

THE VERY FIRST CHRISTIAN SERMONS
Evangelically Encouraging Ephesian Elders to be Excellent Examples

Acts 20:17-36

Psalm 1:1-2. “**Blessed** is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and **who meditates on his law day and night.**”

1 Peter 2:9. “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who **called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**”

You’re on the inside.

There was a time when that was not true. There was a time when you were on the outside; unaware of what you were missing out on. A time before the Word was announced to you, the Word that brings life and not death, the Word that declares you righteous, innocent, holy in the sight of the God who made you.

What brought you in? The same thing that brought us all in (although our journeys to the door may have looked very different). Jesus brought you in himself. No choice we made ourselves; no clever or convincing preacher; Jesus did the work. He is the Fisher of Men, the Good Shepherd, Immanuel.

Things look different on the inside, don’t they?

As we read the earlier sermons recounted in Acts, perhaps one or another resonated with you. Perhaps you thought about the way Jesus brought you in; the particular message that you heard through which the Holy Spirit worked faith in your heart. And with that faith came a desire to serve the God who loves you, a desire to thank him who showed you such costly love through the death of his Son Jesus.

The verses above speak to that, what we call in theological terms “the new man” (2 Corinthians 5:17, Romans 6). We were born inherently sinful, rebels against God and his will; now, through Christ and empowered by the Spirit, we long to serve our Father in Heaven with our whole lives. We’re on the inside; we live in and work for God’s Kingdom.

May we thank and praise God with our lives now and forever on account of his great love!

Getting Into It

Before we start reading...

Welcome to the last session of our study in the *Very First Christian Sermons*! Thank you for joining us through this study. I pray that Christ has used your time in his Word during our study to strengthen your faith; to increase your confidence in the Gospel message of salvation; and to give you a fresh new perspective on some familiar stories of Scripture.

Tonight's sermon is different from the other sermons that we have seen, in that it is preached specifically to believers. We have seen sermons preached to Jews (both open to the Gospel and enemies of it), Greek proselytes, and Greek polytheists, but this is the only sermon we will read which is preached specifically to Christians; people who once belonged to those other groups, but whom God had called to faith in Jesus.

With that in mind, we'll use the breakout groups feature to share with one another the way in which God called us each into the church and sustains us there. Share as much as you like! We'll spend four minutes in the breakout rooms and then come back together.

When did you become a Christian? (Baptized as a child, hearing as an adult...)

Who first shared the Gospel with you? (Parent, preacher, teacher...)

What was your religious background before Lutheran Christianity (if any)?

Do you have a favorite Bible verse?

Read Acts 20:17-21.

Paul's meeting with these elders (not "older people," but leaders of the church) occurs in Miletus because his last visit to Ephesus had provoked a riot. While Paul surely would have wished to visit this congregation which he loved dearly (see *his letter to them*), he recognized that it was a practical matter of safety for both him and the Christians at Ephesus.

Paul mentions plots against him by the church's Jewish opponents and then reminds the elders that he has "not hesitated to preach anything helpful" to the Christians (*verse 20*). These two ideas are connected.

- What controversy came up often in the early church (*coming from both believers and opponents of the church*)? **See Acts 15:5 and Galatians 3:1-9.**
- Why would the "Judaizers" (*Jewish believers who promoted the belief that Christians yet lived under the Law*) believe that their teachings were "helpful"?
- How does Paul counter the "helpful" teachings of the Judaizers in verse 21 while still preaching the Law to both Jews and Gentiles?

Read Acts 20:22-24.

Paul says something interesting in this sermon; he was both compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, yet warned by the same Spirit about what would happen to him on this trip. What seeming contradiction do we see there?

"I consider my life worth nothing to me" (*verse 24*). Are these words of Paul a properly Christian expression? Is he undervaluing the gift of life which God gave him? As you consider this question, keep verse 22 in mind. See also Philippians 1:12-14 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

React to this statement. Does this summarize what Paul is saying in verse 24? Do you agree with the sentiment? Would you change this statement in any way?

My life is worth nothing to me, but everything to Jesus.

Read Acts 20:25-27.

Paul seems to be mistaken in what he says in verse 25. 1 Timothy 1:3, 4:13, and 2 Timothy 4:20 indicate that after the imprisonment which concludes the book of Acts, Paul did return to Miletus and made plans to visit Ephesus (though we can't conclusively say that he did so). While the Holy Spirit had given him warnings about his coming imprisonment, what Paul expresses in verse 25 must not be something revealed by the Spirit, but instead his entirely reasonable expectations about the outcome of all this.

Paul tells the Ephesians that he is "innocent of their blood." What does he mean by this? How does he explain this peculiar statement with his words in verse 27?

Once again, Paul's words here are meant to guard the Ephesians against errors and controversies that will arise.

- What would the "will of God" be, according to the Judaizers?
- What is God's will, according to Jesus in John 6:28-29?
- What, then, has been the content of Paul's preaching as he proclaimed "the whole will of God"?

Read Acts 20:28-31.

This section is dense with some teachings about the church; what it is and who we are as its members.

