

## LIVING FOR WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Acts 20:17-32; Ephesians 3:14-21

June 25, 2023

I would like to start off my message with this advice from James, the brother of Jesus, *“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes”* (James 4:13-14). James reminds us here that our time on this earth is short, like a mist that appears and then disappears, and with each passing birthday our time on this earth is getting shorter-and-shorter. So, today I want us to think about how we are spending our days, this precious gift of time that we have been given by our heavenly Father with this gift. Are we living for what really matter in life, or just putting in time? This morning I want us to think about the things that we would like to see happen or accomplish before we *“kick the bucket?”*

**In 2007 there was a movie that came out called *“The Bucket List.”*** It was the story of two elderly men played by Jack Nicholson a billionaire businessman and Morgan Freeman a working class mechanic. Both men had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and placed in a cancer ward as room mates. After getting to know each other they manage to escape from the cancer ward and head off on a road trip with a wish list of *“to-dos”* before they die. These two men are very different in every way but shared a common passion to make the most of the time they had left, before they *“kicked the bucket.”* So, they make up a bucket list – they’re going to go skydiving, they’re going to climb the pyramids, get a tattoo, they’re going to drive race cars, and over three months, as they ticked off the items on their *“to-do”* list, they saw the world and became good friends. Along the course of their adventures together, they learned about the simple things in life that matter most, especially family. On their adventure, there goal was to answer these two questions: *“Have you found joy in your life?”* and *“Has your life brought joy to others?”* And they end their lives, saying *“YES”* to both of those questions, and I would like us as well to think about those two questions!

I titled this message *“Living for What Really Matters,”* and we are going to look at the final days of the ministry of the Apostle Paul and what he has to teach us. We will be looking at Paul’s third and final missionary journey, in which he returns to the churches he had established years earlier, for this purpose, *“to strengthen and*

*encourage all the disciples,*” (Acts 18:23; 20:2) and to say goodbye, because he knows that he won’t be seeing them again. This morning we will be travelling with Paul to Miletus, where Paul gives his farewell speech to the elders of the Ephesian church that is recorded for us in **Acts 20:17-38**. It’s always hard to say “goodbye” to those you love – so, it must have been very difficult for Paul to say “goodbye” to the people that he had so deeply loved and invested his time, energy, and effort into over the years of his ministry, especially since he won’t be seeing them again on this side of heaven!

As we look at these verses, let’s stretch ourselves and think about the time we have left on this earth. I don’t know if any of you keep a list of things you want to do before “kicking the bucket,” or have even thought about it. But this morning I want you to think about the things you would like to see happen or would like to accomplish before you “kick the bucket,” and we are going to use Paul as our model, as we try to answer this question: “*What would Paul advise us to put on our “bucket list” as fellow disciples of Jesus Christ?*”

During Paul’s third missionary journey he sees the end of his life looming before him as persecution is starting to intensify against him, so he decides to return back to Jerusalem in time to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. Paul reaches Jerusalem and after spending a few days with his brothers and sisters in Christ, reported what God had done among the Gentiles, he’s arrested. And as a Roman citizen, Paul appeals to Caesar, so is sent off to Rome to face trial, and after a few years of house arrest his voice was silenced by a Roman executioner’s axe, but thankfully his letters (epistles) that he wrote from prison continue to live on. Before Paul was silenced, he was not going to slow down or disappear from the scene, he was going to stay active in ministry right to the very end. You would never find Paul saying, “*I have put in my time in ministry, in serving the Lord, and now I will sit back, relax, and let someone else take over.*”

Even in prison Paul continued to proclaim the Gospel to the soldiers he was chained to, as **Acts 20:24** describes Paul’s attitude and goal in life, “***I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.***” Paul is saying, there are no retirement plans for me in serving the Lord – my life purpose is to proclaim the Gospel message until the day that I leave this earth and see my Lord, face-to-face. The only item on Paul’s bucket list is this – “*I will stay the course in service to the Lord Jesus until I have finished the race*

*and He takes me home!”* Paul’s going to serve his Lord until his dying breath, by testifying to anyone that would listen about the Good News of His Saviour, Jesus Christ, who met him that day on the road to Damascus and completely transformed his life!

**When Paul left this earth, what did he leave behind?** We don’t read anything about him leaving behind a great deal of property, or a large sum of money, or even family members – what Paul left behind was a number of churches filled with mature healthy disciples scattered over the Middle East – that was Paul’s legacy. When I think about what I will leave behind – I think about maybe leaving behind some property and some money, but what I need to think about is leaving behind family members and other who I have poured my life into – that will be my legacy. Therefore, what should really matter to us in this life is not the property or the money that we will leave behind – but *“What kind of legacy we will leave behind?”* What will the generations that follows us look like? Will they be grounded in the faith, or have no faith at all? Will they be followers of Christ or followers of this world that is against Christ and against truth!

