

**“YOUR CHURCH: WHAT’S IT WORTH TO YOU?”****Acts 20:17-38****THEME: The care and protection of the church.****DATE: 10/14/07**

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About 20 years ago I bought a new computer, along with an external hard drive and a printer for \$2,400.00. It was a huge sacrifice to get it, but our son needed it for school. A few years later we were fortunate to get rid of it for \$250.00—in perfect condition! An old man who knew nothing about computers wanted to get one for his little granddaughter.

That’s rapid depreciation. Some stuff loses its value quickly.

But other things gain in value. Earlier this year we learned that the home we bought in Walnut Creek, CA 21 years ago is now worth four times what we paid for it. I wish we still owned it, but we sold it more than 15 years ago just when the market was depressed.

Some things increase in worth, other things plummet in value.

- And some things hold their value if you take care of them.

I think a church is one of those things.

Its worth is incalculably great. The Apostle Paul said it was purchased with the blood of God incarnate (Acts 20:28). We’ll see that in our Bible text today.

But when you read the words of Christ in Revelation 3:16 he says to a certain church, *‘I am about to spit you out of my mouth.’* That church was clearly no longer precious. It was worthless—worthless, disgusting!

Churches don’t automatically retain their worth. Neglect, abuse, or compromise can destroy a church.

All Christians have a responsibility to evaluate their church.

- We’re studying the life of the church at Ephesus, founded through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul was the one most responsible for giving the Ephesian church a strong start.

Our text today is still in the Book of Acts: Acts 20:17-38

As we look at this text today we’ll identify some of the **essentials** that help a church hold its value.

**I. PERSONAL INTEGRITY (20:18-19; 33-38)**

This is a value that the Apostle Paul injected into the lifeblood of the church at Ephesus. He exemplified authenticity. He was the real deal.

In a pagan culture of duplicity and deception, the believers learned from Paul that integrity was absolutely essential to the health of the church. There was nothing phony about Paul.

Will Rogers once said, *‘Live in such a way that you wouldn’t be afraid to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.’* Paul’s integrity was one of the key reasons for the health of the church at Ephesus.

<sup>17</sup> *From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.*

After preaching the gospel in Ephesus for several years, Paul had left a few months before this to go to Greece.

Now he was on his way to Jerusalem, and his journey again brought him close to Ephesus.

<sup>18</sup> *When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.*

<sup>19</sup> *I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews.*

Paul reminded the elders of his integrity. The whole time he was with them he had not misrepresented Christ at all. The Christians at Ephesus had seen Paul’s struggles. They had seen him under attack by others.

He was not a “pastor on a pedestal.”

He was passionate about the ministry to which his Lord had called him. At times it moved him to tears. His ego was not an issue. He had no interest in prestige or power. (19)

Paul was a good example for the Ephesian church, because he was real. He didn’t pretend to be omni-competent. He was not a phony.

<sup>33</sup> *I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing.*

<sup>34</sup> *You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.*

<sup>35</sup> *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*

No one could ever impugn Paul’s motives. He had poured his life into the church at Ephesus.

Richard Baxter in the 17<sup>th</sup> century wrote, ‘*O how curiously I have heard some men preach and how carelessly I have seen them live.*’

Personal integrity in the leaders is absolutely essential in a church.

Pretense, facades, and phoniness cheapen a church. It’s not worth it to be part of such a church.

<sup>36</sup> *When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.*

<sup>37</sup> *They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.*

<sup>38</sup> *What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.*

Sometimes Christians sing the song, *Blest Be the Tie that Binds Our Hearts In Christian Love.*

This scene described at the end of Acts 20 exemplifies that song.

The very next verse reads, ‘*After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight the Cos.*’ (21:1)

Paul had to tear himself away himself away from the elders of a church he loved. The love was so strong a bond that parting was like tearing skin.

Integrity is the strong glue of Christian unity. Paul and these elders loved and trusted each other. That’s why this was such a painful parting.

[2<sup>nd</sup> essential that helps a church to hold its value]

## II. EVANGELISTIC INTENSITY (20:20-27)

Paul was motivated by the Holy Spirit with a powerful compulsion.

There was not a hint of half-heartedness in the apostle.

Someone said half-heartedness in a Christian is serving God in such a way as not to offend the devil.

Paul was fearless.

<sup>20</sup> *You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.*

<sup>21</sup> *I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*

People knew where Paul stood. They didn’t have to guess. They could not be mistaken.

In the churches where Paul had preached and taught, people knew that when he was present, the theme would be repentance and faith (21)

- Paul was not a smooth-talking, slick performer.

When I served as a pastor in Indianapolis, Bobby Leonard was the coach of the Indian Pacers Basketball team.

They called him “slick.” Someone said he was ‘*slicker than snail slime on Teflon.*’ That’s slippery!

There was nothing slippery about Paul. He was about as subtle as a rodeo bull.

He had intensity that pressed through to every person’s deepest need. He called people to repent of sin and have faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

An old English evangelist named W.P. Nicholson used to close all of his letters with these words: ‘*May you never get used to seeing souls go down to hell.*’

A passion to bring spiritually lost people to salvation in Christ burned in Paul’s soul.

