

# “Six Defining Characteristics of a Successful Life” // Acts 20:17–38 // *The Whole Story #41*

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## Acts 20

I've been thinking a lot this week about moments in which we have the opportunity to define ourselves, to determine the values we will live by and the legacy we leave.

This is happening now right in front of us with **2 presidents**—one on his way out, trying to shore up his legacy; the other on his way in, determining what is going to shape his administration.

**When you get elected president**, your life will be defined by what you do in those years. Your life is much longer than those 4 or 8 years, but what people remember about you is shaped by what you do during that time.

**I share that for 2 reasons: ONE, I want to remind you to pray our President.** Even when you don't agree with their policies, we are commanded to honor and pray for them.

**2<sup>nd</sup>, I want you to have a similar moment to what these guys are going through today.** I know you probably haven't been elected President of anything in the last week, nor are you likely putting together an administration, but there are key moments in your life

where **you decide what is going to define** the rest of your life, and what values and principles are going to shape how you live.

**Author-philosopher Beverly Donofrio** One day can make your life. One day can ruin your life.... Essentially, when you look back over your life, you'll see it is determined by decisions you made on 4 or 5 days that changed everything.

**In Acts 20** Paul gives a farewell speech that summarizes the 6 values he's lived by. He's **saying goodbye** to the church leaders in Ephesus, where he's **spent the last 3 years**. As far as he knows, he's never going to see any of these guys again. He is **headed to Jerusalem and then to Rome**, where he assumes he's going to be martyred. This is his farewell speech to them.

*If you were making a farewell speech, **what would you include?***

I used to lead a Bible study called “Men's Frat,” and one of the things we would do is have them draw out a tombstone and put on it the 5-6 things they would want to be remembered by. These are the 6 things Paul wants them to remember.

(BTW: little Bible trivia; this is the **only extended speech** in all of Acts made to other Christians—all the other recorded speeches and sermons are made to unbelievers—so this speech is important, and I think that's because it gives us crucial insight into how **the Holy Spirit wants all believers to think about their lives**).

**Acts 20:17–38 – 6 statements from Paul's farewell speech**

Works Consulted:

Tim Keller, “The Gospel Ministry”

James MacDonald, “Famous Last Words”

Bob Shank, “Living, Under God”

Levi Lusko, “Carry the One”

20 “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable... [26] Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, [27] for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

### 1. I made sure my generation knew the truth (vv. 20, 26–27)

- Twice Paul says to them, “*I have done my duty: I delivered the message God had me give you; I told you everything.*”
- Paul saw himself **primarily as the bearer of a message**. As a messenger was not responsible for whether people liked it, only that they heard it.
- And for Paul, this was **very serious business**. Vs 26, “*I am innocent of the blood of all.*” (26)
  - That’s on **odd statement, right?** Why would he use that language?
  - Because he sees this is a life or death message.
- Paul is **likely here thinking about the passage in the OT** where the prophet Ezekiel says, “*When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.*” Ezekiel 33:8
  - When I know something, and don’t warn you... BRIDGE STORY
- **The gospel is an announcement that the human race stands underneath the judgment of God because of our rebellion.**
- The **gospel starts with bad news**, very bad news: we are dead in our sin and there’s nothing we can do about that.
- But, after the bad news, the gospel proceeds to give us good news, the greatest news: **God so loved the world** that he gave his only Son—Jesus, who came and did for us what we could never do for ourselves. He lived the sinless life we were supposed to live, and then died the sinner’s death we should have died, and now offers forgiveness as a gift to all who will receive it. The gospel declares that if you will turn from your rebellion, and admit that

you need to be saved and that you cannot save yourself, he will save you and give you eternal life.

I’m **not responsible for how you respond** to that; I am responsible for making sure you hear it and understand it.

