

“Paul’s Tombstone” // Acts 20:17–38

// SENT # 21

I used to lead a thing here called *Men’s Fraternity*, which was basically a life Bible study for guys. (The campus pastors lead it now... it’s an awesome program). But **one of the things I would have the men** do during the semester is write out an epitaph for their tombstone.

(I **would give them some examples** of actual last words and epitaphs written on tombstones, some of which are profound and others ridiculous:

- For example, Leonardo da Vinci’s last words on his deathbed were: *“I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.”* (PERFECTIONIST?)
- Elvis Presley’s last words at a press conference were, “I hope I haven’t bored you.”
- The epitaph on Merv Griffin’s tombstone reads: “I will *not* be right back after this message.”
- From the tombstone of a dentist: “Walter Brown lies here, filling his last cavity.”
- From an unnamed tombstone found in Western North Carolina: “Here lies Pa. Pa liked women. Ma caught Pa, in with two swimmin’. And here lies Pa.”)

But the idea is that what is on **your tombstone should summarize** your life... and it’s **good to think about** your life from that end perspective *now* and start to live your life in light of what you want your tombstone to say. (Kind of **reverse engineer** your life.) Moses, the man of God, said it this way: **Psalm 90:12**, *“So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to learn wisdom.”* (Martin Luther translated that verse into German, “Lord, teach us to think about death so that we might learn how to live.”)

So – What do you on your tombstone? What do you **want the summation of your life to be?**

Today I’m going to give you the **5 things that I believe Paul** would have wanted written on his tombstone. (Of course, **Paul had no real tombstone**. Paul was beheaded by Nero in Rome and scholars say his body was discarded and most likely eaten by dogs.)

But these 5 things are what I believe he *would have wanted* on his tombstone; because Paul gives them in a farewell speech to a group of Ephesian elders in Acts 20 he thinks he’s never going to see again, because he’s about to go to Rome and die—so he summarizes his whole life for them.

- (BTW: this is the **only extended speech** in all of Acts made to Christians—all the other ones are sermons to unbelievers—so this speech gives you a crucial insight into how Luke, the author of Acts, thinks believers should think about their lives).

These are the five things I want said about my life, too. This is the outline for my funeral sermon. (In fact, if you’re taking notes, maybe draw a little tombstone around the place you take notes—these are 5 things that go on it.)

Acts 20:17–38

[7] On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. [8] There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. [9] And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked *still longer*. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.

- This has **nothing to do** with my message today, but I read it because *it is awesome*. This is **why you shouldn’t sleep in church**.
- And, **you think I preach too long sometimes?** Paul started his sermon in the afternoon and preached past midnight and a guy

fell out of his seat and died. Someone says, “You went five minutes over today.” I say, “Did anyone fall out of a window and die? Stop complaining.”

[10] But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.” (This is similar to where Jesus said about the dead girl, “She’s not dead, but sleeping.” And so Paul raises this kid from the dead.) And then (best part)...

[11] And when Paul had gone back up... he conversed with them a while longer, Paul wipes the dead off this kid and *keeps preaching*, until daybreak, and so departed.

[17] Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. [18] And when they came to him, (Ephesus is where Paul had spent the last 3 years), he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, [19] serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; [20] how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, [21] testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[22] And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, [23] except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. [24] But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. [25] And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. [26] Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, [27] for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

[28] Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

[32] 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. [33] I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. [34] You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. [35] In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself 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] And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, [38] being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

5 statements from Paul’s farewell speech:

1. I have been faithful to do what Jesus told me to do (vs. 24)

- Paul says (vs. 24), “My single focus has been and is to do what God has told me to do...” “None of these threats or dangers move me, he says, “I just want to do what Jesus has told me.”
- At the end of the day, that is all that any of us are really responsible for.
- **MY QUESTION: What has Jesus called you to do?** You’re not responsible to save the world; you are responsible to fulfill the assignment(s) Jesus has given to you.
- **There are two ways people really go wrong with this.**

