

Series: You Are Sent Vol. 3 – “Planning to Go, willing to stay”

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Text: Acts 20.17-38

Sermon: The cost of Building a faithful church

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PRAY OVER THE INCOMING MIDDLE SCHOOL/HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AT START

MPT: Elders shepherd the church by devoting themselves above all to God’s word of grace, teaching the full gospel to the church, and guarding against threats to gospel ministry.

MPS: We cannot build God’s church without great personal cost to each of us.

Intro

I missed you guys! I love you so much and consider it a real joy to be your pastor. I especially love preaching God’s word to you so I have MISSED this. If you are new in the last 6 weeks my name is Spence and I serve as the lead pastor here and each summer this wonderful church body creates space for me to unplug for a few weeks & meet with God & enjoy my family and man. But I’m back and so excited to preach. I was preaching my dinner plans by the time I was ready to come back. Sandwiches, Salads, & Steak.

One reason it was hard for me to be gone is because I suffer from a condition commonly called FOMO. Anybody else? I love a good time. And my time is limited. So I want to do the greatest possible thing I can with every minute I have. Maximize my minutes. In fact, in college when I was dating Courtney she’d get frustrated with me because I would wait to commit to something for fear of missing out on a better opportunity that may come along. And then I got in business school and they taught me the term opportunity cost. Where if you decide to go one way in a business plan you don’t just look at what it will cost you to do that thing, you also need to look at the COST of the opportunities you may be missing out on. And I thought THANK YOU. And I went back to Courtney and said SEE...I’m just SMART. And she said oh ok...well what is the OPPORTUNITY COST of taking me on a date? What are the *other things* You’d rather be doing? And I said...IT’S A TRAP! And ran outta there.

We all function in terms of opportunity cost... all the time. There are only so many minutes and so many dollars and one life. If we commit to little league baseball, we can’t do soccer. If we do both, we can’t have a life....if we commit to that girl, we can’t have the girl that might come along later. And in the end the decisions we make....the dollars and minutes we spend...reveal what matters most to us. We spend our lives on what we think is BEST...or another way to say it...on what we value over and above other opportunities. Well, today we are going to see what it costs to build a church. Not financial cost...that’s really a small footnote in our passage. It’s about personal cost. About things like time, attention, mental and emotional effort, fighting enemies and saying goodbye to

friends. And deeper still today's passage is about WHY would we do all of that? Why spend so much of our lives...thereby giving up other opportunities...to build God's church? Today is about what it costs to build a faithful church. What it costs us TOGETHER...what it costs you personally.

Now let me set you up for where we are. If you are new to the Bible there is this guy named Paul and he is a church planter who travels all around the Mediterranean preaching the gospel and starting new churches. And the 2nd half of the book of Acts documents a good bit of his travels. We pick up in Acts 20 verse 13 today and Luke in the first few verses is going to do a little google maps step by step for us.

17 Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and summoned the elders of the church.

Here's where he was – Show map

Basically guys I'm in a bit of a hurry because I gotta get 600 miles to Jerusalem so can you come 30 miles to meet me? And so the elders are the leaders of the church in Ephesus...the one he later wrote a letter to creatively called EPHESIANS. And he says this is going to be his last time EVER with them face to face. So he's giving them instructions on what to do from here. It's a young church with leaders young in the faith. So this is a big moment. And his word to them is basically: If you want to build a faithful church, it's going to come at great personal cost to you and those you lead. You are going to give up a lot. He shares his own hardships in ministry and then calls them to a similar calling. This is a "count the cost" moment for

these elders. And I believe it should be a count the cost moment for our elders. I already let them know that about this passage. And I also believe it should be a count the cost moment for each of you. Will you join us in building a faithful church... if it costs you something? If it means you can't do something else because your time and energy and resources go to God's kingdom? Gonna walk through this passage, through Paul's sermon to the Ephesian elders, and show you 5 costs.

18 When they came to him, he said to them, "You know, from the first day I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19 serving the Lord with all humility, with tears, and during the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews.

