

We Are – Purposefully Adventurous

Acts 20:17-28

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Over the course of September, we have looked at our mission, vision, and values as a church. Last week, we explored our value of radical generosity. We define radical generosity this way, living adventurously to impact my world. Think about that for a second. How many of us would really and truly define our lives as “being on an adventure?” Frankly, I know that I don’t always think of my life that way. Especially when I am just going through the motions of the everyday things – meals, errands, work, bills, taking care of the kids and helping my spouse, and then trying to unwind with what little time is left over. Hardly an adventure, right?

Here is how Paul describes the chief purpose of his life (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.” It is really remarkable that someone like Paul defines the value, purpose, and adventure of his life in this way. It should also be really encouraging to you and me. We don’t need to be like Paul in the travel and the intensity of his missionary endeavors to live a purposeful adventure with the Lord. Our everyday lives can be and, frankly, are supposed to be a purposeful adventure with and for the Lord. Errands, bills, work, the general humdrum of the normal is supposed to be an adventure...? Yep! How is this possible?

It was the gospel that changed everything for Paul, and it has changed everything for us. It took us from being enemies of God to adopted children of grace. It took us from trying to find purpose and value in anything and everything of this world to having eternal purpose and value in Christ! It took us from trying to eke out everyday existence to becoming everyday missionaries! The reality is that even for Paul there was a lot of downtime between travel and missionary journeys. He spent around three years in Ephesus on one stop alone. There was a lot of “normal” for Paul in those stops, and yet, he describes his life’s chief purpose as testifying to the gospel of grace. He was in every way an everyday missionary. In our own city, there are 26,000 permanent residents who have no measurable connection to a gospel-preaching church. Think about that for a second. That is 72% or 7 out of every 10 permanent residents. These are our neighbors, colleagues, friends, classmates, and family members. Imagine how their lives and our community would be different and more joyful as more people experience the hope and love of Jesus. If the gospel has changed us, then we should see ourselves not just waiting out our time here and now for eternity. **We are a church that wants God to use us in the everyday circumstances of life.**

1. Genuine – Humble – Focused

a. The context of the passage –

- i. Paul's consciousness that he would not return to Asia led him to take a last opportunity of speaking to the church leaders before he set off for Jerusalem with the probability of arrest and imprisonment there. So far as Acts is concerned, this address constitutes Paul's farewell to the churches, although we shall hear Paul's voice frequently in the remainder of the book in defense of himself before Jews and Romans. The address thus contains the elements that would be expected in the type of farewell discourse familiar at the time. There is little agreement among scholars as to how it is to be analyzed, but it falls broadly into two parts. In the first section, verses 18–27, Paul looks back over his own work as a missionary. He describes how he had performed his work faithfully, then moves on to speak about the uncertainties of the future, his readiness even to die for the sake of Christ, and his conviction that his friends will not see him again. He emphasizes that he has taught them fully and that the responsibility for what they have heard now rests in their own hands. These thoughts lead over into the second section, verses 28–35, in which Paul instructs the church leaders for the future when he will no longer be with them. **They are to follow his example of faithful service, and to be ready to give themselves to the service of the church as freely as he had done.** They stand under God's blessing and also under the command of the Lord Jesus to give freely to help the weak.¹

b. What you have seen in me is the real and genuine thing. (v.18) – Genuine

- i. Paul had lived among these Ephesian elders for a period of three years. He reminds them here of what they have seen in him, Jesus and genuine faith.
- ii. Paul wasn't putting on a show or trying to be something that he wasn't. He was genuinely himself, and he was genuinely following Jesus in front of them.
- iii. **What do people see in me? Specifically, do they see Jesus?**
 1. This is an old example, but it is one that still bears weight for us. When treasury agents train to spot counterfeit dollars, they don't train in all of the possible fakes; they simply train to know the real and genuine thing so well that a fake quickly stands out.
 2. When someone looks at me, what do they see?
 - a. We live in a cultural moment where real and fake are constantly at odds with one another. We can tell when someone is being fake with us or if they are being genuine. Too often though, we confuse being genuine for being liked. Just because you are being genuine doesn't mean that you'll be liked. Being genuine is one of the most important factors in being taken seriously. Paul wanted them to take Jesus seriously, so he had to be genuine with them and show them what it looked like to truly follow Jesus.

c. I served the Lord with all humility. (v.19)

i. Humility is a right-sized perspective of yourself.

1. Received or achieved identity? → This distinction will determine the size of your perspective on yourself.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 347–348.