- **Some people** feel like they are responsible to save the world—to **fix their friends**, make sure their **kids turn out right**; save the **poor and the orphan**. So they carry around the weight of these things on their shoulders—and no matter what they do, it is never enough. They're always worried.
- **Other people** never even stop to think that they have been given responsibilities by God.
- **Paul would say it this way: 1 Cor 4:2, "Moreover, what is required of stewards is that they be found faithful."**
 - **A steward is just a servant...** A servant is not in charge of the whole house. The master is. The steward is responsible to do what the Master tells him.
 - **Think of it like a money manager...** If I give my broker a sum of money to invest in a certain company, and the company tanks; he doesn't take the blame; if it succeeds, he doesn't get the credit. He just does what I tell him.
 - **Success and failure are "master" words; faithfulness is the concern of stewards.**
- **What God requires of each of us** is faithfulness in what he has assigned to us.
 - **So to those of you who tend to carry around the weight of too much responsibility...** *What God requires...* Because God can do more with one act of faithfulness than you can accomplish in 10,000 lifetimes on your own.
 - A good example of this we've seen in Acts is Philip. Acts 8...
 - Friend making a big decision: "I almost always evaluated, "Where am I the most valuable; where can I make the biggest impact. After reading Acts: *Where does God want me?*" **Because God can do more through acts** of faithfulness than we can accomplish in 10,000 years of our own effort.
- (When we get to heaven, I think we might be **shocked at the powerful ways** God used the smallest things)
 - **Every once in a while you get a glimpse now... Letter from Amy.** Your faithfulness... It's made me wonder, "What is heaven like?"
 - Maybe **at your college**, you feel like you lost the argument in your classroom; you were humiliated; your commitment to purity makes no difference... but your courage becomes the catalyst to their faith.
 - Sometimes being sold out to Jesus at college is like when you are watching a football game... and in a sea of fans there are 2 people with the opposite color on, screaming their heads off for the other team
 - **At your workplace...**
 - **As a mom or dad**, you'll be shocked to see how God used the smallest acts of faithfulness to make the biggest impact on your kids)
- **(For a servant): Success in life is identifying what God has called you to and being completely faithful in it.**
 - **Our staff each year:** father; husband; friend; witness; pastor; giver. Are you being faithful?
 - Particularly stressful time in my life: **10 things**

Success in life is identifying what God has called you to and being completely faithful in it.

- Chris Gaynor—who is one of our pastors—his mother died last week. Dear saint of God. What Chris said is that there was **nothing particularly extraordinary** about his mother, in terms of talent. In her late 40's she learned that God wanted to use her to disciple other women. How many people think about that as the time to start a ministry? So she began to take women through a discipleship curriculum; **what she did with them was ordinary.** Just discipleship. Didn't write curriculum. Over the last 25 years she has discipled hundreds of women.

- **What do you think she heard when she walked into heaven?** She did what God had told her to do to the day she died. **“Well done, good and faithful servant.”**
- What’s it like to hear that—to look into the face of Jesus—the one who is true, and real, the beginning and end of creation, who loved me and pursued me and died for my sin, and hear him say, “Well done! Good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!”?
 - **What are you looking for on either other side of the grave; and, are you living that way now?**

2. I told the truth (vs. 20, 27)

- Twice Paul says: [20] I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable... [27] I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.
- Paul saw himself as a herald of truth:¹ He wasn’t responsible for the content of the message; or whether people liked it—he’s only responsible to deliver it.
 - **Theologian J.I. Packer:** *“Paul in his own estimation was not a philosopher, not a moralist, not the world’s wisest man, but simply Christ’s herald. Paul’s royal master had given him a message to proclaim. His whole business therefore was to deliver that message with exact and studious faithfulness. He adding nothing, altered nothing, omitted nothing.”*
- And let me show you seriously Paul took this. He says this in vs. 26: **“I am innocent of the blood of all.” (26)**
 - This is a summary of a verse from Ezekiel 33:8, “When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.” (EXPLAIN)

- **The gospel is that the human race stands underneath the judgment of God because of our rebellion;** we are dead in our sin, absolutely helpless, and there’s nothing we can do about that.
 - But **God so loved the world** that he gave his only son, who did for us what we could never do for ourselves by living... if you humble yourself to admit you are a rebel deserving of judgment, and receive his grace as your only hope, you will be saved
 - I’m not responsible for how you respond to that; I’m responsible for making sure you understand it.
 - **Guy who left our church**—You always talking about sin, I feel bad... I’m not responsible for you liking it... only for making it clear. **I’ve got to make the path clear!** Telling you that you are dead in sin; depraved; worthy of judgment; our only hope in the grace of God may not get me on Oprah; but I have to make it clear.
- **Have you been clear with your friends and family about God’s word to them?**
 - Understand... This doesn’t mean you have **made them all believe**... or that you **grind them** into the ground—that it’s **all you talk about** every time you see them; you’ve always got your finger in their face: TURN OR BURN! **All Paul said was, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”** He hadn’t persuaded them all; he was leaving with a lot of them unconverted. **But he had been clear.**
 - *That’s the question: Have you been clear with them?*
- **And notice: What characterized Paul’s attitude was tears, not anger. Vs. 19: I was with you in tears. Vs. 31: I did not cease to admonish you night and day “with tears.”**
 - **For many of us, our attitude toward friends and family who don’t know Jesus toggles between apathy and anger.**
 - *Does your presentation of the truth flow with tears?*
 - **“If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them**