If you are going to serve the Lord...it's going to come with tears and trials. I promise. There is heartache and heartbreak in following Jesus. In giving your life away for a cause greater than yourself. And therefore it requires humility. If you are proud and believe you can do it all...you will burn out. Because tears and trials are coming. This is why a lot of young pastors burn out. They believe they are superman when they are Louis Lane. They are reporters of the news who are constantly in trouble & in need of superman. This isn't even one of the 5 things it's just laying the groundwork. Paul's ministry is hard and ours will be too.

20 You know that I did not avoid proclaiming to you anything that was profitable or from teaching you publicly and from house to house. 21 I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.

Just because it was hard doesn't mean he stopped! Listen...life is hard! choosing to devote your life to the cause of Christ and therefore serving others...that's even harder. And just because it's hard doesn't mean it's wrong or bad. In fact, choosing to be faithful to proclaiming the gospel during hard times is how God refines you and sometimes its where God does his most unexpected work. Because only he can get the glory. Some of you are well versed in following Jesus during hard times. And he has refined you and made you into a powerful beacon of his grace. And others of you are going through it now.

22 "And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, compelled by the Spirit, not knowing what I will encounter there, 23 except that in every town the Holy Spirit warns me that chains and afflictions are waiting for me. 24 But I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God's grace.

Ok now we arrive at opportunity cost. What is underneath all of this. What explains Paul's actions. What it costs to build a faithful church. I see two things in these first few verses:

1. Building a faithful church will cost us our surrender

Look at verse 24. When he says I consider my life of no value to myself...he's not making a mental health warning sign. Like his actual physical life is just worthless. He's saying life under HIS purposes. Life with HIS dreams...he's talking about opportunity cost. And he's saying those things.... that future...it is not valuable to me AT ALL. Because he has tasted

the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord. He's found something better!

Is verse 24 true of you? Are you willing to go there with the Lord?

Can't help but think of the rich young man Jesus talked about in Mark 10. This young man says he has obeyed the law perfectly, he's been a good guy and Jesus says you got one more thing to do... sell EVERYTHING you have and follow me. SELL It ALL. And he looked at that life. That stuff. And the cost was too high for him. He couldn't surrender his wealth. So he left Jesus. IT'S A TRAGEDY!

There's this really famous sermon in Christian circles from John Piper that he preached in the year 2000. It was right around the time I graduated high school so it really stuck with me. He compared two stories he read in a newspaper. One was about a missionary couple who was killed in a hostile region while sharing the gospel. And the article said "what a tragedy." The other was about Stan & Jean or something who retired & bought a house at the beach and spent the next 20 years collecting seashells. And piper said...That's the tragedy. This couple who bought the American dream and gets to the end of their lives and has a seashell collection to show for it. And he said can you imagine standing before the Lord the moment after you die and looking up and the Lord asks for an account of your life and you say "HERE LORD...MY SHELL COLLECTION!" Then he just whispers...don't waste your life.

And a new generation of believers needs to take up that call. The American dream is still being sold to you. DON'T BUY IT!

I'm not saying wealth is bad or that working hard is bad. I'm saying the whole hearted pursuit of 25 years of COMFORT instead of looking to 100,000 years and more with the Lord is insanity.

Is it costing you ANYTHING to follow Jesus? Is it costing you anything to advance the gospel? God says he PURCHASED you with his son's blood. You were bought with a price! So glorify God in your body 1 Corinthians 6. Let's get practical...Look at your life like a budget.

25 "And now I know that none of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will ever see me again. 26 Therefore I declare to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, 27 because I did not avoid declaring to you the whole plan of God

2. Building a faithful church requires cherishing and proclaiming the full gospel of repentance, grace, & the kingdom.

I love that Paul articulates the different facets of the gospel right next to one another. He reminds them the gospel is one of repentance and faith

A gospel that does not call you to turn from your sin is not the gospel

These sermons we preach here aren't tips for better living with a little Jesus sprinkled on top. The gospel we preach and the gospel all of our members live by is one that actually owns

how sinful we humans really are. We have hearts that are PRONE to wander. That desire to lie, cheat, steal whatever it takes to preserve our own self-interest. We are sinners!

