



Pastor Kyle Mercer  
Lessons From a Lifetime of Mission

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Series: One

Acts 20:17-38

**BIG IDEA – SIX DECLARATIONS OF A MISSIONAL LIFE**

All right, guys. I missed you over the last two weeks. Pastor Nate and Pastor Carlos did an incredible job. Over the last two or three weeks, I've had the opportunity to get away with our staff pastors. There are eight of us. We got away, and we were doing some planning. Whenever we do that, we plan the next six months in pen, and then the six months after that in pencil, and we really talk about what we're doing.

I come to you today with as clear a vision of the future for our church as I've ever had, guys. I've been saying it for a long time, but we make and mobilize disciples in an environment of prayer and worship. That's what we do. This initiative ends today, but it's really just the beginning. I just want to encourage you guys. We're getting it done. We are not the same place we were eight weeks ago.

We're taking personal risks to bring Christ to every relationship. We are praying. We are guessing. We are going. We are taking personal responsibility for the Great Commission. I'm hearing a lot of you talk about your one. You know, "I'm praying for my one" or "Pray for me this week. I've got a conversation with my one." A few of you have actually brought someone up to me and said, "Hey, I want you to meet Joe. He's my one."

So, the first thing I want you to hear is "Well done." Really. We have made a lot of progress, and we're growing in this area, but I want you to hear the second thing. So, two things I want to say at the beginning before we pray: "Well done" and "We're not done." This is just the beginning. We can't be in the ONE Initiative series for 142 weeks. We have to go to other parts of Scripture. There are a lot of other things to cover. Really, this is not the finish line; this is the starting line.

I just want to encourage you, because we've heard some stories, and I'm sure we'll show some videos eventually of people's ones coming to Christ through this series, but a lot of you just began the conversations. A lot of you are maybe even a little discouraged, because you tried a few things and they didn't work. Here's what I want to say, and then we're going to pray: God is not done with your one.

What you heard in that video just continue to believe. I believe it's true. Because you're in their life, that means God is at work in their life. So, one last time, we're going to pray for our ones, and then we're going to look at Acts, chapter 20, and close this series together. It has been a great spiritual journey. They say it's one thing to do something you love; it's another thing to do something you love with people you love. Two Cities Church, I love you. Let's pray.

Lord, I'm grateful for our church, grateful for how people are taking personal responsibility for the Great Commission, grateful for how people have identified at least one relationship and have begun to take a gospel risk to bring Christ to that relationship.

I pray, whether it's through the wristbands we have on, that we would not forget to pray for those who are far from God and close to us. I pray that we'd continue to take risks, to ask questions, to invite people, to start Bible studies, and just to be very intentional and deliberate in our relationships. We pray this in Jesus' name. And all God's people said, "Amen."

Guys, what's your favorite Bible verse? Don't yell it out. What's your favorite Bible passage or what's your favorite book of the Bible? I know all Scripture is inspired. We believe in the total truthfulness of Scripture. But there are just certain portions and parts that jump out, and you go, "That's my life verse."

For some people, it's Jeremiah 29:11. "I know the plans I have for you." For some people, it's a chapter. It's like Romans 8, the filet mignon of the Bible. They just love Romans 8. For certain people it's Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd." "It just speaks to me. If I could just have one portion of the Bible, it would be that."

Well, for me, it's Acts 20:17-38. This is the apostle Paul's farewell speech. It's Paul's parting words. You'll see this in a minute. What's interesting about the book of Acts is most of Paul's speeches in the book of Acts fall into two categories. The first category is early in the book of Acts, and it's a bunch of evangelistic preaching. He goes into the synagogue. He goes into the marketplace. He defends the faith. That's apologetics. It's a lot of Paul speaking to unbelievers.

Then the last third of the book, after this chapter on, is Paul defending himself in court. That's really what happens in chapters 21-28. It's a bunch of Paul defending

himself in court. This is the only speech or sermon or lecture we have from the apostle Paul specifically to Christians. It's not just Paul the evangelist. We love that. It's Paul the pastor, and it's Paul the leader. I'll show you.

Turn to verse 17. He calls a meeting. Look here. "**Now from Miletus...**" That's going to be about 40 miles from Ephesus. "**...he sent to Ephesus...**" Ephesus is a place he spent three years. That's the longest time he ever spent anywhere, and Timothy is going to later pastor that church.

"**...and called the elders...**" Those are the spiritual leaders of the church who uniquely represent and are responsible for the church. We don't know how many elders they had. We have 22 elders in this church. "**...to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them...**" We're going to look at his speech in a second, but I want you to notice something.

Paul had something called *convening authority*. You go, "What is that?" It's the ability to call a gathering and people actually show up. There's positional authority. *Positional authority* is like, "I have authority over you because I'm your boss." Then there's convening authority, which comes out of the way you live your life. Paul had moral authority. Paul was the kind of guy other people wanted to be around.