**Does your community know the truth?** Have you made it clear to them? **Have you made it clear to everyone in your life? Have they felt its weight?**

- Vs. 31, “*...for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.*”
- Do you remember the story I told a couple of weeks ago of the girl who said, “**Do you really believe this?**”

**That’s kind of the question, isn’t it?** Do we really believe the message? Do you believe heaven and hell are real?

- **Sometimes people are like**, “You are an educated person, you really believe in a hell?”
  - **Well, Jesus believed in it.** He talked about it more often than he did heaven.
- **They say, “Like, with literal flames and smoke?”**
  - **The Bible uses a lot of metaphor**, and I don’t know everything, but even if they are symbols, whatever these things are pointing to is a terrible reality...
  - **Rev 21:8** calls hell the fiery abyss of burning sulfur, where is weeping and darkness and gnashing of teeth, and the smoke of their torment ascends forever.
  - *If those just symbols, then what are they symbols for? A winter retreat? A summer vacation?*
- *No, it’s a terrible reality... and **Summit, I believe it is morally wrong** to know that and live in complacency.*

**It demands something of us.**

It ought to change how we look at our stuff.

- In **Long Beach, California**, you can visit a ship that's been turned into museum. It was originally launched as the **Queen Mary**, the ultimate luxury cruise liner of the time for rich people, but in **WW2 it was commandeered** to carry troops back and forth in battle.
- You can go onto the ship now and see examples of **both setups**:
  - When it was a luxury liner, it housed 3000 with every possible convenience.
  - In wartime, however, they refitted it so it could house 15,000 people. Rooms that once slept 1 couple now slept 8.
- The point: **Wartime and peacetime demand different things.**

The **same thing is true for us.**

- As best we can, **this mentality forms our approach as a church.** We're not trying to build the Queen Mary luxury liner for Christians. We're build a **rescue station** for lost people.
  - Now, it doesn't have to be trashy—we want to have warm, inviting, well-kept environments, done excellently for the glory of God.
  - But we do it with the understanding that our resources weren't given to us to create a cruise liner for Christians, but a rescue station for the broken.
- **We use the phrase, "resourceful excellence"** (*Do it excellently, but with a wise use of our resources*).

I believe this principle should also shape your approach to life:

There's **nothing wrong** with enjoying God's blessings; there is something morally wrong with putting your head in the sand and pretending the world is not lost.

- *"This generation of believers is responsible for this generation of souls all over the world."* (Keith Green)
- **(You want to know why we do things like Multiply? This is why. We're their only shot, and we should live that way.)**

## 2. I directed people's attention toward Jesus, not toward me (v. 19)

Notice, Paul says in vs. 19, "I served the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials."

- That's **not typically** how great leaders describe themselves, is it? Leaders talk about their **victories**. Their accomplishments. Their strengths.
  - In fact, **that word, "humility" in vs. 19** is often translated weakness, and it was **almost always** considered an insult. It meant low, defeated, weak...
  - But the word is used **200 times** in the Bible, and it's almost always presented a virtue.
- **Why? Why does** Paul take a word normally intended as an insult and turn it into a virtue?
  - **Because Christian ministry, at its core, is not about extraordinary men and women of great power; it's** about a great Savior who can save and then use the weakest, most broken, and most guilty of sinners.
- Paul doesn't want to leave them with an example to admire but a Savior to trust in, and weakness and trials and tears are how God demonstrates the sufficiency of that Savior.
  - "A humble and weak person will show a crucified savior better to a listener than a polished, pulled together expert. Because that's how it happened for us: we weren't saved by pulling ourselves together, but by admitting we were sinners and calling on the one who was pulled apart for us." Tim Keller
- **As your pastor, I want your attention to be on Jesus**, not on me. I don't want to posture myself up here as a man who has it all together, because a) that's not true; b) I want you to see that I'm a recovering sinner like you are, so you can learn to hope in Jesus like I have.

- What you need is not an impressive example but an all-sufficient Savior.
- **With my kids...** I want to help them see that I'm a sinner like they are. They already think I'm superman.
  - But by admitting my sin in front of them—maybe my sin toward their mother, toward them—and asking for forgiveness and prayer, they can learn that Daddy is a saved sinner, too, and they can learn to hope in Jesus in their insecurities and failings.
  - I don't want them to grow up trying to live up to a model—like Pharisees; but hoping in a Savior—like Christians.

