

“What Really Matters”

Acts 20:17-38

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

This past week, we had over 70 pastors in for our second *CF Connect* gathering. Most were senior pastors under the age of 45 and God is working in an amazing way through this ministry. I want to thank you for supporting, praying and giving towards it.

We had pastors in from all over North America: Colorado, Massachusetts, Georgia, all throughout Texas, Indiana, Missouri, Alabama, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Michigan and I know I am missing some others.

I've just got to tell you, Champion Forest God is using you...he's using us to make a difference! These guys are going back to their hometowns and their churches FIRED up for Jesus and they are going back better leaders because of YOUR investment in them.

And so, I just want to say THANK YOU for supporting *CF Connect*. Monday we met here at the church and then on Tuesday we met at the Lanier Library.

One of the speakers Tuesday morning was Gary Thomas. He was talking to us about spiritual formation and the need as pastors to really protect our hearts and guard our time alone with the Lord, and he posed a question...he gave a scenario at the start of this talk that I want to give to you this morning because it sets up perfectly where we are going today with the message.

He said, “I want you to imagine being told that everything you wanted in life could be yours if you climbed this one mountain – and you only get one chance to climb it!

And so, you get after it. You get a trainer and you start making a plan and training and strategizing to climb that mountain. You spend money on the right and best equipment to make the climb, and it takes a lot of work and a lot of time...it takes a lot out of you.

But finally, after years of hard work and dedication and commitment, you climb up this mountain. You get to the top and the guide you were with looks at you and says, “Uh-oh, we climbed the wrong mountain.”

Gary went on to challenge us as pastors and I think the challenge is true for all of us today to make sure in this life which we only have ONE shot at, we MUST be certain that we're using our time, effort, and energy to climb the right mountain.

I'm quoting him here: “The modern world has so many compelling pursuits that it is so, so easy to miss a glorious one. In a world with a mountain range of options, how do we know we're climbing the right mountain?”

This is what the text we are getting at today speaks to. We are going to see in and through Paul's life and ministry that he was climbing the right mountain. And in looking at his life and ministry, we're going to be able to see if the mountain we're currently scaling is the right one.

The title of the message today is: **What Really Matters**

Now, if you missed last week, as always, I want to encourage you to go back and check it out. You can download the notes on our media page at championforest.org, listen to them there or on our app.

Quick review and catch up: Paul is on his third missionary journey. His home base for this missionary journey has been Ephesus, and this is the longest he has ever stayed in one place – nearly three years and we got a glimpse of his ministry last week!

Ephesus was a very important city for Paul (**SHOW MAP**). The scripture says for two years he disciplined people daily from here.

When you look at the ministry that took place, it really is amazing:

- He planted churches in Laodicea, Colossae, Hierapolis from right here at Ephesus.
- He wrote the book 1 Corinthians from Ephesus.

Acts 19:10 tells us that “all of Asia heard the word of the Lord” as a direct result of Paul's ministry here. What is also a direct result of Paul's ministry in Ephesus is the conflict that followed due to the people repenting of sin. Paul's ministry was so effective that it was having a negative effect on the businesses there.

People who were silversmiths and craftsman and made little idols to the goddess Artemis, weren't selling as much as they had in the past. And you can read all about this in (Acts 19:23-40) - a riot takes place in the city that is led by these disenfranchised business owners. They want Paul and all his associates run out of town!

Illus. Texans, Stros, Rockets – give me a little leeway here, but perhaps a good modern-day equivalent of this would like someone coming to Houston and preaching in such a way...having such an effective ministry that people fell under conviction about the time they give to Stros and people start burning their jerseys, not buying anymore tickets or memorabilia in stores...it disrupts things! It causes a riot!

And so, Paul, look at: **Acts 20:1-2** – “**After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. ²When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece.**”

Now, it's important to note that Paul didn't leave Ephesus because he was scared of conflict or worried about his safety and security. On a scale of 1-10 that was probably like a 2 in his mind.

He left because he wanted to check on these churches he had planted in Macedonia and Corinth and if you look back at:

Acts 19:21 – “Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.”

So, his plan all along was to get to Macedonia and Achaia (Greece), (**SHOW MAP**) the riot thing may have just sped things up! He probably saw this as an open door from the Lord he needed to take...that it was time to get going.

Now, a little Bible Trivia for you here: It was from his time in Macedonia that Paul wrote the book of 2 Corinthians. He then travels down to Corinth (read the book there was definitely some tension in that relationship) – Paul had some pretty stern words for Corinth. He stays for three months, and this is where he writes the book of Romans.