For some reason (I don't know why; we don't get all of the answers), Paul didn't have time to go to Ephesus. He's on his third missionary journey. He knows (we'll see this a little bit later) his time is short. He understands something that we all understand. As go the leaders of a church, so goes the church.

So he gets the leaders, and here's what he's going to do. He's going to talk about his past, his present, and his future. You'll see this. He's going to say, "This is how I lived, this is what I'm currently doing, and this is where I'm going." That's what he's going to do. This is a unique message for us at the end of this series.

I'm going to give you six statements from Paul's life that should define your life. Paul is so autobiographical, and he's so personal. He's going to open up, and he's going to tell us how he lived. Basically (this is really neat), we get to look in and learn together, at the end of this series, lessons from a lifetime of mission.

Why is this important? Because if we're going to be a missional church, if we're going to be on mission where we live, learn, work, and play, if we're going to fulfill the Great Commission that Jesus gave us, we're going to need more than an eight-week series. We're going to need to embrace these statements.

Now, they're so important... I almost never (I don't even remember the last time I did this) put anything on the screen. So, both of you who take notes are going to really

enjoy this today. I put all six statements on the screen because I want you to see them. But first I want you to see them in the passage. They arise out of Scripture.

## **01 I WILL LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN FRONT OF OTHERS**

The first declaration Paul makes is in verse 18, continued. *"You yourselves..."* He's speaking to the elders. *"...know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia..."* Here's the first statement that I hope you're going to embrace for the rest of your life: *"I will live the Christian life in front of others."*

"I will no longer be a silent Christian. I will no longer allow the only people at work who know I'm a Christian to be Jesus and me. I will decide today to be highly relational and explicitly Christian." I hate to break it to me, but people would rather see a sermon than hear a sermon.

Here's the thing. Here's how Christianity works. Christianity is a belief system and a way of life. It's both. Our temptation is sometimes to think, "Well, Christianity is a belief system." I mean, we're Bible. Right? We're Bible people, and then we have creeds, and we have confessions, and we have doctrinal statements, and a lot of our pastors go to seminary.

We believe all of these deep things about God and Jesus and heaven and hell. That's all true, but it's a belief system that should lead to a way of life. Okay? In fact, the only way you know what you believe is you have to watch how you behave. We've talked about this before, but it's worth just one minute on this. You're the most complex thing on earth, so you probably don't know what you believe.

Why do people need to go to therapy? Why do people go to counseling? Why do people get entire PhDs in things like anthropology and psychology? Because we don't know what we believe. So, how do you know what you believe? The only way to know what you believe is to watch yourself like a stranger and watch how you behave.

It's very easy to be like, "Yeah, I believe everything I own is really from God on loan. I really believe in stewardship." It's like, "Okay. But wait a second. If I act like everything is my own, and I'm not storing up treasure in heaven, and I live my life like this is the only life..." You have to have that conversation. "I don't really believe." You have to go, "God, help me."

Those of us who are Christians say, "Yeah, we know other people need to hear about Jesus so they can escape the wrath of God," but if we tell nobody, then we have to have the honest conversation with ourselves. "Okay. I guess I don't believe that. I've

got to figure out what I believe, because this is not how I'm behaving. And I need to deepen my beliefs, because my beliefs will show up in my behavior."

Okay. Maybe ask yourself this question...*What life are you living in front of others?* Let me just tell you. Here's what you're probably doing. Unless you're super intentional, and you're thinking about it, and you're trying to be an explicit Christian, you're probably doing what is called *expressive individualism*. This is what every American does. It's on autopilot unless you think differently.

*Expressive individualism* is "I need to figure out who I am on the inside, and then I need to show everybody who I am by expressing that on the outside. That's why I live in the neighborhood I do...because it says something. That's why I drive the car I drive...because it says something. That's why I wear the clothes I wear, and that's why I'm at the country club I'm at. I do everything to try to express to others how I feel and who I am on the inside."

What life are you living in front of your kids? Those of you who have kids, there's only so much we can do in an hour of kids' ministry. We have an incredible kids' ministry and an incredible student ministry, but if you bring your kids and drop them off at those events, but then they go home, and what you live in front of them, really, is consumerism and materialism, I can't preach good enough to make up for your bad example. I just can't.

So, we have to be honest. What life are we living in front of others? Well, Paul tells us. I'll show you. He doesn't leave us alone. You might say, "Paul, how? How do I live a Christian life?" Look at what he says. He says, "This is my life." Verse 19: ***"...serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews..."***

Paul tells us for a second his motive. That's the interesting thing. I can see your actions. I know you're all here, and I know you all came to church today, but I have no... I mean, there are hundreds of different motives as to why you came across this room. We get in trouble because we assume and judge people's motives. We only know someone's motive if they honestly tell it to us. Paul says, "Guys, I want to tell you my motive for living the Christian life. It's to serve the Lord."

