lord called him to faith and apostleship. It has everything to do with faithfully presenting the Word of truth. It comes from a realization of a great responsibility, that failing to say exactly what was needed when it needed to be said could lead a soul to perish in his sin. One dare not hold back any Word of God when souls are at stake! Eternity hangs in the balance! It is so important to present the whole counsel of God.

Every truth which God presents to us in His Word is God's truth, and He presented this truth to us in His Word because we needed it. **God's Word is truth.** We are not to single out would like to be true and what some might judge to be fable, as if this were the writings of mere mortals who got things wrong at times, or allowed their own prejudices to influence what they wrote. All the Bible is God's truth!

There are different teachings within God's Word that are going to be "hard sayings" (John 6:60) to different people. For some it is the truth of the seven day creation. For others that a particular activity is sinful. For others it is the truth that hell even exists, and that indeed very sadly many people, including many nice people are going to be lost forever to the torments of hell. For others it is the plain and simple truth of the gospel, that it is not by works of our righteousness but by the vicarious sacrifice which Christ made upon the cross that we are saved. If we start compromising any Word of God, we undermine the authority of God's Word in people's minds, and the certainty of salvation is threatened. The whole counsel of God needs to be presented.

That is why the Church year is laid out the way it is, and why pastors within confessional Lutheranism work with these schedules for preaching sermons called pericopes. They were carefully established to cover a wide spectrum of God's truth throughout the year. The use of a pericope helps safeguard against preaching the same thing, or preaching only easy sermons that wouldn't offend anyone.

Paul made a very special point that he laid upon the hearts of these church leaders. There were going to be people that would even come from within the church that would teach things that weren't true, and other false teachers would attack from the outside that would teach things that would confuse believers. They would be as dangerous as savage wolves attacking the Christians in their charge. They were to be shepherds watching, tending, and guarding the sheep of the flock. They were to understand how precious each and every soul is to the Lord. Every soul is purchased with Jesus' blood shed upon the cross. That makes them precious beyond measure in the eyes of the Lord and so it should be also in our eyes. So that is why Paul was so diligent in warning them about the false teachers that arose already when he was with them.

I know some people don't like it when I talk about the different wrong things that are taught in some churches, or the false ideas that come upon us from the world. Paul warned time and again concerning the dangers of false teaching for the three years he spent in Ephesus, even with tears, and then also later by epistle.

This emphasizes how much we need to be warned about false teachings because they do endanger souls.

Paul worked hard at the ministry. We should all work hard at teaching, testifying, warning, and encouraging others in their faith. We should work as hard as if it all depended upon us that others would be saved. At the same time we should proceed with the confident faith that it is God alone who moves hearts to believe by the working of the Spirit through the Word. So we learn from Paul to –

III. Commend the Brethren to God and His Word of Grace.

Acts 20:32-36 “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. 34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. 35 I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” 36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.”

Paul did work hard. He didn’t want people to get the false impression that he was “in it for the money” so he worked at his trade of tent making as well as preaching. He worked hard, as hard as if everything depended upon him to win over these souls for Jesus. But Paul knew that he was not the one who changed the hearts, or the one who preserved believers in true faith. He knew it was the Lord. That is why he entrusted them to God and the word of His grace. Paul knew and appreciated the power of the gospel, and how God works through the gospel to keep us in true faith. He wrote to the Romans “**I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes**” (Romans 1:16).

The power of God that comes to us in the gospel is still the only power that saves. Oh, it is true that the Lord has entrusted us with this ministry that we should be diligent and faithful in taking care of the Lord’s flock and encouraging one another, but as we do this

we do it with the gospel of God's love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. We need to encourage one another not to neglect this gospel, for God's Word of Grace keeps us in true faith. Apart from God and His Word of Grace our faith will shrink, and shrivel, and finally even die under the press of this world, and the trials of this life.

We also need to commend one another to God in prayer, just as Paul prayed for the Ephesian congregation. As we give of ourselves and our treasures, let us be confident both in our labor for the Lord, and in the knowledge that it is more blessed to give than to receive. What we do and give for the gospel's sake and the advancement of the kingdom of God is not wasted. It is received with appreciation by our Lord, and it is used by Him to achieve His end and goal, the salvation of souls.

What a blessing is ours as we conduct our lives as Jesus instructed us in our gospel lesson this morning. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world (Matthew 5:13,14). When we testify to the truth of our salvation, and share the joy of salvation with others we are letting our light shine, and the Lord will bring the increase. May the Holy Spirit empower us to fulfill Paul's charge, and the mission statement of the church: **Testify to the Gospel of the Grace of God.**

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.