¹ 1 Tim 2:7

perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for.” Charles Spurgeon

- Shouldn't this be true of our city—let not one; your friends. God help us if someone in our family goes unwarned, unprayed for.
- **What makes you cry?** Do you weep over your lost friends and family? Do they know that? Do you weep over nations and villages that are lost without the good news of Jesus?
- **Illus.** I was leading a prayer time once on campus... “Not right to pray...” And the guy left to get his friend and brought him back before the prayer meeting was over. Some of you need to do that this afternoon.

3. I directed people's attention toward Jesus, not toward me (v. 19)

- [19] I served the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials.
 - That's **not typically** how great leaders describe themselves, is it? We want our leaders to be **people of “victory, power and joy.”**
 - But Paul says, “I am a man of **humility, trials, and tears.**” In fact, **that word, “humility” in vs. 19** (often translated weakness), was a common one in Greek, and it was **almost always** an insult. It meant low, defeated, weak...
 - But the word is used **200 times** in the Bible, and it's almost always considered a virtue.
 - **Why does an insult outside of the gospel become a virtue inside of it? Because Christian ministry is not about extraordinary men and women of great character worthy to be praised, but about a great Savior who can save the weakest, and most broken, and most guilty of sinners.**
- Paul doesn't want to leave them with an example of admire but a Savior to trust in.

- *“A humble and weak person will show a crucified savior better to a listener than a polished, pulled together expert. Because that's how it happened for us: we weren't saved by pulling ourselves together, but by admitting we were sinners and calling on the one who was pulled apart for us.” Tim Keller*

- I want people's attention to be on Jesus, not me, so rather than tell you how awesome I am—not true; why not help you see how weak I am and how awesome Jesus is.
- **“Tears and trials,” which Paul mentions there, are how God ensures** we live that way.
 - Tears and trials are how God keeps us weak in ourselves so we can be strong in him.
- **I think about how much different today's religious leaders are presented.** Today we say, “Great religious leaders are people of power, triumph, positivity, and happiness.” *Is it possible that the ones that God sees as great leaders, and the ones we see as great leaders, are different?*

4. I finished strong (vs. 24)

- After explaining that the Holy Spirit has told him that only beating and imprisonments await him in the future, Paul says, (vs. 24), *“...but none of these things move me, if only I may **finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus.**” (24)*
- Many people start well, but they don't persevere on to finish. They are like one-hit Christian wonders. The Milli Vanilli of Christians.
- I see **3 things that** often **keep people from finishing strong: A. Pain:** *The people you are ministering to don't appreciate it.* God's not rewarding you with success. It's easy to quit. Paul experienced that: he had been taken advantage of; forgotten about; betrayed; ripped off. **B. Fatigue:** *The sense that it's just not working.* No one is listening. Paul was like that. His sermons sometimes ended in two people who agreed to hear him further... sometimes they ended with people trying to stone him.
 - **But in both of these things, Paul kept going.**

- **Why?** Paul understood how the gospel worked. Jesus' ministry had ended in sorrow and death, but God brought a resurrection.
- **So Paul tells** his congregation in 1 Cor 15 to be steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because their labor is not in vain, and **even when it doesn't look like things are working**, the God who brought resurrection out of Jesus' work will bring resurrection out of theirs.
- Here's the main reason people have trouble finishing: **C. Divided hearts:** You want to complete the assignment that Jesus gave to you, but other things start pulling at your heart:
 - *"I want to follow Jesus, but I love comfort... so I won't do that" "I want to do what Jesus says, but I also want to live here, own that. So, no to Jesus for a while." I want to follow Jesus, but I want to be with her." "I want to stand with Jesus, but I really need their approval."*
 - **Those divided loves keep us from finishing. ILLUS: I realized this about myself the other day...** God has called us to plant churches... My open hands with our church planters. My problem is that I am divided.
 - Some of you made a **faith commitment** to All-In...
- Here's a verse to pray: **Ps 86:11**, "Give me an undivided heart that I might fear your name."
 - Paul said, "None of these things move me. I just want to finish well and hear, 'Well done...'"
 - **I don't need your approval.** I live for an audience of ONE. If God is for me, who can be against me.
 - **I don't need your money.** My God has promised to supply my every need in Christ Jesus.
 - **I don't need to give myself to pleasure**, because in his presence is the fullness of joy and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore.
- *Paul didn't want just to start well; he wanted to finish well.*
 - I feel like this is the biggest thing I teach my kids: Finish the project. Your carrots. Good for us parents, too!