Now, just to clarify, if you're new here, Paul is not saying, "I serve the Lord so I get to go to heaven." He's not like, "I'm serving the Lord, and I'm just going to serve the Lord and hope God accepts my service and, therefore, lets me into heaven." No. Paul's whole theology is "God served me in Jesus Christ at great cost to himself. The cross of Christ was God's service toward me, his sinless life and his substitutionary death, and in response, now what I want to do is serve the Lord."

Now listen. How do you serve the Lord? You serve God by serving people. That's it. James talks about this. You serve the God you don't see and can't see by serving people you do see. You serve God by serving people who are made in his image. What a motive, guys. I think, at the end of the day, you could summarize all motives into two categories: *guilt* or *conviction*.

We try to preach and teach and lead in such a way here that your motive should not be guilt. "I just feel so terrible all the time, and I feel so bad; therefore, I have to do... I don't want to show up to Community Group and have nothing to say. We're doing this ONE Initiative, so I guess I should probably be a part of it." That's guilt. Conviction is something deeper.

Paul says, "I serve the Lord," and he gives us three words: *humility*, *tears*, and *trials*. *Humility* is actually the word *lowly*. Here's what that means. Paul says, "I feel in debt to other people because of how gracious God has been to me." We can't pay God back, obviously. That's not the gospel. God did everything. Maybe another way to say it is God doesn't need your good deeds, but other people in your life do.

Paul never got over the grace of God in his life, so he said, "God has given me so much grace, I want to serve other people." But then he says *tears*. It's very interesting that Paul would use *crying* as one of the three words to define his ministry. I think he means, "Guys, I am emotionally invested. This is so important to me."

Remember, in Romans 9, Paul cries. He goes, "I'm weeping over my Jewish brothers and sisters who don't know Jesus, and I would rather be cut off and accursed and go to hell if they would all believe." Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians and said, "I write this to you with tears." Even writing his letters he would cry. He'd be brokenhearted over them. Paul said in Philippians 3, "I write this right now with tears in my eyes: many live as enemies of the cross of Christ."

So, here's the first thing Paul said. We have to decide this today. You just have to say, "You know what? When I wake up, at my home, at my work, in my neighborhood, I will live the Christian life in front of others," because people need an explanation of the gospel and an example of the gospel. People cannot believe in something they've never heard and never seen.

## **02 I WILL TELL THE TRUTH...EVEN WHEN IT IS HARD**

The second one he says in verse 20. He's going on about his life. "***...how I did not shrink...***" That's to be small and silent. "***...from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house...***" Are you ready

for the second statement that I hope will define your life? *"I will tell you the truth even when it's hard."*

Notice Paul says, "I didn't shrink." To say it positively, Paul is saying, "I was courageous." G.K. Chesterton, a famous Catholic thinker (and I think he's right on this), said that courage is the virtue on which all of the other virtues sit and stand. If you think about it... You want to share the gospel with your mom, but you're like... Why are you struggling to share the gospel with your mom? The number-one reason is you don't have the courage to do it.

Okay. You need to confess a sin to somebody, just one person. Why haven't you confessed sin? You don't have the courage to do it. You need to be reconciled to somebody in your life, and you know you need to initiate that conversation, but why haven't you done it? Well, there are a lot of reasons, and there are a lot of virtues, but you don't have the courage.

Paul says, "I had the courage to tell you the truth." In a couple more verses he's going to say, "I told you the entire counsel of God." So, we have to be committed to telling people not what they *want* to hear but what they *need* to hear. For some of you, there are certain topics you completely avoid.

You never talk about hell. You never talk about judgment. You never talk about a New Testament sexual ethic, because you know... You're like, "That's not what they want to hear," even though that might be what they need to hear. Paul says that in the last days... That's this time period. Now, are we in the last days of the last days? I don't know, but we're in the last days according to the Bible.

He says in the last days people will seek out teachers for themselves who will tell them what they want to hear. That has always been true, but it has never been easier than today. If you want to live some lifestyle, you'll find some podcast where he or she will tell you it's okay. You'll find a YouTube channel that'll tell you it is great. You'll find a social media account that will affirm you in your worldliness. You'll find a *New York Times* best-selling book that will tell you exactly what you want to hear.

Let me give you an example. This happens in our church. A couple will come to the Weekender, and we're like, "Wait a second. They have two last names, and they live at one address. Okay. They're cohabitating together." We will always try to, lovingly, have a conversation with them. "Hey, listen. This is sin. This is actually what used to be called *living in sin*, literally. This goes against what God's Word says." We try to have this conversation.

