

March 11, 2007
Christianity in a Nutshell
Acts 20:13-38

A friend of mine has a college-aged son who asked him the other day how he would know when he was in love. His dad responded with the usual advice, things like, “You’ll enjoy spending time together, you’ll have many things in common, you’ll both be committed Christians”—a number of wise and thoughtful comments. My friend’s daughter was listening to this discussion and when it was over she asked, “Dad, how will I know when I’m in love?” Without even blinking the dad said, “Honey, You’ll know when you’re in love when I *tell* you you’re in love.”

A dad in the church was talking to me some time ago and told me the anguish he felt when his sixteen-year-old daughter went out on her first date. He said that about an hour before the young man rang the door bell, he was lecturing his daughter, trying to cram all he had taught her the past sixteen years into one fifteen minute cram session. Finally, his wife came into the room and said to him, “Honey, look at her eyes. She is not listening to a word you are saying.” And the daughter responded, “Yeah, but mom, I’ve been listening to this speech all my life. I know it by heart. It’s on tape right here.”

There are important moments in life when we really want to get it right, aren’t there? I think Paul must have felt that sense of urgency when he spoke to the church leaders from Ephesus. He knew that there was a good possibility that he would never see them again. He had spent three years with them, preaching and teaching the gospel. But now, one more time, he wanted to pour out his heart to them, explain the essence of the gospel to these dear Ephesians one final time.

Do you see that pronoun “We” in verse thirteen? The “We” probably included Luke who is the author of this book. Interestingly, when Luke and his companions left Troas and sailed to Assos, Paul did not go with them. Instead, he walked the twenty or so miles between Troas and Assos. Why do you suppose he traveled on foot instead of taking the short cruise? Maybe Paul wanted time to think and pray about what he was going to say to these pastors and leaders from the churches of Ephesus. He wanted to make sure that his last sermon stuck in their minds and hearts.

I’ve read and prayed about these verses over and over this week. There are just so many points that Paul makes that it is hard to know which one to emphasize. But there is one phrase that captures the essence of Paul’s preaching and teaching. Did you pick it out? If you selected verse 21 you win the prize. Throughout Paul’s writings the themes of repentance and faith occur again and again: “they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (v. 21). For Paul, the concept of repentance and faith is one action and not two. Repentance is not one decision and then faith another decision but rather repentance and faith constitute one action. In fact, Paul seldom uses the word “repentance” in his letters but opts for the word faith. Faith, for Paul, is understood as both repentance as well as faith. To have faith in Jesus is to turn from your sins toward God. So closely connected are these two words they can almost be understood as synonyms. When Paul writes to the Ephesians “For by grace have you been saved through faith,” Paul clearly has in mind that faith and repentance cannot be separated.

Repentance and faith imply for Paul that one is turning away from a life directed toward self to a life directed toward God. What a difficult concept! Paul is not suggesting that we ever attain a God-centered life, but he does say that a Christian is one who is moving in that direction.

This was the core of Paul’s preaching and life. A Christian is one who is continually being morphed into a new creation. Someone has said, “If you are what you were then you ain’t.”

Repentance and faith toward God explain Paul’s understanding of Christianity in a nutshell. From the moment we say “Yes” to God, we are continually moving toward God by *repenting* and *faithing* and becoming more like Jesus. Paul is not simply teaching a new philosophy; he is showing by example a new way of living and a new way of dying. Jesus did not come, according to Paul, to simply teach a holy idea; he came to make us holy. Paul says to the pastors of Ephesus, “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you...” (v.18). Life and faith for Paul were all intertwined. Paul’s preaching was backed up by his life! Paul could look people right in the eye, people who had known him for three years, people who had seen him every day for three years, and say, “You’ve seen me live and know that my life backs up my message.” Here is a very simple truth: If a Christian’s words about Jesus are not backed up by a lifestyle that reflects Jesus, then he will make no lasting impact for Jesus. But a faith backed up by a life will change the world.

What does a life of faith look like? What Paul is doing in his sermon to the Ephesian pastors is reminding them of what a life of faith looks like. A life of repentance and faith has certain qualities, certain characteristics.

First, to live a life of faith means to seek God above everything. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and has no idea what awaits him there. What he does know is that the Holy Spirit has warned him “that prison and hardship are facing” him (v. 23). But that doesn’t matter to Paul. He says, “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” (v. 24). Now Paul is either a very mentally sick man or he believes that the worth of his life pales in comparison to the work of God.

In a culture that places so much emphasis on life, it is hard for us to imagine that people will give their lives for great causes. But a mother will give her life for her child. A soldier may sacrifice his life for a friend. Why is it so difficult to imagine that Paul would sacrifice his life for God? Elton Trueblood, the devoted Quaker philosopher, once said that “if God is, then living for him is the highest and most noble task of human existence.”