- College students: finish school
- Mothers... see your life as chapters; finish each one well.
- Men, you feel bored leading your family, using your career to bless others and spread the gospel: FINISH. Don't be one of those ridiculous guys who gets bored in life in his 50's, buys a sports car, unbuttons his shirt down to his navel, which makes us want to vomit, and then plays golf all the time. FINISH!
- ((LET ME SAY ONE REALLY PRACTICAL THING: Where do you get the strength to finish? Not by looking far ahead. By looking at the next step.
 - This day; that day.
 - Lone survivor; Morgan Doherty.
 - God will give you strength to take the next step!))

5. I gave more than I took

- "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel... by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (20:33, 35)
- Paul thought of a successful, blessed life as one in which you gave more than you took. Why? Because that's what Jesus had said and done.
 - **On the night before he died**, Jesus had washed the disciples feet. If I knew I was about to die, for you, the night before I would have been like, "Look, this is me time." But, even then, "The Son of man comes not to be served, but to serve."
- *Jesus always gave more than he took.* That's a **good question to ask** in any relationship you are in: do you give more than you take?
 - **In your marriage—**
 - **Do you serve your spouse** more than you expect them to serve you? Guys: **Whose preferences** do you think more about? Ladies: **Whose comfort and happiness** are you more devoted to?

- **Brad Hambrick** says that Acts 20:35, “It is more blessed...” is the best sex therapy counseling you’ll find in the Bible! *And that was an application from this passage you weren’t expecting—but Acts is all about getting into the missionary position.*
- **In what you do with your career and your moneymaking potential:** Who is it for? Is it about taking all that you can? Or are you asking how can I leverage my career and my money to give to the mission of God?
 - We encourage this with you a lot—**God gave you your career as a platform** to bless others and extend his mission! *It’s not just that God called a few of us into “vocational” ministry and the rest of you are to go make money, **serve yourselves, and tithe.*** Every job is to be leveraged for the Great commission.
 - And the **money you make from it:** for followers of Jesus, **we don’t work so that at the end of the day** we can have more money in our pockets, but so that we can give more. *Greater financial capacity should increase our standard of giving, not just our standard of living.*
- **In your friendships:** do you give more than you take?
- **In how you relate to your parents:**
- **In how you see your retirement:**
 - **Is retirement a destination** where you can finally make it all about you? Live at the beach. Play golf.
 - **When Christians talk like that I always want to say, “Do you understand the gospel?”** It is more blessed to give than to receive. Which means that if you have achieved financial independence, that is more time you pour our more freely for God’s kingdom without being a financial burden on people.
- **What you’re doing with your money in retirement:** I heard an older, rich man say recently, “I want to give the biggest gift of all at my death.”
- **Why did Paul think this way?** Why did Paul want to give to others more than he took? Because there was one relationship in which Paul would always take more than he could give.
 - **It is interesting to compare Paul’s journey toward Jerusalem to Jesus’s.** Like Paul, Jesus had set his face to go toward Jerusalem with his friends begging him not to go. But **Paul went to Jerusalem with the love** and companionship of his friends. Jesus was forsaken by every friend and went into the trial alone. **In his hour of trial, Paul had the comfort of the Holy Spirit in his heart**—and he would say, “My God has stood beside me all the way and he will never leave me or forsake me.” But in Jesus’ hour of trial, Jesus prayed, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
 - **Jesus had given up far more for Paul than he would ever take from Paul.** And how could Paul repay Jesus for that? We can’t. Jesus said that when we have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” (Luke 17:10)
 - So, because I can never repay Jesus for what he’s done, I want every relationship I have on earth to be characterized more than giving than taking. With my **wife**. My **kids**. My **parents**. My **friends**. My **career**. My **wealth**. My **resources**.

5 things on your tombstone:

- I have been faithful to do all that Jesus told me to do
- I told the truth
- I directed people’s attention toward Jesus, not toward me
- I finished strong
- I gave more than I took

This is an excellent funeral sermon—start writing it now!

Psalm 90:12: *Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to learn wisdom!*