

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermon series titled, □ “The Church that Changed the World.” It is a study through the New Testament book of Acts.

Our text for today is □ Acts 20:17-38. From this text we are going to learn about how to be a godly leader. We are going to consider the traits of Christlike leadership and how they are lived out in everyday life.



Some of you may not think of yourselves as a leader, but you may be one without realizing it.

- If you are a parent, you are a leader, no matter how old your children are.
- If you are a teacher of any kind, you are a leader.
- If you have held your job longer than other people with whom you work, you are a leader.
- If you have younger siblings, you are a leader.
- If you supervise anyone, you are a leader.
- If you are older than others in your youth group, you are a leader.
- If you are a husband, you are a leader.
- If you are responsible for the wellbeing of someone else, you are a leader.

I am trying to show that our text about leadership is broadly relevant because many of us are leaders in one way or another.

And besides, we can all benefit from learning about godly leadership because, even if you don't happen to be a leader right now, knowing what godly leaders look like is important in deciding who to follow.

Cathy and I have recently been watching some documentaries about fallen leaders from churches and parachurch organizations—leaders who seemed like cool shepherds, but eventually revealed themselves to be more like wolves. Many in their respective flocks may have been spared a lot of pain and disillusionment had they chosen who to follow based on a biblical template instead of a more emotional one, like “this guy is fly.”

The setting for our story today is the coastal city of Miletus, as shown on  this map. Paul is on his third missionary journey, and is headed for Jerusalem, but he has stopped in Miletus to do something important.  Acts 20:17 says of Paul,

ESV Acts 20:17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

You may recall that Paul had planted the church in Ephesus on his second missionary journey. On this third journey, Paul had spent many months ministering in Ephesus. He left Ephesus at the heels of an uproar incited by silversmiths who viewed Paul as a threat to their idol-making business and an insult to their patron goddess, Artemis.

Having left Ephesus, Paul had traveled through Macedonia and Greece, and it is now nearly a year later. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul sails past Ephesus because time is of the essence, and he doesn't have the time

to deal with his old adversaries there. Nevertheless, he calls for the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him in Miletus before he leaves. The elders are the leaders of the church—the ones Paul has probably had a hand in saving, discipling, and choosing. □ Verse 18 says,

ESV Acts 20:18 And when they came to him, 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,”

This is the beginning of a unique discourse. It is the only speech in all the book of Acts presented exclusively to believers. It is a farewell address to brothers Paul will never see again this side of glory. Paul’s purpose is to exhort these elders to step up to their role as godly leaders.

Paul is going to summarize how he himself had lived among them, presenting himself as a model for godly leadership.

At first blush, this may seem arrogant. But Paul is not trying to puff himself up. He is trying to build these elders up. And at this point in history, presenting himself as a role model is Paul’s best option among limited alternatives.

The elders he is addressing are the most seasoned, mature Christians in Ephesus, and yet they have been believers for just a few years. And it is likely that none of these elders has ever laid eyes on Jesus, who died about 25 years earlier, 700 miles away. They have no other human models besides Paul.

And Paul can’t just say, “Read your Bible to find church leadership principles” because only about 7 of 27 books of the New Testament had been written at this point in history and none of them were gospel

accounts of the life of Jesus.¹ And the Ephesians likely do not yet have access to all 7 of the letters that had been written.

So, Paul goes with what he has: himself as a role model for leadership the Ephesian elders are to follow. How Paul had lived among them is something they already know. Paul merely has to remind them. Beginning in □ verse 19, Paul recounts how he lived . . .

ESV Acts 20:19 “serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews;”

First, we see that, above all, Paul is □ “serving the Lord.” His ultimate authority for what is right, for what is true, and for what is required is God. Paul is fully surrendered to believing whatever the Lord says is true and doing whatever the Lord would have him do.

This is the counter-cultural paradox of Christlike leadership. A godly leader is a servant.

I suspect Paul starts with the idea of servanthood because that is an overarching theme of his leadership. The leading idea from his speech, and indeed, the big idea of this sermon is this: □ A godly leader is a servant.

This idea is reflected in the person and work of Jesus himself.

In □ John 6:38, Jesus says,

ESV John 6:38 “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.”

¹ Wayne House, “A Chronology of the Apostolic Age,” in *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*, p. 127

Jesus serves not his own purposes, but the purposes of his heavenly Father.

In □ Mark 10:45, Jesus goes on to say,

ESV Mark 10:45 “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The leadership paradigm of Jesus is to serve, not to be served. Jesus serves the interests of his Father, and his Father’s interests are tied to the best interests of the people he created and loves. And so, in service to others, Jesus gives his life to pay for sin that many might be saved through faith.

And Jesus’s teaching also reflects this servant leadership ethic. In □ Matthew 23:11, Jesus says,

ESV Matthew 23:11 “The greatest among you shall be your servant.”

So, back in □ Acts 20:19, it is not surprising that we see Paul “serving the Lord.” It is what godly leaders do. They are servants.

In the rest of Paul’s speech, he fleshes out what that looks like, beginning in the last part of □ verse 19, where he describes himself as serving the Lord “with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.”