Do you know what happens almost every time we do it? Do you think they repent? No. They make a lot of excuses. "Well, it's more affordable, and *this* is why." Then they

leave, and they go to a church that affirms them in their cohabitation. See, we live in a time... Everybody is lying to us today. The mainstream media is lying to you. The government is lying to you. The school system is lying.

I know these are hot topics, but just think about it. Like, the whole pro-choice movement, which is the pro-abortion movement, which kills babies in the womb. That's what it does. How can you do something like that? You have to lie about it. You have to call it *women's reproduction rights*. You have to call it *women's health care*.

Okay. The blue-haired gender jihad group... Do you know who I'm talking about? We love them. We don't like their ideology. We love them. The idea that you're going to castrate boys, give puberty blockers to kids, give healthy girls double mastectomies, and you're going to call something *gender affirmation surgery* (that's what it's called) is Orwellian.

Listen. I want you to understand. How can that happen? The only way that can happen is if people lie all the time about everything. But there's one person who lies more than all of them...you to yourself. How many times do you say, honestly... Don't raise your hand, but you've told yourself you're okay, and you're not okay.

You've told yourself you're not addicted, and you're addicted. You've told yourself you don't have a problem, and you do have a problem. You've told yourself your kids are fine. "Oh, they're fine. Yeah." No, they're not. You know they're not. You've said your marriage doesn't need counseling, and it definitely needs counseling.

So, here's what happens. This is important to understand. The Bible transcends every culture, so what it will do to every culture is it will commend and celebrate certain things in the culture, and it will challenge and condemn other things. Right now in our nation we do a great job with all of our ADA stuff. I mean, we know this going to our new building. That's all the stuff you have to do for people with disabilities.

Uniquely, our government has said, "We need to think about these people and design every building so it works for them." That is the image of God. That is caring for the least, last, and leftovers. That is a heart for the weak. Love it. You can think about it this way. The Bible is both cake and carrots. We all like cake, and no one likes carrots. Don't tell me you like carrots. If you like carrots, it's because you put butter and other things all over them. No one likes carrots. We know you don't like carrots.

When the Bible says something you don't agree with, you're going to have to decide, "Am I going to try to edit the Bible or am I going to change my mind?" Those are the two things. You know if you believe the Bible if the Bible is actually allowed to correct you. I mean, did you think God, the God of the universe, was going to agree with you about everything? No. God is not just a bigger, smarter version of you.



So, Paul says, "I told you the truth even when it was hard." He goes on here. **"...testifying both to Jews and to Greeks..."** "I was the same person, and I said the same thing around different people." **"...of repentance..."** That's carrots. No one likes to talk about that. **"...and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."** There's cake. We all like to talk about that.

### **03 I WILL SUBMIT TO GOD'S WILL FOR MY LIFE**

Look at what he says next. Verse 22: **"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."** The third thing is **"I will submit to God's will for my life."**

I mean, these guys are long-term statements that can define your life. "I will live the Christian life in front of other people." What would that look like? "I will tell them the truth even when it's hard, which means I know I'm going to have some hard conversations at Thanksgiving." Then what else? "I will submit my life to God's will."

Paul says, "Guys, I'm constrained by the Holy Spirit." That's the only time that phrase is used in the New Testament. Christians are told to be led by the Holy Spirit, and Christians are told to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We're told that when a person becomes a Christian, they are baptized in the Holy Spirit. In other words, they're immersed in the Holy Spirit.

But what does it mean to be constrained? I don't know if this is like we're all JV and Paul is varsity level. *Constrain* has something to do with "I've given my life over to the total leadership of the Holy Spirit." Now, here's what it means to submit: "I accept what God has said and what God is doing in my life, and I trust him."

There are two things about submission. Submission always has to do with the future. You'll notice here Paul says, "I don't know what's going to happen." Then he goes, "Well, okay, imprisonments and afflictions, but I don't know what's going to happen." So, here's what you realize as a Christian, or you can realize this is as a non-Christian as well. You realize, "I can't change the past, and I can't control the future. All I can do is submit in the present."

It's interesting. I'm sure we all have things in our pasts we're ashamed of and embarrassed by. You just have to say, "Lord, I submit. I submit that you're going to work all this out for good in my life." You know, "My parents were hard" or "My first marriage ended" or "I struggled with this addiction for a lot longer than I wish I did." We all have to deal with our pasts.

Nietzsche once said something like, "You may think you're done with your past; your past may not be done with you." That's always scary. So, you say, "Lord, I can't change the past." Then you realize, "I can't control the future." Think about your life. I don't know how old each of you are, but you take a 20-year window, and the honest truth is you have no idea what's going to happen.

All we know is that the future is where all of us go to die. That's what the future is. If you take a long enough view of the future, what is the future? Where I go to die and everybody I love goes to die. That's what the future is long enough into the future. So, then you have to go, "Okay. I have no idea what's going to happen in my health or my parents' health in the next 10 or 15 years." You might say that.