A gospel that does not offer you salvation by God's Grace alone is not the gospel (24) –

The gospel starts with GOD not with you. He has offered you grace not because you deserve it...but because he loves you. The hardest thing in the world is to surrender your pride. You cannot climb your way to heaven. You must kneel your way there. The gospel is an announcement of grace because you can't earn it. It's plain and simply the announcement of a gift FROM God to be received by YOU. Jesus died to pay the price for your sin. And your freedom is found in dying to your old life & receiving the new life he has for you. Have you ever counted the cost? And then received the gospel of God's grace?

A gospel that forgets The kingdom is not the gospel – The great hope of the gospel is that death is not the end! Because Jesus defeated death and ascended into heaven...so will we! This is the hope of the church! In fact, the church NOW here on earth is to be a sign...a kingdom representative. Showing what heaven will be like. Sacrificing for one another as any have need. Worshipping alongside those from other ethnicities and income levels as brothers and sisters in Christ. Serving each other with joy. And the watching world will take notice!

You might build a church, even a big flashy one. Maybe one where everyone is really moral and upstanding... but it will not

be a faithful one, if the full gospel is not preached. See there's this letter at the end of the bible called Revelation. And in the first part of it there is an announcement to 7 different churches. And one of them is this very church. The Ephesian church. And it says you did everything right but this one thing I have against you...you have lost your first love.

Are you willing to count the cost of repenting...turning from your sin...turning from the future you could without God's involvement...and receive the grace of Christ through faith in his death and resurrection? Oh there is no greater COST in this world. And yet Paul says it's not worth anything compared to knowing Christ.

28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them. 31 Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears. 32 "And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified."

3. Building a faithful church costs the attentive security of the elders against external and internal threats

Here specifically he addresses the function of elders in the church. And I want to make sure you are clear on that because

it informs how we function here. The elders...plural...more than one. There is a whole group of them in this room and we at mercy church have multiple elders that lead our church. They do not rule our church, they lead it. Jesus rules the church. Scripture says he is the head. And then we have a group of elders. You heard a couple of them preach while I was out and we desire to see many more become elders. This isn't my church. It's Christ's church. I am one of its pastors and I'm grateful to be so.

He says be on guard for yourselves first, then for the flock. Think like airplane instructions. You gotta put your mask on before helping your child. Cause if you pass out you are no help. Likewise, elders MUST attend to their own souls. Because the enemy will come after them. 6 weeks may have seemed like a long time away for me. Better that than a worn out pastor all the more vulnerable to the temptations of the enemy.

But here is what the elders are to do...shepherd the flock. Elders / Pastors / Shepherds the word is interchangeable in the Greek. We must shepherd. Which means feed & protect. Feed with the word & prayer, and protect by attentiveness to threats. This is very difficult & spiritually exhausting because on our own power we cannot see the wolves. They dress like sheep.

A wolf comes in ACTIVELY intent on hurting others. One example, maybe an extreme one, are sexual predators. We've put AMPLE security checks in place in our kids' ministry because we want to be a church that protects the vulnerable

among us and we put an officer here every week because if we get a whiff of a predator we are sending you straight to him or her. Period. Wolves look to kill. They are hunters. So we pray against them constantly. & we watch.

We also devote ourselves to the teaching of faithful doctrine. Listen it's my main job to teach the word of God as faithfully as I can. And to train up others to do the same!! And maybe you feel like you have the gift of teaching. Are you willing to submit your teaching to our elders...who are charged by God with protecting sound doctrine?

Ya'll like Paul this is what keeps me up at night. We may not do everything right. Our facilities may be tough at times and our ministries may go through transitions BUT...my job remains steadfastly to shepherd you. And I do so with joy and tears. I've shed many tears over mercy church. My beard & half my hair has joyfully grown greyer each year through this. And I will gladly continue as long as the lord will let me!