Now, we know from Paul’s letter to the Romans and from his letters to the Corinthian church (beauty by the way of reading the Bible as a whole – you start seeing things come together!) that his plan was to visit these churches in Macedonia and Achaia, Asia and everywhere else he went he took up an offering for the “mother church” in Jerusalem.

He talks about this offering multiple times in his letters to the church in Corinth - 1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8-9 – GREAT chapters on giving! (plan giving, give with a cheerful heart, sow sparingly, reap sparingly) Wish we had time to look in detail at them.

Listen to what he writes the churches in Rome about this offering though...you can see his heart in this!

Romans 15:22-33 – (I read this because it really does help us fill in the blanks to what Paul was thinking about and working towards as we read Acts 20) – “**This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.**²³ **But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions,** (Paul knows his time in these regions is done...it’s time to go to the furthest most parts of the known world with the gospel!) **and since I have longed for many years to come to you,** ²⁴**I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.** ²⁵ **At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.** ²⁶ **For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.** ²⁷ **For they were pleased to do it,** (2 Cor. 8-9 tells us they gave out of their poverty!) **and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.** (The heart of these churches! To give to other believers – Jewish believers who are in need! Only God could compel people to give in such a way...this is what happens when God gets a hold of our heart!) ²⁸ **When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.** ²⁹ **I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,** ³¹ **that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,** ³² **so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.** ³³ **May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”**

And so, Paul as he gets ready to return to Jerusalem from Corinth with this offering in hand, but I want you to notice, Acts 20 shares with us he is NOT coming alone and here is where we get to the first part of what I really want us diving into today about what really matters!

Acts 20:3b-5 – “...he decided to return through Macedonia. ⁴Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus.⁵ These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas...”

A bunch of names, and this highlights something VERY important for us...notice also where they are from. These are disciples that have been made in nearly every city or town that Paul has planted a church!

Take note: They are WITH Paul...they are going to make this journey with him! He has invested his life in them and now, they are following him and traveling with him all the way to Jerusalem to help deliver this offering he has taken up. They are in this with him...ministering alongside of him.

If you want to know what really matters in life you get a glimpse of it here in (v. 3-5). For Paul, what really matters and what is really important is relationships.

It's...get this: **Friendships with people**

S.E. Hinton – is a famous author. She wrote the novel *Outsiders* while she was in high school! She is credited with introducing to the world Young Adult reading way before J.K. Rowling came along.

She is quoted as saying: **“If you have two friends in your lifetime, you’re lucky. If you have one good friend, you’re more than lucky.”**

Well, Paul had a number of good friends. We’ve seen this from the very beginning of his ministry. He loved traveling and ministering with Barnabas. He loved investing in Timothy and Titus. We’ve read recently about his ministry with Aquila and Priscilla.

Of course, these are the names of people we know...he put elders he invested into in every church he planted and many of those people we don’t know by name!

If you want to get a sense for Paul’s heart for people and the friendships he made in ministry, read Romans 16. Again, he wrote this from Corinth right here on this third missionary journey. The first 16 verses of Romans 16 are nothing but names of people that mean something special to him.

Paul treasured friendships. I pause here to simply ask this question, “Do you?”

So many people I know today are lonely! Many don't have close friends – someone that loves them unconditionally...that they can trust whole-heartedly. Oh, they have ton of followers and fans on social media, but even they would say they are not friends.

Illus. Always God – I spend an entire chapter on loneliness in my book *The Always God*. One study I site in that book is that 25% of Americans feel lonely according to one Gallup poll. A Cigna health study revealed that 61% of our young people feel lonely – most connected generation ever and yet lonely! Many senior adults feel the same way – and this pandemic that we are hopefully coming out of didn't help things!

Listen, at creation God hard-wired us for relationships...for friendships with other people (horizontal element to this) and he made us ultimately to be friends with God (vertical element).

- Abraham was called a friend of God (2 Chron. 20).
- Prov. 18:24b – "...but there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother!"
- John 15:13-14 – "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

Friendship is to be prized...it is to be treasured and here we get a list of some of Paul's friends. These names mentioned in Acts 20:3-5, let's just go through them briefly.