"I don't know when my parents are going to die. I don't know if they're going to have to live with us. I don't know what old age and illness and injury are going to do to them." You have no idea. Like, are we heading into World War III right now? I don't know. We have no idea what's going to happen in our nation over the next 10 or 15 years. We have no idea what's going to happen in our economy and with your finances. You have no idea.

We just hope our kids grow up and love the Lord and everything works well, they're always healthy, and they marry young. You have no idea. I'm just telling you this all right now so you go, "Okay. Well, I can't change my past, and I can't control the future, so I submit. I accept."

Then Paul teaches us another thing about submission. He says, "I accept the hard things in my life." So, you have to accept the unknown, and that's always scary, and then you have to accept the hard things in your life. It's easy to submit when God blesses you in a way you want him to.

You get the promotion. You're like, "Lord, I submit. I submit." The woman of your dreams falls for you. You're like, "Lord, it's...I submit." That's easy. It's really hard when you're like, "I'm still single, and it's not the young single anymore." It's like, "This is not a season of singleness; this is maybe stage-of-life singleness."

Paul says, "I'm going to submit." Now, Paul doesn't let us alone. He tells us how he's able to do this. You're like, "Paul, are you a superhero? I mean, how do you do this?" Look at verse 24. He tells us how he's able to submit. ***"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself..."***

Here's what Paul is saying. In the Greek, the original language, you can see he's using the language of an accountant. He's literally saying it this way. This is the way we would say it today. "Hey, guys, calm down. I've done the math. I looked at my life, and I realized the average person only lives 30,000 days, and I realized that..."

Paul really believed all of the things we say we believe. He really believed that this life is preparation for eternity. He really believed that, actually, one of the main ways, the main strategy, God's strategy, for the gospel getting to new people is suffering. I mean, you know that. How did the gospel get to America? One word: *suffering*.

How will the gospel get all of the places that it hasn't gone yet? Suffering. How does the gospel get to the heart of Wake Forest campus? There's only one answer. It's suffering. So, he understood that. He said, "I'm not thinking about what I can lose." That's how *we* think. He said, "I'm actually thinking about what I can gain."

So, here's what Paul says: "I will live the Christian life in front of you." I hope you'll make that commitment today. He says, secondly, "I'm going to tell you the truth even when it's hard." Thirdly, "I'm going to submit to God's will for my life even when I don't know what's going to happen or I'm pretty sure what's going to happen is not good in the world's eyes."

#### **04 I WILL RUN MY RACE...AND FINISH IT**

The fourth thing is "*I will run my race and finish it.*" I want you to see this. ***"...if only I may finish my course [my race, my path] and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."*** There are no fewer than six times in the New Testament where the apostle Paul talks about running a race.

We've said before that the Christian life isn't a sprint. I mean, that would be great. No, it's not a sprint. It's not even a marathon, although that's a better way to think about it. It's like a lifelong race where we're constantly passing the baton to the next generation. So, a couple of quick things about running your race.

First, you have to run *your* race; you can't run someone else's race. This is a word just for some of you, but some of you had such great parents or such a great older brother or sister or such a great mentor, and you just have to go, "I'm not him" or "I'm not her. I have to run my race."

By the time somebody gets out of high school, they are seriously... I don't mean this in a snowflake way. They are seriously unique. If you're over 18 years old (again, I mean this in a biblical understanding), there is no one like you. No one had your parents, your birth order, your personality, your struggles, your IQ, your skill set, and your sin. I mean, nobody. So then you have to go, "Okay. Then I've got to run *my* race."

Here's maybe the other point of this: nobody can run your race for you, and if you don't run your race, then you leave a huge hole. And you'll see this. It's like, "Dude, Dad didn't run his race" or "He didn't finish his race, and he left a huge hole." Some

people can look back, and it's like, "Grandpa didn't run, and it's still affecting me." Because no one else can run your race, but how you run your race can affect everybody else.

Well, Paul says, "I ran my race. I was on my path." See, we also know that the direction of your life is way more important than the intentions of your life. If I said, "Guys, after this service, I'm going to head to Asheville," and I got on 40 east... If you don't know this, Asheville is west. If I get on 40 east, I am never getting to Asheville. It doesn't matter how much I pray about it. It doesn't matter how much I plan on the way there. It doesn't matter how excited I am.

What you'll realize is for anybody who has done anything great in life, there was a path. You'll meet somebody, and they're in fantastic shape. You'll say something to them like, "Hey, how did you get in such great shape?" and they'll never say to you, "I don't know. I just woke up with this six-pack." They're all going to say the same thing. They're going to be like, "Well, here's how much water I drank. Here's how I eat. Here's how I sleep. Here's my exercise routine, and here are my goals."