Albert Schweitzer was one of the great humanitarians of the twentieth century. He was a great musician, a talented physician and a brilliant theologian. Living in Europe, he enjoyed the life of one of Europe’s elites. One night at dinner with friends he told them that he was going to Africa to work as a missionary doctor. They were shocked. How could this great man leave Europe and sacrifice his life in the jungles of Africa? They argued with him and asked how he could do such a thing. Schweitzer looked at his friends for a moment and then answered, “Don’t you know? God has called me.”

A life of repentance and faith understands that the greatest calling of one’s life is to seek first the kingdom of God. Only in striving to seek first God will one discover the true meaning and purpose of life.

What would it mean for you to live a life where you seek God first? What an incredibly radical concept. Imagine that in every decision you would first consider how your act would affect the kingdom of God, how it would impact his church and the lives of

other people. Let me challenge you this morning to pick out a day where for three or four hours you would act as if Jesus were living in you--just for one three or four hour period. And then maybe try it for a day. Live one entire day as if Jesus were living in you. Eventually, stretch a day into two then maybe three or even a complete week. Isn't this what it means to be a disciple?

The youth observed a wonderful weekend of spiritual growth called "Discipleship Now." Would you be so brave as to extend your weekend to school? Would you dare to live as though Jesus were living in you next time you are out with your friends?

Second, to live a life of faith means to trust God's grace. Paul hands over the Ephesians to God and "the word of his grace, which can build" them up (v. 32). Grace was an incredibly important part of Paul's faith. Paul knew that without grace there would be no life with God. Grace was God saying "Yes" to the world when the world deserved a "No." Grace opens the doors to have fellowship with God even though we are sinners. Grace accepts us back home when we have wasted our lives in the far country. But there is something mysterious and wonderful about grace: grace is infectious. The more grace that God pours into your life, the more you will grace the lives of others. Think of the people you know who are full of grace. What a blessing they are.

People of grace are accepting of others. People of grace shun the spirit of destructive criticism. People of grace build others up; they do not tear people down. When we are around people of grace, our lives are enriched and made better. Isn't it interesting that the common people, sinners and tax-collectors, loved to hang out with Jesus? With him these people experienced God's grace. Jesus accepted them just as they were.

There is a story in the Bible of a woman taken in the very act of adultery. She is guilty of committing an immoral act, punishable by death in the Jewish legal system. If you would have been on the jury, what verdict would you have given? Another time a woman of the streets visits Jesus and anoints his feet with expensive oil. She is immoral and perhaps dirty. Her body odor offends all those around her. As you witness this act by this prostitute, what thoughts would go through your mind? What would you have said to your wife on the way home? Those kinds of acts are happening around us all the time. People come into our church that don't look like us or act like us and how we treat them and what we say about them to others more than answers how we would have responded in Jesus' day.

It is important for us to remember that not only are we saved by grace but we also live by grace. To live by grace means to means to accept others as they are. One does not first become righteous and then receive God's grace. Grace is present from the very beginning—"while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

Stories of grace are mind-boggling in the Bible. Read the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke fifteen. The story makes no sense. It is not even fair. But it is wonderful! God's love is radical. He loves his creation for absolutely no reason at all.

Third, to live a life of faith means learning to live more simply. Did you read the part where Paul said that he had not "coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing" (v. 33)? I think all too often we do covet people's silver and gold. Our culture teaches that we must always have more and thus many of us are selling our souls for just a little bit more. But no matter how much we have, it is never enough. The Jewish Talmud asks the question, "Who is wealthy?" Answer: The man who is content with what he has.

Paul was aware that more things did not increase happiness or the ability to serve God. In fact, material possessions are like weights that drag us down and imprison us. Jesus cautioned us that no person can live a life committed to both things and God. We must choose. When Jesus speaks of material things, money for instance, he personalizes them. He understands material things are rival gods. They seek to control our lives and many of us are in their deadly power. One economist has written: "Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self." The offering on Sunday morning is not just a collection to help defray costs but is truly an expression of where our hearts are.

To choose God means to choose to live more simply. All too often we think we have to buy the most expensive car or the biggest house we can afford. We use our credit cards and drive ourselves in debt and then have no money left to give to the poor or those who are truly needy. Do not be the servant of things. Use them, yes, but do not allow them to control you. Do not allow things to become another way to satisfy the self. If you do, you end up selling your soul.

A few years ago I read of a company that was concerned with employees who were stealing from the company. The security guards were charged with checking every person leaving to make sure that nothing was being stolen from the company. One man left every day with a wheelbarrow full of trash. The guards checked the wheelbarrow closely but could find nothing. They were certain that the man was stealing something but could not figure out what it was.

One day the guard said to the man, "Look, I know you're stealing something. If you tell me, I promise I'll let you go. I'm just curious as to what you are taking." The man smiled and said, "Simple, I'm stealing wheelbarrows!"

Some people just never get it, do they? How tragic when people in the church never figure out what Christianity is all about. Christianity in a nutshell is expressed through repentance and faith: Seek God first, trust God's grace and live more simply. Amen.