**Before Paul’s time was up** – the top item on his *“bucket list”* was to leave behind a mature, healthy group of disciples that would continue on the work that he began and wasn’t that what Jesus did as well. Jesus poured His last 3 years of life into twelve disciples to continue on to do what He did and greater things. So, on his final missionary journey Paul travelled to his various churches that he had planted across Asia (basically his only family) to encourage them to never give up following in the footsteps of Christ, regardless of how much persecution and trials would come their way. And Paul did that by telling them to follow his example on how he lived among them.

We find Paul’s final message to the Ephesian church in **Acts 20:17-23**. Paul was not only an evangelist and church planter, but also an encourager to his brothers and sisters in Christ – having a deep relationship with and coming alongside of those that he helped bring to Christ. They could easily identify with Paul because his life was an open book, his faith was real and genuine as he served his Lord with love, humility and made himself vulnerable; his people saw not only his victories, but also his struggles (his tears in the midst of severe testing by his Jewish opponents). Paul modeled Christ’s humility!

The people also saw his persistence and boldness to preach and teach the truth without discrimination against anyone (both Jews and Greek gentiles heard the Gospel message), and he lived out the words he taught, demonstrating them by his words and actions. Paul demonstrated how the preaching and teaching of the Gospel message calls for repentance and a turning away from sin towards God. So, the biblical concept of encouragement is not just about comforting and building people up, but also includes getting deep into their lives with the truth of the Gospel message – not only loving them, but also challenging them to change their ways when they are heading in the wrong direction. So, being an encourager is also about calling people to repentance and to change the direction they are heading out of your love and concern for them.

We need to notice that Paul in his determination to serve Christ, is not concerned with being put in prison and suffering, or is he concerned about any hardships facing him, no one is going to keep him quiet from claiming the good news of the Gospel. Paul considers his life's aim, what really matters to him is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord has given him!

As we also consider our life's aim - let's focus on the ones that we will leave behind, not only family members but others as well! Picture them in your mind! Do they need to know Christ as their Lord and Saviour? have they wandered away and need to be brought back into a relationship with Christ? And then what about those believers, do they need encouragement? Do they need to know the crucial importance of having a mature unwavering faith in Christ? Do they need to be reminded that it takes effort and discipline to live the Christian life, because it doesn't come easily or without testing and challenges? Do they need to be told that they need to be strong in the Lord, and not give up when the going gets difficult, and they want to quit.

Like Paul – at the top of our “*bucket list*” as followers of Jesus Christ, has to be this passion to constantly encourage the people that are closest to us, encouraging them to stay connected, don't get isolated from the Christian influence of others. Every follower of Christ needs accountability and encouragement. We all need help and guidance. We all need to constantly be in community with each other, having others come alongside of us on this faith journey as we encourage and motivate each other to go deeper-and-deeper in the faith. The churches found throughout the book of Acts needed leaders like Paul and Timothy in their midst to

be healthy! Likewise, we also need mature Christians in our midst to be healthy, especially as the outside attacks of the world increase in strength!

**The next item on our “*bucket list*”** – is to get involved in fighting the forces of evil and darkness around us, by keeping watch over ourselves and those God has placed around us, warning them about the potential dangers before them. We tend to ignore the forces of evil at work around us to our peril! The greatest struggle going on today is not economic, political, or social; it’s spiritual. Paul tells us this in **Ephesians 6:12**, “*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*” Our politicians and leaders can only do some much, but its up to the church to address the matters of the spiritual realm.

Paul emphasises this spiritual battle as he continues his final words to the church in **Acts 20:25-32**. Paul was well aware of the dangerous spiritual battle that rages around the church. Paul knew what would happen if we let down our guard, lose our zeal for the Gospel, become lax and complacent, letting the enemy ever slowly, stealth like, take over our culture and our churches, bit-by-bit-by-bit. Paul’s warning here was addressed mainly to church leaders but is also a warning to all of us. We need to warn our loved ones and those we associate with that there is a spiritual battle waging for their souls, and they need to seek divine help to combat the enemy. Therefore, we as believers are shepherds over the flock He has given us – we are to always be on guard and watch over our flock (church members, family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers) watching for savage wolves that come to kill and destroy; those that tell lies, those who come to distort the truth in order to draw others away from God. Paul is saying, be a model to others, showing them how your faith has enabled you to stand up against all of the evil that comes against you. Those mature in the faith must shepherd their flock, not leaving them to fend for themselves in this corrupt society; thereby, leaving them vulnerable to the enemy. Our role is not only to warn others, but also to stand for the truth!