You'll never meet somebody with a great family and a great marriage and say to them, "How did your family...? You guys still love each other, and your kids want to come back to the house when they don't need to anymore..." No one is going to say, "I don't know how it happened." Everyone is going to say, "Well, we valued *this*. We took vacation. We spent time with our kids individually. We had a plan for their lives. We had values for our home."

But Paul's focus is not just to run the race. You'll notice his main focus is to finish the race. We all start differently. Some people get a slow start to the race. We meet a lot of people here in our church, and we're not really sure, and they're not really sure... Did they become a Christian in our church or did they just wake up spiritually?

A lot of people say something like, "Well, I was baptized at 12, and I think I believed, but it wasn't until I was 23 years old and came here and got invested in a Community Group that I actually feel like I'm growing." So, there are some people who get a slow start. There are some people who get a late start. I think when we get into this new building and the way God is using this ONE Initiative, we're going to see more people get a late start, and they'll come to Christ at 43 or 45.

By the way, it's a great joy in their life, and it's also very hard on them, because then they look back, and they're like, "My life is halfway over, and half of my life I didn't live for Christ." Then their body remembers all of their sinful behaviors, and they look back and go, "I didn't walk with Christ in high school, and I didn't walk with Christ in college, and our marriage wasn't founded on Christ."

You say to all of these people, "Guys, listen. It's not how you start; it's how you finish." You can have a slow start, and you can have a late start, and it's all about finishing. Unfortunately, guys, we have some examples even in the New Testament of people who didn't finish well. Both Jesus and Paul had a good friend who didn't finish well. Jesus' good friend was Judas. Paul's good friend was Demas. Both of them didn't finish well. So, Paul says, "I'm going to run the race, and I'm going to finish it."

## 05 I WILL THINK ABOUT THE NEXT GENERATION

Then there's a fifth thing I want you to see. Turn with me to verse 25. ***"And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again."*** So, he's talking to these leaders, and he basically says, "Guys, I'm headed to heaven really soon." This is his third missionary journey. He knows he will never make it back to Ephesus again and that he will never see them again face-to-face this side of eternity.

So, here's the fifth thing he says: *"I will think about the next generation."* We believe here that churches should live longer than people. That normally doesn't happen, but churches should live longer than people. People live to be 80, 85, or 90 years old. We think churches should live longer than that. The only way churches can live longer than that is if every generation thinks about the next generation.

Paul is going to basically do two things to help the next generation. He's going to warn them, and then entrust them to God. I'll show you. He warns them first. Verse 26: ***"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."***

Paul believed what we believe here: it takes the whole Bible to make the whole Christian. That's one of the reasons, by the way, we just walk through books of the Bible so we deal with all of these different topics. I want you to get an illustration. It's a little intense. He says, "I'm innocent of the blood of all." It's like, "What are we talking about?"

He's using an illustration from the Old Testament, and it's the illustration of a watchman. This is what would happen. There would be certain men who would guard the city walls every night, and they were called the *watchmen*. Their job was to stay awake and be alert, and if they saw danger coming, they had one job. Usually it was boring. No one showed up. Everything was fine. Their one job was if they saw danger coming, they blew the trumpet.

Now, why is this all connected? Because the Jewish law in Israel was this: "Hey, listen, watchmen. If you blow the trumpet saying there's danger coming," which basically meant, "Hide" or "Get out of here" or "Our enemies are coming." He says, "If you blow the trumpet and people don't listen..." That often happens. You'll see this. The weather channel and stuff will tell you, "Hey, a hurricane is coming," and people will just stay. This happens. They don't listen. They don't believe it.

He says, "Listen, guys. If you blow the trumpet and people don't listen and they get killed by this enemy, it's not your fault." But the other side was, "If you're not awake and you're not alert, or you see danger coming but don't blow the trumpet, the blood of everybody who dies is on you." So, Paul takes this intense idea of a watchman and says that's what every Christian is for the people in their life.

I hate to be so intense. I know there are some intense things in there. I really do. And we're going to get more intense for a second. Here's what we don't want to have happen. I would rather talk about it right now so it doesn't happen. What happens in a lot of people's lives is their older brother or their older sister or their aunt or their mom or their dad gets stage 3 or stage 4 cancer, or something like that, and they're dying, and they may be dying quickly.

What happens in a lot of those situations is the person will feel an enormous amount of guilt of "I've never talked to them about Jesus." You don't want to get the phone call like, "Hey, I've never talked to my dad about Jesus. He's got stage 4, and it's going sideways, and I don't know if I'm going to make it in time." You do not want to be on the other side of that phone call.

Paul wanted to have something we don't talk about anymore. Paul wanted to have a clear conscience. If you read Paul's letters and look at Acts, he is always talking about something we never talk about, which is having a clear conscience.