- Sopater, the Berean. Remember, the Bereans were known for how they studied the Scripture. Evidently, Sopater would not only go Jerusalem with Paul, but then went with him to Rome to take the gospel there.
- Aristarchus of Thessalonica would do the same in going with Paul to Rome and would actually according to Col. 4:10 end up in prison with him there in Rome.
- Secundus is only mentioned here...we don't know much about him nor Gaius of Derbe.
- We know all about Paul's relationship with Timothy. Paul refers to him over and over as his "son in the faith."
- Tychicus is mentioned several times in scripture and became an entrusted ministry partner to Paul. Not only did he help deliver this offering to the church in Jerusalem, but he also would be called upon by Paul to deliver letters Paul wrote to several churches. We know these as books of the Bible: Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon.

Paul refers to him in Ephesians 6:21 as a "beloved brother and faithful minister."

- Trophimus is the last name Paul mentions here and he too traveled to Jerusalem to help deliver the offering and was headed to Rome with Paul, but ended up falling ill. Paul requests prayer for him in 2 Tim. 4.

Look, Paul LOVED developing and maintaining friendships. And if you want to really know what matters in life, let's learn from Paul here and take this truth to heart. Friendships with people matter.

Illus. Coffin question - I remember, I was asked this one time when this subject of having godly relationships and friendships came up in a small group. The question was, "Who's going to carry your coffin?"

It may be a morbid question, but I think it's a good one to consider in light of what we're talking about today.

- Who are the people you have in your life that you can count on...that you can call when you're lonely or the day is tough?
- Who are the people you can totally be yourself around...they know you inside and out?
- Who are the people that will be at your house walking with you through your greatest defeat or experiencing and celebrating with you your greatest win?

Do you have these type of deep and meaningful friendships in your life? I'm telling you at the end of the day, you can scale any mountain you'd like, but if you are doing it solo, I promise it won't be near as fulfilling and meaningful as if you had 2-3 or 4-5 people there with you or cheering you on.

Friendships with people...deep, meaningful friendships is what really matters in life and if you don't have those type of friendships, we want you to experience them here at church.

Illus. Life Groups – I hope you'll find them in Life Groups. This is why we have life groups in the first place! Yes, we want you to study the Bible together, but combined with that is we want you to grow in friendship with those in your same age and stage of life.

And this is a good word to all those in Life Groups. Be on the lookout for people that visit your life group. I've got news for you - This is WHY they visit! They are looking for community...they are looking for friendships...people they can, as we say "do life with!" and I pray that we never have a closed off mentality of "us four and no more".

My encouragement to us as a church is to let's commit to ALWAYS being a friendly church. Each week when we come we should remember what it was like when we first came! This is a big church. It can be overwhelming. And for someone to come here, they need to see a smiling face and a warm welcome.

Champion Forest, let's make sure we are ALWAYS sensitive to this. Most people when they come to church, they are wondering if they will fit in...will they be welcomed...will they be cared for?

Let's not let the world out there take better care of people than we do in here! Let's Barney it up in here – "I love you..." Amazing watching my little kids make friends when they got here – don't know why we lose this as adults sometimes!

And speaking of friendships...did you know that missiologists tells us that 83% of the people that come to so because they were invited by a friend?

Illus. Serve Sat/Three Circles Card – loved passing our door hangers about Easter, and we have these invite cards, but here's the deal – 80+% come because a friend invites them. It's why we are passing out this card today (EXPLAIN – next week, text).

What really matters in life? Friendships. Let's be a good friend to people. Chances are highly likely if we are a good friend to people, we will have people that want to be a good friend to us.

I was told one time that the Kingdom of God advances on relationships...on friendships and we see this is TOTALLY the case when it comes to Paul.

Now, on his way to Jerusalem to deliver this offering, he stops at a city called Miletus. It's here he is going to set sail for Jerusalem. And speaking of relationships...speaking of friendships mattering, look at what Paul does:

Acts 20:17 – "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him."

Paul knows this is the last time he's going to see these elders that he has established to help lead the church in Ephesus. Ephesus, as mentioned represents three years of his life and he has invested BIGTIME in these people who are now going to lead this church.

If you've ever been around someone when they are dying and speaking their last words to loved ones, you know there is a weight to those words. No one is checking their phone when last words are being spoken. It's an all ears, all-in on being attentive kind of thing.

Well, Paul is not physically dying, but he knows he's not going to see these men again. And here we get his last words to them. And we are going to learn something else from Paul as we read these final words about what really matters in life.

And that is: **Faithfulness to Jesus**

Let's read Paul's words here...this is a long passage of scripture I know.

Now, from an applicational standpoint, Paul is speaking to church leadership and essentially what he is about to say to these men is he has been an example for them to follow. He's leaving them and will never see them again, but if they will recall how he lived among them and follow his example, they will be fine and so will the church they are helping lead.