Godly leadership is not about pridefully enjoying the perks of privilege. It is about humbly enduring the pain of servanthood. Any parent who is doing her utmost before God to serve the best interests of her children will tell you it is a humbling, tearful, trial-filled experience. That is the nature of godly leadership.

That is not to throw shade on parenting or godly leadership. Leading is vital and can be tremendously fulfilling. But there is a cost. There is the sacrificial giving of oneself so that others can flourish. And it is not for the faint-hearted.

In □ verse 20, Paul continues,

ESV Acts 20:20 “how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,”

Paul is determined to convey what is profitable, not necessarily what is popular. The suggestion here is that some things that are profitable are not popular; hence, a leader might be tempted to shrink away from declaring such unpopular things, and to instead pander to his followers.

But Paul is saying, “I didn’t tell you what you *wanted* to hear; I told you what you *needed* to hear for your own good.”

In □ verse 21, Paul conveys the substance of his teaching—teaching which is not always popular.

ESV Acts 20:21 “testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It seems to me that all leaders, whether they are religious or not, deal in the two things mentioned here: □ repentance and faith. Repentance and faith are a leader’s stock-in-trade.

The word “repentance” in our text comes from the original Greek verb, μετανοέω (*meta-no-EH-o*). It’s a combination of two words. *Meta*

means “after,” implying some kind of change.² *No-EH-o* means to think or to perceive.³ So, the primary meaning of “repent” is to change one’s mind.⁴ And most often it is a change of mind that leads to a change in behavior.⁵

The Phoenix Suns just hired a new coach. I would argue that he is going to be preaching repentance. He is going to be trying to get his players to change their thinking about what it is going to take to win a championship, and to change their play accordingly. That is a form of repentance.

He is also going to be preaching faith. His players are going to have to believe in the system—to buy into it; otherwise, it is not going to work.

Paul’s leadership also is about repentance and faith, but with a different, higher focus. Most often, the Bible uses the term “repent” or “repentance” to signify a change of mind in a direction away from sin and toward God.⁶ So, the biblical command to repent is normally a command to get right with God. To turn from sin toward God. To seek relational harmony with him. And that is how Paul is using it here.

Is the idea of repentance always popular? Decidedly not.

² W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, unabridged ed., s.v. “repent, μετανοέω,” (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.).

³ Ibid.

⁴ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “μετανοέω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁵ Friberg, s.v. “μετάνοια.”

⁶ Some scholars argue that, in a few isolated cases, repentance may actually be synonymous with faith, on the thinking that the change of mind is from unbelief to belief. While that may be true, that is not the usual meaning of repentance in the Bible.

So, why would Paul urge people to repent if they're not going to like it? Because it is in their best interest to do so. Servant leaders want the best for people and do what they can to bring it about.

Here in verse 21, Paul also testifies concerning "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." To believe in the person and work of Christ is necessary to receive eternal life. In John 14:6, Jesus says,

ESV John 14:6 . . . "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Is this exclusive idea popular? Not in many circles. Not in ancient Ephesus. Not in modern Phoenix.

So, why would Paul urge people to believe in Jesus? Because it is in their best interest to do so. Servant leaders want the best for people and do what they can to bring it about.

In our culture, all this may sound like a rationalization for being a jerk. It's not. Not unless you consider Jesus a jerk. John 1:14 tells us that Jesus is full of grace and truth. We like the grace. But we don't always like the truth. But Jesus embodies both, and godly leaders like Paul are committed to both. Not because they want to wield power or to manipulate, but because a godly leader is a servant, serving God and the best interests of people.

In □ verses 22 and 23, Paul shifts from the past to future, explaining what lies ahead.

ESV Acts 20:22 “And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,”

□ ESV Acts 20:23 “except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.”

As a part of being a servant leader, Paul is bound to do what the Spirit of God compels him to do, come what may. He is prepared for hardship. He expects opposition. In fact, godly leaders are guaranteed it. In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul says, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Pain is the price of godly leadership. But it is pain for gain, in the likeness of Jesus Christ. In □ verse 24, he reveals his laser focus on his God-given mission.

ESV Acts 20:24 “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.”

That’s Paul’s way of saying, “I am not too concerned about feathering my own nest here on earth. My primary concern is to bring the life of Jesus to this world. I am on a mission, not a cruise.”

I ask myself, “Can I say that with Paul and mean it?”

My honest answer is, “Not always.” Sometimes I fail. At times, I am selfish and not a servant.

I suspect that Paul would make the same confession. Just months prior to the speech to the Ephesian elders in Miletus, Paul wrote his letter to

the Romans in which he confessed his ongoing struggle with sin, saying, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”⁷

Despite his weakness and stumbling—things all godly leaders have in common—Paul keeps repenting and reupping for his God-given mission.

So, in our text, Paul is not patting himself on the back for some pretense of perfection. He is calling the elders of Ephesus to his side. He wants them to be godly leaders who themselves serve the mission all believers share: to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. There is no better news. There is no greater good. There is no higher call.

In □ verse 25, Paul takes a poignant turn, saying,

ESV Acts 20:25 “And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.”