Paul basically says, "Guys, here's my job. I have to tell you about Jesus, but I'm not the Holy Spirit. I can't play JV Holy Spirit. I don't know what you're going to do with what I'm going to tell you, but my conscience before you and before God is clear once I have told you the gospel message and called you to respond."

If we could say it more simply, Paul was saying, "Before I go, I want you to know" or "Before you go, I want you to know." What you're going to realize is over your life, you're going to be in a lot of different situations. You'll live in a neighborhood. You'll be in college at a dorm. You'll be at a certain job for five years, and then you'll move and take a promotion. You'll live in one city for a while, and you'll go *here*.

You'll be in this apartment complex, and then you'll get your starter home. What you want to say in every season is "God has put these people around me, and before I go

or before they go, I want them to know." So, Paul says, "Guys, the way I think about the next generation is I warn you. I taught you the whole Bible." Then he warns them again. Look here. I'm in verse 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. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears."***

So, Paul warns them. He says, "Guys, there are going to be dangers from without and dangers from within." The danger from without is always persecution; the dangers from within are always false doctrine and worldliness. No church will ever experience all three of those at the same time, because the worldly church will never be persecuted, but those are the three temptations of the church in every age: worldliness, persecution, and false doctrine.

Now, I don't think we're in a time where we're being persecuted as a church or in the nation of America, but I will say that if you follow a history of how persecution works, there's always opposition to Christianity before there's persecution of Christians. I will say what appears to be happening in many places in America is increased opposition to Christianity, which makes me think there may one day soon be persecution.

Paul is less concerned about what happens on the outside. He's more concerned about what happens on the inside. Notice he says, "There are going to be fierce wolves that will come in." A lot of people, when they think about the church, have an overly simplistic view of it. They go, "I understand the church. The church is shepherds and sheep." I wish that's what the church was.

They go, "Okay. There's the staff, the pastors, and the Community Group leaders. They kind of shepherd, and then there are the sheep." Man, I wish it was that simple. The Bible actually gives you four types of people that are in the church. There are shepherds, there are sheep, there are goats, and there are wolves. The whole parable of the sheep and the goats says there are people who are a part of the crowd and not part of the church.

They know all the right language, and they don't realize until the end that they weren't really believers. Those are the goats. Then he says there are wolves, and wolves come into the church, and Jesus says they come in in sheep's clothing. So he warns them to be very, very careful. By the way, this is why we're so careful about

who comes into our church. This is why we have the Weekender. This is why we are super serious about all of our leadership in our church.

So, here's what Paul says. He says, "I want you to be careful," and then look at what he says in verse 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."*** So, "I warn, and then I commend you to God."

*Commend* is a word which means "I give you over and place you in protection of." That's what you do. This is what every parent has to do with their kid at some point, especially once they graduate high school. It's like, "All right. I've warned you about *this*, and I've warned you about *that*. I've told you you need some good Christian friends.

I told you to find a church, and I told you to find a campus ministry, and I warned you about the danger of sexual promiscuity. I'm giving you over to God. I can't babysit you the rest of my life." So, Paul is like, "Guys..." Even though he's concerned, he can't stay, because he's about to leave, which leads to the last thing he's going to say.

## **06 I WILL ALWAYS GIVE MORE THAN I TAKE**

Here's the last thing he says. ***"I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak..."*** Paul probably means the poor. ***"...and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"***

Here's the final thing Paul says: ***"I will always give more than I take."*** It's interesting. I only talk about money as often as it comes up in the Scriptures, but it's interesting to me that Paul's final words of his final words are about money. He has talked about teaching the Bible. He has talked about telling the truth. He has talked about living the life. He has talked about trusting God. He has talked about running his race.

He has talked about all of those things. It's like, "Really, Paul? The final thing... You're literally about to get on the ship and leave them forever, and you're going to talk about money and possessions?" Yes. So, the first thing Paul says is "I coveted no one's silver, gold, or..." He even says, "Apparel." He says, basically, "I didn't want your Patagonia jacket." That's what he's trying to say.

Here's what happens when you covet. When you covet, you say, "God, you got it wrong. *I'm* supposed to have that, not *them*." You can't minister to somebody you're jealous of. You're jealous of your older sister because she's... You know, whatever.



You're jealous of your coworker or you're jealous of your friends. You can't minister to somebody you're jealous of.

Instead of coveting, Paul says, "I worked hard so I could share with others." It's interesting. Some people are jealous because they're lazy. People look at people who have... They look at someone in their 50s, and they're like, "Look at their house! Look at their cars!" It's like, "They're 50! They worked really hard for a long time and learned how to save. They made their money, and then they invested their money. Okay."

Young people are like, "Well, I'm covered in Cheetos dust playing video games, and I want all..." It's like, "You can't have all those things. You're lazy." So, Paul says, "I wasn't lazy. I worked hard." Paul understood something: you make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give.