- He preached a strong message calling all people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. That was his legacy in Ephesus.

Paul was the consummate model for pastors today. He had been blameless in his personal life and in his ministry.

There was no reason for anyone to have remained an immature believer who had been under the teaching of Paul.

<sup>22</sup> *And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.*

<sup>23</sup> *I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.*

<sup>24</sup> *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

Paul had a compelling sense of the Spirit’s guidance. He knew what he had to do, but he also knew that hardship awaited him.

Doing the Lord’s will never gets you an easy life.

Paul wanted to finish what the Lord had called him to do—to witness solemnly to the gospel of the grace of God.

When he completed that, Paul expected that his life would be fulfilled and completed. That’s what he lived for.

<sup>25</sup> *Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.*

<sup>26</sup> *Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men.*

<sup>27</sup> *For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*

Paul seized every opportunity to tell people about God’s will for mankind.

What is the will of God?

The Apostle Peter put it well, *‘The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.’* (2 Peter 3:9)

Declaring the will of God is declaring the gospel, the good news of salvation by faith in Christ Jesus.

- Paul knew that his ministry in Ephesus was completed. He had done all that the Lord wanted him to do. The task was completed. Therefore he could never be accused of failing to give everyone the truth that would save them. If people did not obey God’s will, Paul could not be blamed. He had done his part.

Paul could leave because his work had been successful. From Ephesus the gospel had reached all people throughout the province of Asia (19:10).

A church that retains its worth is a church that maintains an evangelistic intensity. Paul made that clear.

[3<sup>rd</sup> essential that helps a church to hold its value]

### **III. PASTORAL RESPONSIBILITY (20:28-32)**

That is the responsibility of the shepherds of God’s flock.

Paul urged the Ephesian elders to assume this responsibility with utmost diligence.

They were shepherds of God’s flock.

<sup>28</sup> *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

You can’t miss the deep affection Paul had for God’s church in Ephesus.

- The pastors and elders in God’s flock must care for the whole flock.

Look at the price paid for it. Paul said, *Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

- The price God paid is beyond our capacity to calculate.

At the Cross God incarnate took the sins of the world upon himself; he paid the price that God’s holy justice demanded; he suffered and died in our stead.

Paul impressed this upon the Ephesian elders at this last meeting with them.

It was imperative that the elders appreciate the inestimable value of the church.

The church is a community that belongs to God, purchased with his blood.

That’s what First Free Church is—before and above anything else we might say about it.

- These were Paul’s final words of counsel to the leaders of a church where he had completely invested his life for three years.

He told them that they were overseers. Paul had not made them overseers. The Holy Spirit had done so.

- Every pastor and elder in the church must have this conviction that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. And everyone in the church should respect the Holy Spirit’s involvement in making certain ones overseers. It is a very solemn responsibility.

<sup>29</sup> *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.*

<sup>30</sup> *Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*

<sup>31</sup> *So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

The church is both valuable and vulnerable.

Even in a healthy church there are lambs that are easy prey for savage wolves.

Their faith is still fragile. They are not yet grounded in the truth.

The elders, as shepherds had to watch over them and protect them from those who spread lies about the gospel and about Paul.

- The Ephesian elders took Paul’s words to heart. They protected the doctrinal integrity of the Ephesian church.

Forty years later this is what the Lord himself said about the church at Ephesus: *To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.* (Revelation 2:1-4)

The church in Ephesus would not be deceived by false teachers. They held to the truth. But they didn’t maintain that first love for the Lord, and over time it eroded the strength of the church.

I recall the warnings we received in our theological studies in Seminary. We were to be on guard against becoming cold spiritually. We would immerse ourselves in biblical and theological studies in order to have an unshakable foundation for what we believe and what we would teach. But it could become academic—cold hard truth, rather than a vital warm-hearted faith.

- But that was not exactly what Paul was dealing with in his address to the Ephesian elders. He was concerned about false teachers gaining a foothold and then a stronghold for their error among the believers where he had toiled in the gospel for three years.

Doctrinal precision is essential in a church. If you don’t know the truth, you won’t be able to identify errors and deceit.

<sup>32</sup> *“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

The last thing Paul did was commit the church to God and to the word of God’s grace. The word of God’s grace is the whole gospel. That’s what builds up a church and gives it a place among all those who have been called and set apart for God.

That is the main responsibility of the pastors and elders—the shepherds—of a church.

What is First Free Church worth to you?

Do you see personal integrity in the leaders? Is there an honesty and sincerity that keeps trust intact and is the glue of true Christian fellowship? The Apostle Paul made a big deal of this, and so should we.

Do you see an evangelistic intensity in the church? Or are the members more involved in other issues and concerns? Anyone who went to the church in Ephesus knew immediately that the good news of Jesus Christ was what the church was all about. That’s why the gospel spread throughout the whole province of Asia Minor.

Do you see pastoral responsibility in the church? Are the pastors and elders shepherding the precious flock of God? Are they able to protect you from any who would destroy God’s flock? I must tell you that our elders and pastors are diligent about this. Every week many of them are sharpening their skills by careful study of what it means to be a godly leader in the church. Please pray for them.