**Confession of our sin, weakness, tears and trials, are how demonstrate to others the sufficiency of the Savior.**

- Do you wonder why it is, when you become a Christian, God doesn't make everything easy?
  - Why would Paul's life be characterized by tears and trials?
  - Because **tears and trials are how God keeps us weak in ourselves** so we can be strong in pointing people to him.
  - When you've been broken, and weakened, you can better testify to the strength of the Savior.
- **This is also, I'll mention before we move on, the heart behind sacrifice.**
  - Sacrificial generosity is deliberately divesting yourself of resources you could use to "strengthen yourself" to redirect people's attention to Jesus!
  - **When you give sacrificially**, you are saying, "My life is not about me."
    - My talents, my treasures were not given to me for me, but for me to help people know Jesus!
  - When we give, we voluntarily put yourself through tears and trials so that others can see Jesus.

### **3. I invested deeply in God's community, the church (vs. 28)**

In vs. 28, Paul says to the Ephesian elders: [28] **Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.**

There is one institution, Paul says, that Jesus died for; one body he gave his life to create—the church.

- Investment made in school—they really want this to succeed!
- No one has made a bigger investment in any institution.

Paul says, If Jesus poured out his blood for the church, I'm going to pour my life into it."

Now, **I know your role is not the same as the Apostle Paul's.** It's not the same as mine. But the church ought to be the center of our lives.

- **The church**, Paul tells us, **is Christ's body**—the means by which he does his work on earth.
  - **I've described it like this:** When my brain wants to accomplish something on earth, it doesn't send out magic brain waves. It uses the body.
- The **church is Jesus' bride**—what he gave his life for (and like I told you the other week, you can't love someone and hate their bride).
  - If Jesus died for the church, you should be deeply devoted to it.
  - I know it's not perfect—that's why Jesus died for it.
- **But you should be deeply committed to it**, and very connected in it—not just a casual attender on the weekend, but involved and invested.

That's **why we do things like Multiply.** The church is Jesus' way of impacting the world, and you should be committed to it.

**Listen, I know this political season has shaken** a lot of us—many of us are really discouraged, if not lost faith in our government

altogether. And in the big picture that can be good, because we know that ultimate hope and ultimate salvation has never been found in politics, anyway. *But based on how emotionally invested many of us got in the election, many of us forgot that.*

**More than ever, this is the time for the church to rise up.** We're the only ones that can offer real hope, real salvation. We are the ones who can heal deep wounds and demonstrate true multicultural unity.

That's **why Multiply is so timely**: This is the **time for the Summit Church rise up in RDU**.

- Based on what I read in Scripture, what the Triangle looks like for our kids, and our grandkids, and future generations of college students and immigrants has less to do with who sits in the Governor's Mansion or the White House and more to do with what we do in the coming days at the Summit Church!

#### 4. I have been faithful to do all that Jesus told me to do (vs. 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," (vs. 24)
- This was personal to Paul. He had received a personal assignment from Jesus: "My course. The ministry I received."
- God **doesn't give the same assignment to everybody**. But he has given you an assignment. And at the end of the day, we'll answer to him for **what we did** with what he gave us.
- *In another place, Paul said it this way: 1 Cor 4:2, "All that is required of stewards is that they be found faithful."*
  - **A steward in those days was a servant...** A steward wasn't responsible to provide for the house. They were only responsible to do what the Master had said.
  - A lot of us spend **a lot of time thinking about how successful** we are, how much of an impact we are going to make. That's not the concern of a steward.
  - **Success and failure are "master" words**; faithfulness is the concern of stewards.

- And what we find in Scripture is that God uses ordinary acts of faithfulness to accomplish his most extraordinary things.
  - Think of the little boy offering the **5 loaves and 2 fish**
  - **Every once in a while we get a glimpse now... I got a letter from a guy...** gave him a Bible. It's made me wonder, "What is heaven like?"

It is faithfully parenting your child...

Telling someone about Jesus...

Praying...

Serving and giving...

These are what God uses to accomplish his greatest works.

#### 5. I finished strong (vv. 23–24)

- Paul was determined to finish strong. In vs. 23, he **explains that the Holy Spirit** has told him that a lot of hardship is in his future, but (24) "...but none of these things move me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus."
- In another place Paul says, **it matters less how you start the race and more how you finish.**
- A lot of people **start well** in the Christian life, but they don't persevere on to the finish.
  - They are like one-hit Christian wonders. The Mark Ronson or Carly Rae Jepsen of Christians. (Or Milli Vanilli for those of you whom the last time you were current with pop culture was the 1990's)
  - It always really grieves me. They sit on front row for a few weeks; raise their hands in praise and then fizzle out.
- **It usually happens for one of a handful of reasons.**
- Sometimes it is just the **pain of obedience**.
  - It **felt great** to make the decision.
    - **Stick in the fire**: cool, got to go up, sing "I have decided." We cried, put our arms around each other. The hard part is living that out.