**So, how do we do that?** I believe there are two primary methods of doing this: the first method is to show your flock the crucial importance of the Bible in your life – by showing them the importance of knowing and using the truth found in God’s Word in directing your life and helping you to come against the enemy. In his letter to his young apprentice, Timothy, Paul tells him how crucial the Bible must be in our lives, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching,*

*rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If we can get others to fall in love with the Bible, becoming totally drenched and immersed in the Holy Scriptures, they are going to be equipped not only to survive the spiritual battles that come, but to also advance the good work of the kingdom of God to their areas of influence, and then pass it on to their future generations; thereby, keeping the ministry going. That’s how the Christian faith has endured over time, disciples-making-disciples, bringing hope, reversing the direction that our culture is heading, keeping our society in touch with God by pointing to the truth that exposes the lies of the enemy.

**The second method** – is to show your flock the crucial importance of prayer in your life. There is nothing better than to have others see you humbled before God, on your knees before God, seeking His guidance and direction. You need to let others know that you’re praying for them, and also don’t fail to ask them to pray for you. Nowhere is the commitment to prayer more beautifully expressed than in the prayer that Paul offered for his spiritual sons and daughters in the Ephesian church, recorded for us in **Ephesians 3:14-21**. Make this prayer your regular prayer for others, and also imagine someone praying this powerful prayer over you!

**Here’s what Paul is praying:** that you would come to know that Christ’s love is the greatest power on earth, and that His desire is to fill you up to overflowing with His love. Christ’s love surpasses all things, surpasses anything this world has to offer, especially surpassing knowledge (great amounts of knowledge can’t answer all of our spiritual questions). The solution is that we need to drink deeply of our Lord and Saviour – so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith – so that we would be deeply rooted and established in His love – so that we may have His power at work in our lives – so that we would know how wide, how long, how high, and how deep is His love. Then, Paul concludes his prayer with these words, *“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”* Paul is praying that Christ will do in you what I, Paul, your spiritual father, can’t do for you or in you. YES, I’m going to do my very best, but I know, as hard as I try, God can do abundantly more than I could ever do for any of those under my care – for I’m imperfect, but He is perfect – I’m weak, but He is all powerful. Prayer was a high priority that Paul put on his *“bucket list!”*

**Let's face the facts** –not one of us knows how much longer our race of life will last – so what are we focussing on as we finish the race? Are we spending our time living for what really matters, or are we just putting in time? This is something that we don't usually want to think about, however, one of these days we will *"kick the bucket."* And then, there are also a lot of voices out there telling us what we need to focus on in the time we have left – travel, see the world, buy this, or buy that, live it up because you can't take it with you (eat, drink and be merry)! The world is telling us to pour as much into your life as you can before it's too late. However, Paul's message to us is very clear and very different:

*"Don't just spend your time filling your life with a big wad of cash, and a house and garage full of stuff for your kids to fight over when you are gone, and nothing else to show for the time you spent on this earth – because once your money and stuff is gone, you will be forgotten. Instead, leave a lasting legacy – by doing everything in your power to encourage your loved ones and those around you in the way of Christ."* I believe that's what Paul is trying to tell us through the pages of the letters that he wrote and left behind for future generations of believers – that our primary goal on our *"bucket list"* should be to leave behind followers of Christ that will continue to make a difference in this world for the kingdom of God until Christ returns! That's what really matters as Paul gives his final words to the Ephesian church!

**We can only accomplish this challenge** – if we resolve to be the right kind of model for those under our influence. In our words, in our deeds, and in anyway that we can, we need to model what a follower of Christ looks like, acts like, and talks like to those around us. And be an encourager – keep at it kids, grandkids, great-grandkids, nieces, nephews, cousins, friends, neighbours, co-workers – follow my example as I follow Christ, let me model it for you by my words and my actions. Let me show you what it sounds like and looks like to be a faithful follower of Christ. Keep at the faith – YES, it's going to be hard at times – YES, you are going to get discouraged at times – but it's worth it, because God is faithful and keeps His promises. Keep following the way of Christ and keep the truth of God's Word constantly before you and – I will pray for you until my dying breath.

**And, if we resolve to do all of this faithfully before God** – it will reap future kingdom rewards. Then, when our loved ones stand at our gravesite one day, they'll say: *"My dad, my mother, my grandparent, my co-worker, my friend, my neighbour, my pastor was a person of deep faith, a person of obedient devotion to the Word of God, and to prayer. And, I am forever thankful and grateful for their*

*great example, in how they encouraged me and prayed for me. And I pray that I will be able to do the same – to follow faithfully in their footsteps so that others will say the same about me when my time comes to leave this earth!”*

**When we “kick the bucket”** – I don’t believe that anyone would ever write a story or make a movie about our life, but we can leave a lasting legacy none-the-less, that could affect our loved ones for future generations! But that will only happen when we start living for what really matters today!