

Christianity as a Way of Life.

Acts 20:17-21.

Sunday morning, September 18, 2011.

I. The historical context.

- A. Paul was on his way from Corinth to Jerusalem. He was trying to reach Jerusalem by the Jewish feast of Pentecost, and he was bringing with him the offering of the Gentile churches to bring relief to the famine struck churches of Judea.
- B. At least half of the 50 days between Passover and Pentecost had already been spent, and Paul had traveled only a relatively short distance.
- C. As such he sails South, past the city of Ephesus, and he stops in Miletus, the next port South of Ephesus; from there he summons the elders of the church of Ephesus to meet with him one last time.
- D. As such the soberness and seriousness of the tone of this meeting should not be underestimated. This was a final meeting, and final words were spoken.

II. You know...in what manner I always lived among you.

- A. Luke includes for us a very detailed account of the things which the apostle Paul discussed with the Ephesian elders in this final meeting.
- B. What is perhaps surprising to some of us is the way the apostle begins his address to the Ephesian elders, or that it is surprising how he doesn't begin it.
 1. We might have expected that the apostle would begin to remind them of the central themes of his teaching, after all the apostle had spent three years ministering in the city of Ephesus.

He might have started to remind them of the deity of Christ; of justification by faith alone; of the resurrection of the dead and the judgment to come; of the doctrine of repentance toward God, and of faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.
 2. Important as these themes are, this is not where Paul begins. Instead he begins with Christianity as a life that must be lived.

“You know...in what manner I always lived among you...”

 - This is a sobering reminder to us that faith, if it be worthy of the name, will not fail to produce a way of life in us. It reminds us that faith is a matter of ultimate commitments of the heart, and of the bottom line in our life; matters we ultimately live for and out of.
 - It is also a sobering explanation why the last judgment begins with our works, and not with the confession we have subscribed to.

It is from those works that the Lord will openly, and convincingly establish what the ultimate faith commitments of our hearts have been.
 - Furthermore this shows us why James emphasizes to us that faith without works is dead; that is a faith that does not produce in us a Christian way of life is not worthy of the name.
 - Finally it explains to us how we may discern the ultimate faith commitments of our teachers. It is by their works. “Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles... every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit (good or bad ultimate faith commitments)... by their fruits you will know them.” Matt.7:16-20.

II. Serving the Lord with all humility...

The apostle enlarges on his manner of life giving two specifics. The first one is given to us in vs. 19 in these words: "Serving the Lord with all humility..."

A. How do we understand "serving the Lord?"

A somewhat free-spirited way of rendering this text might be "Serving the Lord's interests in your lives with all humility..."

In interpreting the matter thus I think we are capturing the essence of what Paul is saying.

B. How do we understand "with all humility?"

1. It is a reference to a true servant spirit. A true servant spirit at bottom is convinced of his Master's worthiness, and the worthiness of his Master's subjects because of what his Master has invested in them. This conviction is his ultimate faith commitment out of which he lives. It is a bottom line

2. By contrast there is another faith commitment in a servant's heart; another bottom line. It is the conviction that it is not about me; not about my worthiness or greatness of some kind. "I, who am the least of all apostles; the least of all the saints..." is Paul's testimony.

C. This faith commitment to his Master's worthiness and the worthiness of his subjects gives birth in the heart of the apostle to a faithfulness; a steadfastness, and a tenacity: "With many tears," meaning when it was heart wrenching. Furthermore, "under many trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews," meaning when it was downright difficult and even dangerous. Even then Paul stays the course because his Master is worthy, and His subjects are worthy because of what his Master has invested in them.

III. ...how I kept back nothing that was helpful...

A second way in which the apostle enlarges on his manner of life among the Ephesian Christians is found in these words.

A. Note that the apostle did not say that he held nothing back; sometimes the Lord's people seem to think of this as a virtue.

B. The apostle did hold back for example on being severe, and he may well have held back on things of which he thought that his pupils could not bear them as yet. John 16:12 and Hebrews 5:11.

C. The apostle did not hold back on anything he deemed to be helpful or profitable to the Ephesian Christians. As such there was a holy boldness to his teaching.

D. "I kept back nothing that was helpful" in the context of these few verses clearly refers to Paul's teaching ministry. However note how Paul in his closing words to the Ephesian elders returns once more to the theme of the manner of life in which he lived among them in vs.33-35. Here he broadens the context to include the work of his hands as well. "I have desired no one's silver or gold or apparel" (there's the faith commitment to his own unworthiness.) "You know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me; I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak..." (here is the faith commitment to the worthiness of the Lord's needy children and the lost because of what the Lord has invested in them.)