This by the way is why we need more elders. Our church is growing. We need more watchers. More teachers. It's why we need more deacons. They devote themselves to meeting the needs of the church so the elders can watch, teach, & pray. It's why you...who have been gifted by God...maybe in teaching maybe in serving maybe in

leadership...whatever...you need to say am I willing to forgo the opportunity cost of spending my time on me and jump in and be a part of a movement where the lost are being found & the found are being raised up & the raised up are being sent?

33 I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. 34 You yourselves know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those who are with me. 35 In every way I've shown you that it is necessary to help the weak by laboring like this and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, because he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

4. A faithful church finds joy in giving

It is more blessed to give than to receive. Paul says I have not coveted anyone's stuff. I even earned a living from tent making while with you to make sure you knew I was not in it for the \$.

See Covetousness spoils relationships and hinders the work of the gospel, since those who are seeking to advance themselves materially will be tempted to evaluate their contacts and ministry opportunities in economic terms.¹ In other letters Paul applauds the church members for voluntarily funding the ministry and the pastors who lead it. But here, while in Ephesus, he warns them against covetousness and says it is more blessed to give than to receive. Should you give financially to the ministry of the

¹ Peterson, D. G. (2009). [*The Acts of the Apostles*](#) (p. 573). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

gospel? Absolutely. But voluntarily and out of joy. And Our elders should not only LEAD in that practice of generosity, but must also guard our hearts against covetousness so that we can lead you to do the same. And the BEST way to guard against greed...is GIVING! I bet hardly anyone in here would admit they struggle with the sin of coveting. OF desiring what others have. It's one of the most deceptive of all the sins we have on a cultural level. And the antidote...is gospel-motivated generosity. It's giving! The more you give...the more joy in Christ you will find! I promise! Don't believe me? TRY IT. Forever I've told you...you should give your money to the local church and I believe in this church so I have no problem telling you My family gives to this ministry and we are always looking for ways to give more because we believe in it. BUT...if you've got some church baggage you are coming in here with...don't let that get in the way. Just give somewhere else. Give to one of our nonprofit ministry partners here in charlotte like Congregations for Kids. The point is just GIVE! Give somewhere! And see what God does to YOU.

36 After he said this, he knelt down and prayed with all of them. 37 There were many tears shed by everyone. They embraced Paul and kissed him, 38 grieving most of all over his statement that they would never see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

5. A faithful church accepts the cost of sending

Listen – our theme is YOU. ARE. SENT. I believe one of Mercy's callings in charlotte is to train up and send out church planters & pastors to revitalize churches. I believe that's to be here in

Charlotte and around the world. But it's not easy. That's not some sexy ministry model. Truthfully its hard. There's pain involved. We just went through some of it when dear friends went to plant a church right here in Charlotte. We'll go through it again next year when we send more friends to plant across the globe. Being a sending church means planning to go. And planning for those we love to go. Maybe some of you have never seen a loving tear saturated gospel goodbye. I grew up seeing two church splits and it wasn't until I was in my mid 20s that I saw a church faithfully & lovingly send out brothers and sisters to the work God was calling them to. But that's a faithful church. We don't hold God's resources with closed hands. But with open hands. And we embrace & kiss & grieve...And send off. And then you know what those Ephesian elders did? They turned around walked back to Ephesus and started multiplying churches all across the area. Because the church was about one man but it wasn't Paul. It was Jesus. And Jesus says I will be WITH YOU even to the ends of the age. Even when Paul leaves for good. Some of you need to step out of your community group & plant a new one because you've got 82 people in a 800 sq ft apartment and we are busting at the seams with people who want to belong to this movement. You are going to have to be willing to say a gospel goodbye in order to take your next step of obedience.

Church I don't know what the future holds but in January I told you I hope we plant 2 churches in the next 5 years. Not surprisingly I drastically underestimated what the Lord would do. We'll be there by next summer. Maybe we'll plant 5 in 5 years? I don't know. But we don't aspire to be a cruise ship trying to entertain everyone who comes on board. We are

more like an aircraft carrier trying to train up and deploy God's people to bring about a gospel awakening here in Charlotte and to the ends of the earth.

CLOSING – What is it going to cost you to go all in on God's mission? The time is now church.