- a. If you operate with an achieved identity, you have to compare yourself to others. This means your worth and value is only in relationship to others around you. This posture of comparison routinely leads us away from joy and contentment.
 - b. If you operate with a received identity, your value and worth come from someone who esteems you greatly. In Christianity, that is God. This means your identity is both stable and rightsized through God's Word.
 - 2. It is really hard to think of yourself less often if you only ever think of yourself.
 - a. When we have a rightsized perspective we operate in confidence, security, and sensitivity for others.
- ii. **Concern & sensitivity for others.**
 - 1. **Have you ever been in the grocery store, at a game, or in class and you were so focused on what it was that you were doing that you missed someone or something right in front of you? This is what happens when we focus on ourselves, we can't see others around us.**
 - 2. When we operate in humility, we grow in our concern and sensitivity for others.
- iii. **Why was Paul humble? → Everything that he had received, he had received in Christ.**
 - 1. Go back to the statements to Timothy from last week.
 - a. 1 Tim 6:7 – “for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world...”
 - b. 1 Tim 6:13 – “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things...”
 - c. 1 Tim 6:17 – “...God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”
- iv. The one he served was the Lord. → How does this influence the perspective of my life?
 - 1. The first ingredient to influence is being genuine, but the second is humility.
 - 2. For the believer, our humility flows out of the humility of Christ Jesus.
 - 3. It was Jesus who was concerned for us and went to the cross for us. It was Jesus who humbled himself and took on human form (without sin) so that we could be exalted in his righteousness.
- d. **I taught and testified to you the grace of God and the whole counsel of God so that the Greeks and Jews among you would experience repentance and faith. (vv. 20-24)**
 - i. Paul didn't just teach whatever he thought would be good or profitable to them; he taught the things of God specifically related to the gospel.
 - ii. Whatever he may face, Paul does not regard his life as being of ultimate value (2 Cor. 4:7–12; 6:4–10; 12:9–10; Phil. 2:17; 3:8; 2 Tim. 4:7; Bruce 1988a: 390). In fact, he says he does not account his soul as precious in itself, where “soul” stands for a person in this life. The language reflects business accounting or reckoning, where his soul has its only worth in its service to God. Paul could lose his life, but it would not matter if it were done for God as the gospel is preached. His only desire is to accomplish the course to which the Lord Jesus has called him as he testifies to the content of God's grace and the gospel (a genitive of content is here in the reference to God's grace; 1 Cor. 9:15–27; Gal. 1:15–16; 2:2; Phil. 2:16). He compares his ministry (*διακονίαν, diakonian*) to a race (*δρόμον, dromon*) with a course to be completed or accomplished (*τελειῶσαι, teleiōsai*). Luke expresses this with a rare use of *ὥς (hōs)* to introduce a final clause: “I do not consider my life worth anything, so as [ὥς] to complete my course.” This commission to minister was given in Acts 9:15 (Fitzmyer 1998: 677). This term for “race” appears three times in the NT (Acts 13:25; 20:24; 2 Tim. 4:7 [where Paul speaks of successfully finishing the race]; Bauernfeind, *TDNT* 8:234). **Paul is faithfully walking with God,**

wherever it may take him. He does not need to be certain where he is going or what he shall face to be faithful to God. He need only carry out his ministry.²

e. The big question of identity – Who am I first and foremost?

i. **Am I a _____, who is also a Christian?**

1. You can fill in the blank... Mother, father, engineer, leader, student, child, scientist, carpenter, ... etc.
2. This first option sees our faith as important but secondary or as a complement to a well-rounded life. I don't want to totally pull the rug out here, but instead I want to lean into Paul's words and suggest that there is a better way and perspective.

ii. **Or am I a Christian who also happens to be a _____?**

1. This second option acknowledges that those other parts of us are really important, but they are in fact secondary. I have said publicly that I am grateful and thankful for the calling that the Lord has put on my life as a pastor. Yet, I have to acknowledge that there was a time when I wasn't a pastor, and there will be a time when I won't be a pastor. That doesn't change the trajectory of my life or the call that God has on me. It just means that my paycheck will come from some other source than vocational ministry. This is a critical distinction as it informs my greatest purpose and meaning as a person is found in Christ and not in my vocation or my station in life.
2. This perspective also fuels me to see my life as part of God's bigger story and as an everyday missionary.

2. Everyday Missionaries

a. **Paul's concern is that they would see themselves in the role that he once played for them.**

- i. V. 19 - Paul describes his work as *serving the Lord*, just as he frequently called himself the servant of the Lord (Rom. 1:1; cf. 12:11; Phil. 2:22). It is also the service rendered to the church (verse 35), and this thought of service stands prior to any thought of the status that may belong to the servant. Consequently, the first characteristic of his ministry which is singled out for mention is *humility*, the refusal to claim anything for himself (2 Cor. 10:1; 11:7; 1 Thess. 2:6). The second is the *tears* which expressed his personal concern for his converts (Rom. 9:2; 2 Cor. 2:4; Phil. 3:18), and the third is the implied patience and fortitude with which he continued his work despite the temptations to give it up that arose from Jewish persecution (2 Cor. 11:24, 26; 1 Thess. 2:14–16). Here, as will be the case throughout the address, there are direct and close parallels in the writings of Paul himself which show that this was how he thought of his ministry and admonished his converts. To say with one recent scholar that 'a direct dependence on Paul can nowhere be demonstrated' is quite misleading: the total impression gained from the speech is that here we are in touch with Paul himself.³
- ii. Paul's final words to them are a reminder that they are to carry on the very thing that he modeled for them. His closing remarks are stark and should cause us to sit up a little straighter and consider what it means to follow Jesus.

² Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 628.

³ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 349.

1. Paul is innocent of any responsibility **should the Ephesians fail**, as he has told them all they need to know to walk well with God, for he declared to them the entire counsel of God.⁴
2. As the watchman who warns people faithfully of the coming of an enemy is not guilty if they choose to ignore the warning, so it was with Paul as a preacher of the gospel. Paul's assurance was derived from his confidence that he had faithfully preached the gospel in every particular; he had dealt with the whole of God's plan of salvation (cf. Eph. 1:11; but the thought of God's plan is distinctly Lucan).⁵
 - a. The clear idea is that they have all that they need to succeed in following Jesus authentically, and that includes knowing what to do on a day-to-day basis.
 - b. This is not merely the idea that they are equipped with the right theological knowledge, but that the knowledge they have should be and can be applied to their lives.

b. The divine adventure of Paul's life.

- i. Again, one of the risks that we run is looking at Paul's life and only seeing the adventurous, daring, and admirable parts. When we do that, we miss that Paul was a real person with a lot of regular stuff between all the exhilarating moments.
- ii. **3 Years in Arabia** – After Paul's conversion, he spends three years in the desert in Arabia quietly studying, training, and preparing for what God had for him. That's a lot of downtime and regular life that the Bible gives us a note on but doesn't go into detail. - Gal. 1:17
- iii. **3 years in Ephesus** – Remember how Paul tells those Ephesian elders that they saw the real thing in him? It was because he had lived among them for three years! Yes, it was full of intense ministry, but it was also full of everyday things of life.
- iv. **Tent-making and Traveling** – Don't forget that Paul funded a good portion of his life and ministry through his trade of making tents. He had to take time to do that. Oh, and don't forget the time traveling. All of those hours just traveling.
 1. **The thing that we see and that compels us when we look at a guy like Paul is not just the amazing things God did through him; it is the fact that God could do those things through an ordinary human and an ordinary human life. If God could do that, then why can't God do that now?**

c. The divine adventure of my life.

- i. For over a year now, you have heard me mention that there are around 26k permanent residents in Ames who have no connection to a gospel-preaching church. That is 7 out of every 10 residents in our city. If you extend it to include college students, the number quickly grows to 50k on the conservative estimate. This means that 8 out of every 10 in our city have no measurable connection to a gospel-preaching church.
- ii. God did not call you to some other place. Instead, for this season of your life, he has called you here as an everyday missionary to this place and this city!
 1. What would it take for us to reach 500 new families in the next five years?
 2. What would it take to reach 10% of the 26,000 in the next five years?

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 629.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 351–352.

- a. It would take each of us seeing that God has called us to live purposefully adventurous lives for the cause of the gospel.
- iii. **Purposefully adventurous people think about the following –**
 - 1. **People are precious, eternal beings.**
 - a. C.S. Lewis once said this – *“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as now exists, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. **You have never met a mere mortal.**”*⁶
 - b. How do you see the people that you interact with on a daily basis?
 - 2. **Time is a kingdom currency.**
 - a. The way we spend our time matters greatly in God’s economy. Time is not something that is to be frittered away or dismissed casually. It is one of the most precious resources that God has given to us, and it is to be stewarded wisely.
 - 3. **Prayer is a primary action.**
 - a. Too often in our lives we get to the end of our own abilities, and then we turn to prayer. It is as if we say, “Well, since I can’t, I guess I’ll have to ask for some help now.” However, prayer is to be the first response of a believer and is to be seen as a primary action.
 - b. What does my prayer life look like in my everyday rhythms?
- d. **Spirit-led questions to consider when it comes to radical generosity.**
 - i. **Can I name specific ways that I’m leveraging my time and resources to make an eternal impact wherever God places me?**
 - 1. The key here is being specific, not general or ambiguous.
 - ii. **Do I have the margin to intentionally cross cultural, social, and other barriers to listen to others and respond to the needs of others?**
 - 1. Just like with money, we can’t spend time that we don’t have. And if we don’t have margin, we can’t respond to holy interruptions and opportunities. This means that we need to get much better at saying no to a whole bunch of good things so that we can say yes to the best things.
 - iii. **Am I compelled by God’s radical generosity to invest my finances deeply in the work of the Kingdom?**
 - 1. We are reminded once again that God doesn’t need our money. Instead, what we do with our money speaks volumes about what we think about God. We do not serve a God of “not enough.” We do serve a God who has been radically generous to us, and invites us to partner with and invest in the kingdom. It isn’t about the amount; it is about the heart and attitude.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001)