- Paul, **Romans 12:1** Dilemma of a living sacrifice. *“When the flame gets hot, the sacrifice gets up.”*
- For others, it was just that they **never really considered the cost** of following Jesus.
  - **They loved what Jesus had to offer. Get God on my side? Take you to heaven? Present with me to help with your problems?** Yes, please!
  - But what inevitably happens, I’ve told you, is that at some point obedience to Jesus is takes you 180 degrees opposite of where you want to go and at that point you are going to have to decide, *“How valuable is Jesus to me?”*
  - You wanted Jesus and comfort. **Jesus and your viewpoint** on a particular thing. Jesus and your hopes of what your life should be.
  - And you’re going to have to choose—when it’s not Jesus *and*, but Jesus or... which is more valuable to you.
- Sometimes people just give up from **fatigue**: *They just don’t see the payoff for all their sacrifice*. They are not seeing the fruit; not feeling the multiplication.
  - Paul felt like that sometimes.
  - You know, in being the hand-selected ambassador from God, he got some odd reactions to his sermons.
  - Often his sermons ended with people trying to stone him.
  - One time it ended with a guy getting so bored he fell asleep in a window sill, dropped 3 stories and dying.

**Paul said**, *“Pain, the costs of following Jesus, fatigue,”* none of these things move me; I just want to finish my course.” Why? Because he looked forward to the finish and saw Jesus standing at the end!

- **Paul staked everything on whether Jesus had risen from the dead.**
- **In 1 Cor 15**, Paul was addressing a group of beleaguered believers, who were really tired and just wanted to quit. And he says, “Look, what you’ve got to decide whether you really believe Jesus rose from the dead.”
  - Because if Christ didn’t really rise from the dead, first of all, he says, we Apostles are liars.
    - We’re not nice guys or great religious leaders, we are frauds and phonies.
  - Second, if Christ didn’t rise from the dead, you are still in your sins,
    - because the resurrection, he said, is the proof that God accomplished our salvation in the cross.
  - Furthermore, if Christ didn’t rise from the dead, those saints in the Bible who died believing the promises of God are lost; no better off than people who paid no attention.
  - And finally, if Christ didn’t rise from the dead, all our sacrifices are worthless.
    - All this hardship we go through; all this sacrifice, it’s all for nothing and we are of all men most to be pitied!

**Paul says, “This really happened.”**

- **He was beaten and tortured until he died**, after which a Roman soldier rammed a spear through his heart to make sure, then he was buried in a tomb, guarded by a garrison of soldiers, and then 3 days later, people saw him walking around.
- **BTW, how unnerving would that be?** You go to a funeral, go the viewing. See him buried. Throw a handful of dirt on the body. And then next week that guy comes up to you in Starbucks and say, “How you doing?”
  - And if it happened, it changes everything. Nothing I am doing is wasted. Everything will ultimately succeed!
  - Even a cup of cold water given in my name... is not waster

- **So he says, be steadfast, unmovable in your service**, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because their labor is not in vain—because the God who brought resurrection out of Jesus’ work will bring resurrection and victory out of yours.

**Some of you need to renew this vision in yourself; some of you have never really seen it to begin with**, you’ve just gone along with the crowd, you’ve never really asked yourself if you believe it, and that’s why you give up.

- Illus. **Dogs under porch.**
- Do you really believe the resurrection is true? If so, stake your life on it!

Which means: **What you start in faith, finish!**

- **Some of you have started following Jesus, and it’s gotten hard.** If you believe he is resurrected, get up and keep going!
- **For some of you, being faithful in your family or job has gotten difficult:** FINISH.
  - Guys, don’t be one of those ridiculous guys who gets bored in life in his 50’s, buys a sports car, unbuttons his shirt down to his navel, which makes us want to vomit, and then plays golf all the time. FINISH!
- **Mothers: Some of you took time off from your career** to spend with your kids; and you feel like this chapter is hard and unrewarding. Finish it in the faith you started.
- **Some of you made a MULTIPLY commitment:** Do it step by step! Keep believing in the sacrifice and stay faithful to the course.