If you want to know what kind of leaders your church should be employing and having on staff, Paul gives us a description right here.

This is a lengthy passage and to break it up, I will highlight some of the qualities and characteristics of church leadership that Paul mentions:

Acts 20:18-35 - “**And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord** (write down: “servant-hearted” – elders...leaders in the church are first and foremost servants!) **with all humility** (write down the word “humble” – an elder that is not humble is an elder that is not walking with Jesus!) **and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews** (write down “persistent”! Write down “passionate” – this was Paul and he is leaving these elders an example), **how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable** (write down the word “Bold” – he didn’t hold anything back! He wasn’t intimidated by the magic and immorality and idolatry of Ephesus), **and teaching you** (elders are called to be able to “teach and be ready in season and out”) **in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit,** (write down Spirit-led) **not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.** (write down “obedient and trusting” – v. 24 is key verse) **But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself,** (write down “selfless”) **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. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.** (write down: “Theologically sound”) **Pay careful attention to yourselves** (write down “sober-minded” – this is a warning here) **and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.** (Write down “self-aware” – this is God’s church!) **I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.** (Write down the words “pure” and watchful”) **Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease day and night to admonish every one with tears.** (write down “work ethic” – you’ll see it in this verse and the these that follow) **And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel.** (write down: “content”) **You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this we must help the weak** (write down “merciful”) **and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive** (final word to write down – generous).”

Listed out here are the qualities and characteristics that we can pull from Paul’s farewell speech to the Ephesian Elders. He wants them looking like this:

Servant-hearted

Obedient

Watchful

Humble	Trusting	Work Ethic
Persistent	Selfless	Content
Passionate	Theologically Sound	Merciful
Bold	Sober-minded	Generous
Able to teach	Self-aware	
Spirit-led	Pure	

See this list Paul gives here...from his perspective this is what faithfulness to Jesus looks like. For all of the pastors in the room, take a shot of this with your phone! Look at it regularly and remind yourself that this is what faithfulness to Jesus looks like.

To those massive majority of you who are NOT elders in the church. The list may look different, but the goal for you is the same: Faithfulness to Jesus! This is what matters most in life.

Some of you today need to make **Acts 20:24** your life verse! **“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.”**

For EVERY single person in the room, Paul summarizes for us what it’s all about! All of you have a race to run...a ministry that you’ve been entrusted with, and the goal at the end of the day should be to finish faithful and wisely steward ALL that God has entrusted to you.

Faithful. Man, it’s a word that has lost its meaning today. Notice, I didn’t say “perfect”. None of us are ever going to achieve perfection. We are going to mess up...we ae going to fall short.

Faithfulness however is something we can achieve by God’s grace. It’s a steadfastness to the Lord even when you don’t feel like it...even when circumstances aren’t going your way, it’s the act of being true to the Lord.

Make it your goal today...the driving ambition of your life. Faithfulness to Jesus.

So, here it is...here’s what we learned today. It’s the sermon in a sentence: **Friendships with people and faithfulness to Jesus is what matters most in life.**

In closing, let me exhort you as your pastor. This final scene in Acts 20 is so moving. The heart of Paul and these elders just jumps off the page. They’ve been in the foxhole together. They love each other.

Acts 20:36-38 – “And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.”

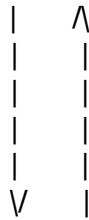
Friendships with people and faithfulness to Jesus is what matters most in life.

Look, you can choose any mountain in life you want to climb that you think will bring you what you most desire in life - BUT if you make the climb and get to the top and have neglected these two things: Friendship with people and faithfulness to Jesus – then I’m telling you, you’re going to realize quick, you either wasted your time or you climbed the wrong mountain.

And so, what can you do to ensure that you are living for what matters most: Friendships with people and faithfulness to Jesus.

Let me show you it on the screen here:

Make it a priority



Making time

Whether it’s in building friendships with people or growing in your faithfulness to Jesus...it happens in the same way!

You’ve to make it a priority. And you make it a priority by making time for it.

Illus. Conference in May – *Intentionality With Your Time*. We all have 24 hours in a day. What are you doing with your time?

Make friendship with others a priority. Go deep. Have people over. Go on trips. Give and grow so that relationships can be nurtured. It’s going to take time and when you give it the time, you are making it a priority.

And as you strive to be faithful to Jesus. Make faithfulness to him a priority. And you know you are making it a priority when you are making time to grow in your relationship with him.

Friendships with people and faithfulness to Jesus is what matters most in life.

Let’s make sure you and me are living for what matters most.

Will you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.