Paul had the right (he said this other places) to live off of support. Jesus lived off of support. There were primarily three wealthy women who supported Jesus' ministry for most of his time. Paul could have done that, but Paul said, "I didn't want to." So, Paul, who was a white-collar, scholarly intellect, made tents on the side. That's blue-collar work.

He said, "I loved to do that, because then I had a little bit of money, and I loved to give it to help other people." It's like, "Wow!" Then he says, "Because I remember the words of the Lord Jesus." It's interesting. Why aren't people generous? There are many reasons. Sometimes it's because we forget. Paul says, "I remember the words of the Lord Jesus."

Now, it's interesting. The words of the Lord Jesus are not found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. I don't know when Jesus said this, but it's not written down by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. This is either part of the oral tradition... Jesus taught many things we don't have written down. This is one of the only places in Scripture where we have the words of Jesus not in a gospel and not found in a gospel.

The words are interesting. The words are not what we think they are. Most people say something like, "Hey, you know what? It's better to give than to receive." People quote that all the time. They don't even know they're quoting Jesus, but actually, they're misquoting Jesus. If you look carefully, here's what he says. He doesn't say it's better to give than to receive; he says it's more blessed.

Here's the interesting thing. What is he talking about? He's not talking about material blessings. Jesus says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." He's talking about spiritual blessing. Here's what happens. If you're honest, what we're looking for when

we're trying to find material blessings in our lives is we're actually looking for the spiritual blessing underneath it.

What is the nice car about? It's not about the material blessing; it's about the security you feel or the identity you have or the status it gives you. Look. All advertisements know this. They're not selling you the car; they're putting Matthew McConaughey in it. You're like, "I just want to look like him. If I have that car, I'll look like him." You won't look like him if you have a car. Okay?

So, can you say in your life, "I gave more than I took"? Maybe you can say, "I'm not the best husband" or "I'm not the best wife, but here's my new commitment: I'm going to give more than I take. That's going to be part of my repentance and part of my healing." "I'm not the best parent. Okay. I'm going to start giving more than I take." At work, can you say, "I give more than I take"? In this church, can you say, "I give more than I take"? Those were the final words of Paul before he went to the ship.

Look here as we close. Verse 36: ***"And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all." What an emotional scene. "And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, 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 is what we call at Two Cities Church a *gospel goodbye*. It's when you say goodbye to a certain people or a certain place for the sake of the good news. It's when you move, even though you maybe don't want to move, and you miss the people you're moving from. You move for the sake of mission.

This is a part of our church, because as I've told you so many times, we had 30 people seven years ago who said gospel goodbyes, mostly in the Raleigh-Durham area. They said goodbye to a great Community Group. They said goodbye to a great neighborhood. They said goodbye to a great school system. They said goodbye to a great church, and they all moved for the sake of mission.

I want you to remember this image because, as we become more and more of a sending church, we're going to have a lot of gospel goodbyes. We're going to be ending services, and "Hey, here are 40 people. Get onstage, guys. They're all leaving. Hug their necks when they leave because they're not coming back. They're going to be going for the sake of mission."

The reason we do gospel goodbyes is because Jesus said the ultimate gospel goodbye 2,000 years ago to the Father and the Spirit and said, "I have to go. I'm not crossing an ocean; I'm crossing eternity, because I have to give my life and die on the cross for

my church." In fact, when you look at the six things we're committing to and the six things Paul modeled, didn't Jesus just do them first and best?

Didn't Jesus say, "I will live the life in front of you. Actually, no. I won't just live the life in front of you; I will live the life for you"? Didn't Jesus say, "I will tell you the truth even when it's hard. In fact, I *am* the truth, I *am* the way, and I *am* the life"? Didn't Jesus submit to God's will in the hardest moments of his life while he was sweating blood in the garden? Did Jesus not say, "I'm going to run my race, and I'm going to finish it"?

In fact, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and his final words on the cross were, "It is finished." Did Jesus Christ not just think about the next generation but about every generation that he died for? And didn't Jesus always and everywhere give more than he took? He didn't just give *some* of his blood for the church; he gave *all* of it. Let's pray.

Lord, would you build a church where each person in the church can say these statements. Would they be a compass for our lives. As we walk into work or meet our family or head to Thanksgiving dinner in a few weeks, can we just say, "By grace and by grit, I will live the Christian life in front of other people."

Lord, even though we're afraid, there are certain topics, certain questions, certain things we need to talk to people about. We really believe here that hard words make soft people and soft words make hard people. Would you give us the ability to tell the truth even when it's hard, Lord.

Lord, some of us are going through some very, very difficult things right now. Would you help us to say, "Lord, I submit. I can't change the past. I can't control the future. I want to submit." Lord, would you help us to run our race, would you help us to think for the next generation, and everywhere we go, would we be able to say when we're done, "I gave more than I took." We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.