Verse 28 states that the Spirit appointed these men as leaders of the church. Yet Acts 14:23 states that Paul and his fellow missionaries were the ones to appoint elders in their various mission congregations. How are these two statements reconciled? What incredible privilege do we have when we call pastors, teachers, and other ministers?

The latter half of verse 28 is a very interesting one. Jehovah's Witnesses translate this verse, "...which he bought with the blood of his own Son." The Greek word for *son* is not found in this verse, however. If you know something about Jehovah's Witnesses' beliefs regarding Jesus, why would they translate this way?

While this verse correctly says that God's own blood bought the church, we take care not to confuse the three persons of the Trinity here.

God has blood. Yet neither the Spirit nor the Father have blood.

God died on a cross. Yet neither the Father nor the Spirit died.

God is a real human in a real body. Yet the Father and the Spirit are spirits without bodies.

While correctly stating and speaking of the Trinity is important when there are many who challenge this Biblical teaching, we should not despair, thinking that, "If I have some wrong understanding of the Trinity in some small way, or if I've ever stated something about the Trinity incorrectly, I might not believe in God correctly and I might not be saved." This is turning faith (belief) into our own knowledge-based work of righteousness. Our correct understanding of the Trinity is not what saves us. Jesus saves us. And out of thanks to him, we seek to most clearly and correctly explain him, his Father, the Spirit, and the love our Triune God has to all who ask.

Verses 29 and 30 are a striking warning to these elders. They still stand as a warning to all Christians today. Paul says here that even among this group of leaders, picked by himself and the other missionaries personally, there will be "wolves." What duty comes along with our privilege as Christians to call our leaders? Read 1 John 4:1 and Acts 17:10-12.

Read Acts 20:32.

Paul sets an example for these leaders by acknowledging that it will not be by his efforts and tears (verse 31) that they remain faithful. What, according to verse 32, empowers any Christian to remain faithful to God and live out their faith?

Read Acts 20:33-35.

The quotation from Jesus which Paul cites in verse 35 is not found in any of the Gospels. This is the only reference we have to Jesus saying something like this. What is your reaction to that fact?

“The words of the Lord Jesus himself which Paul quoted are not recorded anywhere in the four Gospels. We know that the Gospel writers did not have to record every last word of his in order to teach us what he has done for us. We know that he spoke the words which Paul quoted here because they are written here.” (Richard Balge - *The People's Bible: Acts*)

Read Acts 20:36.

This concluding verse is important. What does Paul do with these leaders before leaving them? Why is that worth noting? See verse 32 once again.

What specific characteristics of his audience has Paul made clear with this sermon?

A Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, you are the Lord of the Church. You bought us with your own blood; you gathered us by your Spirit; through you we have come to know the Father. And if all that were not enough, you use us to do your work here on earth! We have the great privilege of being your mouthpiece to the world and the hands by which you show your love. For all this we praise and thank you. By your Spirit keep our lives and teaching true to you. Remind us that the Gospel is not only for the unbeliever, but for the believer too; it is the Word of grace that strengthens us and preserves us in faith every day. When we face trials, both as a church and individually, strengthen our hearts through fellowship with one another. All this we ask in your saving name, dear Jesus. Amen.

Bonus Material

As Paul spoke to the elders, he offered some teaching regarding the church. We noted this theme especially in verses 28 to 31. **Read Ephesians 3:1-4:16**, where Paul again teaches this congregation about their status as Jesus' church.

In all of his letters, Paul writes not only to leaders, but to whole congregations, about living "on the inside" - that is, living as a member of the church. **Read Colossians 3:1-4:6** for further reflection.

This sermon is not the only place where Paul specifically speaks to leaders. **Paul's letters to Titus and Timothy** also contain some exhortations for leaders; yet they are also very practically applicable for all believers. **Read these letters**, and for some further reflection, **listen to Pastor Ethan Cherney's podcast devotion on Titus**. Pastor Cherney's podcast *Dust and Breath* takes a look at different people in the Bible in short, six to seven minute messages.

<https://dustandbreathpod.buzzsprout.com/1071946/3665053-031-titus?play=true>

Lastly - here is a listing of **all the Acts sermons which we weren't able to cover in our study**. Some of these have already been mentioned in the "Bonus Material" of other studies. Feel free to read any of these which interest you! Focus on the things which we wanted to see in our study this summer.

1. *To what audience is this message being preached?*
2. *How is the preacher showing that they are aware of the audience?*
3. *If the sermon uses an Old Testament text, what greater context does reading that whole text give?*
4. *How is Jesus being held up as the central point of this message?*

In **Acts 3:11-26**, Peter preaches before a Jewish audience in Jerusalem, telling them that Jesus is indeed the Messiah whom God raised from the dead.

The arrest of which the Holy Spirit warned Paul comes in Acts 21 and 22. In **Acts 21:37-22:22**, Paul preaches to an angry crowd of Jews in Jerusalem who believe that he has desecrated the temple.

After a few years in prison, Paul gets the chance to state the case for his innocence in **Acts 26**. He uses the opportunity to preach a sermon based on the sure historical facts of Jesus' resurrection.

The book of Acts concludes with a condensed version of two messages from Paul as he awaited trial under house arrest in Rome. Both of these messages, recorded in **Acts 28:17-31**, were preached to Jews who had not yet believed.