It’s not how you start the race, but whether you finish!

## 6. I gave more than I took (vv. 33, 35)

- “I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel... by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (20:33, 35)

- This is the last thing Paul says to them... a man’s **final words are probably the most significant**; it’s what is most on his mind; what he most wants them to remember. And Paul’s last words are about generosity.
- **Paul thought of a successful, blessed life** as one in which you give more than you take. Why? Because that had been the defining characteristic of Jesus.
  - **His whole life had been defined by giving, not receiving.**
  - **Even on the night before he died**, Jesus had washed the disciple’s feet.
    - **If I knew I was about to die, for you**, the night before I would have been like, “Look, this is me-time.” But even there, Jesus served.

Jesus explained, “It is more blessed to live this way...” (makarios)

Is that **how you look at your life?**

- **In your marriage—**
  - **Do you think it is more blessed to give than to receive?**
  - **Do you serve your spouse** more than you expect them to serve you? Guys: Whose preferences do you think more about? Ladies: Whose comfort and happiness are you more devoted to?
- **In your friendships; in how you relate to your parents?** Do you give more than you take?
  - *The key to happy, blessed relationships is to give more than you take!*
- **How about in your career:** Do you look at your career primarily as a tool to ‘get’ all you can? Or **have you asked how your career might be used to give to the mission of God?**
  - **Back in my backstage area: The first English Bible - William Tyndale & Humphrey Monmouth:** *In the 1500’s an Englishman named William Tyndale wanted to translate the Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew into English. For 1,000 years the Bible had been locked in Latin,*

but most Englishmen couldn't read Latin and therefore did not know the Bible. Tyndale wanted to change that. The problem was Bible translation was illegal; you could be killed for it. **But God intervened through a godly businessman** named Humphrey Monmouth. Monmouth protected Tyndale, he provided for him, and he even used his merchant ships to smuggle the first English New Testaments throughout England. Very few people have ever heard of Monmouth, but his partnership with Tyndale changed the world.<sup>1</sup>

- Some of you have careers that can be leveraged for the mission. GCI
- Some of you make a lot of money, and that's great. God didn't give you that just to increase standard of living... he gave it to you to **multiply**.
- **Retirement**, how do you see that chapter of your life? Is that mainly "you" time?
  - **Are you like**, "Finally, I can live at the beach, play golf, and make it all about me!" (When older Christians talk like that I always want to say, "Are you so old in Christ and you still don't understand the gospel?" It is more blessed to give than to receive.
  - **If you have achieved financial independence**, that is more time you can pour our more freely for God's kingdom without being a financial burden on people.)
    - You can go with GCI
  - **With what you're doing with your money in retirement**: I heard an older, wealthy man in our church say recently, "I want my last check to bounce gave it all away."
    - One of our pastors: I'm way ahead of them—my checks are bouncing today.

It is more blessed to give than to receive. This is the last thing Paul says to them, and it's arguably it's the most important question, because it is the most fundamental question of disciples:

### **Do you look at your life as given to you to multiply?**

*Because that is what it means, Paul says, to really follow Jesus.*

So there it is: Paul's philosophy of life!

- I will make sure my community knows about Jesus.
- I will direct people's attention toward Jesus, not toward me.
- I invested deeply in God's body, the church
- I have been faithful to do what Jesus told me to do
- I finished strong
- I gave more than I took

In this season we've given you a tool to think this through in one area of your life. PULL OUT CARD

- (Stay seated and reflect)
- **"Think, pray, and write"**

The 3 GROUPS:

1. *I will tell you, we are rarely ever more like Christ than when we give. So take this step. Join us on this final year of Multiply. Commit like never before, and see what God will do.*
  - 100% of our pastoral team and staff.
  - Looking for a yearly number
2. *Finish strong. "I am renewing my faith commitment."*
3. *Increase. Veronica and I are doing this alongside of you today*

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<sup>1</sup> As told in the book, *Gospel Patrons: People Whose Generosity Changed the World*, by John Rinehart.