I imagine these are not easy words to say. Paul probably has to choke back his emotions to finish his speech. In that moment, his heart is heavy, but his conscience is clear. Because he has carried out his assignment. In □ verses 26 and 27, he explains,

ESV Acts 20:26 “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.”

Paul had not cherry-picked the word of God, sharing only parts that are pleasing or palatable. Once again, he did not shrink from declaring the

⁷ Romans 7:15.

whole counsel of God, even the parts that made some squirm, even the parts that got him run out of town or beaten or cancelled.

A sobering aspect of this verse for me is that, to the extent that I do shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God, to the extent that I do pander just to please people, I will not be innocent. I will be held accountable for it by God.

Now, Paul turns his focus to the elders as he passes the leadership baton. In □ verse 28, he says,

ESV Acts 20:28 “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 obtained with his own blood.”

This could easily be the theme verse for the elders of Moon Valley.

Some parts of the verse are not surprising. Elders are to care for the flock, the church of God, which Jesus Christ bought with his own blood. The implication is that the elders, as godly leaders and overseers, ought to be willing to protect and nurture the church at great cost to themselves.

What may not be expected is the command to □ “pay careful attention to yourselves.” One of the most important traits of a godly leader is self-awareness, because we all have the capacity to fool ourselves, especially as leaders. We can twist our position of power and influence to be self-serving, rationalizing that we deserve it, or we are an exception, or we are entitled, or we are somehow better than others. And we can end up fleecing followers instead of serving them.

Godly leaders must pay careful attention to themselves.

In □ verses 29 and 30, Paul warns,

ESV Acts 20:29 “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

□ ESV Acts 20:30 “and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

The most sobering part of this is the phrase, □ “from among your own selves,” which suggests that one or more of the very elders present will do the twisting, will be fooled, will become self-serving, and will do damage, drawing away disciples after them.

We hear of religious organizations today that try to cover up the transgressions of their leaders—leaders who exploit the people they are supposed to serve.

As a godly leader, Paul does the opposite. He calls out the abuse. He admits that we are all susceptible, including his closest partners and friends. And he charges leaders to guard against it. In □ verse 31, he warns,

ESV Acts 20:31 “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”

His tears are those of a godly leader whose heart breaks at the thought of leadership abuse, especially spiritual leadership abuse.

Then Paul gives a benediction to the Ephesian elders in □ verse 32, saying,

ESV Acts 20:32 “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.”

Here Paul emphasizes the centrality of God and the word of his grace, both written and incarnate. It is God’s grace that builds and motivates us as believers, as we look ahead to our inheritance in heaven. As godly leaders, we are not to be driven by lesser things.

Then Paul gives an example of such lesser things in □ verses 33 through 35, where he says,

ESV Acts 20:33 “I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel.”

□ ESV Acts 20:34 “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.”

□ ESV Acts 20:35 “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.’”

By example, Paul teaches that godly leaders are not greedy or entitled or lazy. Instead, they work hard. The emphasis of godly leadership is on giving, not receiving. This flies in the face modern prosperity preachers who flaunt their opulence as a sign of God’s favor. These are wolves, not shepherds.

Our story ends poignantly in □ verses 36 through 38.

ESV Acts 20:36 And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

- ESV Acts 20:37 And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him,

- ESV Acts 20:38 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.

This brings us back around to the big idea: □ A godly leader is a servant. And we are left to consider how we apply this to our own lives.

If you are like me, there may be a temptation to be discouraged and overwhelmed by the example and ideals presented by Paul. We can see that they are good, but we sense that we are not. We think we are not good enough to step up to such godly leadership. And so, we chalk this up to a message for other people.

But the thing is, godly leadership and servanthood is not so much about ability. It is more about availability—making ourselves available to God as his servant, moment by moment, waiting for his prompting, and then obeying by faith, as God directs.

Godly leadership is not a one-time, monumental move. It is small ball for the long haul. And we can all start with something simple.

Borrowing the words of Paul in verse 32, “I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up.” Today and this week, review the word of God’s grace represented in our text. You could use the questions for reflection and application on the back of the sermon notes. They are also emailed daily to those on our distribution list.

And as you chew on God's word in our text, here is a suggested prayer also printed in your sermon notes: "Lord, I am available to be your servant today. Show me one step you want me to take, and give me the strength to take it."

Would you be willing to reflect on our text and pray that prayer? Who knows how God may lead? Don't be surprised if it seems pretty ordinary and not heroic.

You may be prompted to introduce yourself to someone new as a show of kindness. Or to listen more actively and attentively with genuine curiosity. Or to not shrink away from sharing the truth someone needs to hear for their own good. Or to drop a gracious note to someone who doesn't particularly deserve it. Or to volunteer to serve. Or to build up another by pointing out something specific you admire. Or to prayerfully reflect on the state of your own heart. Or to confess and repent of self-centeredness.

If we persevere in prayerfully making ourselves available to serve the Lord, we are well on our way to becoming godly leaders.

Let's pray. Lord, we are available to be your servants today. Show us one step you want us to take, and give us the strength to take it. Amen.