

## Discipleship by an Island-Hopper

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“You can impress people from a distance, but you impact them up close.”

“It’s not just what you do that matters, but how. Character counts.”

“There is no substitute for consistency.”

“Godly humility is something to be properly ‘proud of.’”

“Tears can say things words cannot.”

“Problems and persecution are a given. Make sure perseverance is too.”

These jewels of Biblical truths are just a few of the valuable life and ministry lessons to be learned from Acts 20:13-38 - a text I plan to use in my next few columns to encourage and exhort us. Give it a read.

The Bible - *what an awesome book!* From its stories and letters, poems, prophecies and prophetic proclamations, we have from God all the truth we need to be who God wants us to be.

From what other literature could one learn an incredible number of practical principles simply by studying an island-hopping missionary? Part of God’s thoroughly equipping of us for every good work includes the sweet farewell found in Acts 20 (see 2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

We meet and learn to admire the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts, the record of how Jesus continues His ministry through His Apostles and people. In Acts 20, we catch-up with Paul hurriedly returning to Jerusalem, as he concludes his third missionary journey.

After Saul-turned-Paul “saw the light,” he then shined it brightly on countless numbers of people – testifying of the gracious forgiveness available through the crucified and risen Messiah.

Paul made three major missionary journeys, each with its moments of excitement, fulfillment and sheer terror. At the close of his last trip, Paul is rushing to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost.

Working ship-to-shore, stopping along the coast and on islands, Paul is revisiting previous places of ministry. Sometimes walking, sometimes sailing, he is encouraging his spiritual children and re-commissioning leaders to their various ministries.

From the beach at Miletus, the western shore of modern Turkey, Paul calls for Elders of the church of Ephesus. Bidding farewell to these dear brothers, he encourages and prepares these shepherds to serve their flock and withstand the challenges heading their way.

Let us consider lesson number one. “You can impress people from a distance, but you impact them up close.”

The text reads: “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.” Acts 20:17 –18 (NIV)

Did you catch Paul’s description of his life and ministry among them? “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you...” he states. He served them by being with them, living publicly, not holing up but fleshing out the life of Christ. Remember John 1:14? How many times did Jesus contact, physically touch people?

All too often we minister from safe distances: behind sacred desks, under robes – both ministerial and choir, from lofts, platforms, in offices, studies and behind closed doors. Yet, as we study Jesus’ ministry, it was a 24 / 7 life contact with people. He called His disciples to be with Him, follow Him, live with Him. His main method of discipleship was daily life living.

We can impress people from a distance. But life-to-life impact requires the risk of life exposure and soul-to-soul contact. Lots of it. Of your method of ministry, can you say “you know how I lived” or just “you know what I taught or did?” How much of your life in Christ is known by others? Are you guilty of “content dumps” in your teaching and “love ‘em and leave ‘em” service projects?

Don’t miss this point: in reviewing his ministry, Paul starts with conduct and character issues first and foremost. We are rightfully concerned about content, correct doctrine. So was Paul. So is God. But, correct content never replaces minimal contact, poor conduct and flawed character (see 1 Corin. 13:1-3).

This leads to lessons number two and three: “It’s not just what you do that matters, but how. Character counts.” And “there is no substitute for consistency.”

Back to the text: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia...”

They not only knew how he lived due to daily life contact, they knew he was consistent. He was the same steady servant-leader from day one as he was when he shoved-off to the

next place of ministry. They knew what they could count on with him in terms of his character.

Dr. Ken Canfield, in his helpful book Seven Secrets of Highly Effective Fathers conveys that the most essential “secret” he discovered in his research of good dads was consistency. It was a foundational characteristic that gave strength to the other six traits.

Is your life and ministry one of character and consistency – be it parenting, teaching teens or tots, discipling ladies or men, serving the hurting, singing God’s praises? The adage is true: people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Consistency speaks to the age-old “one way on Sunday, another way on Monday” crisis in the church. The one word description of this is hypocrisy. Hypocrites simply “do ministry,” fulfilling roles and responsibilities.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, who lived among us, models and desires out-of-life ministry from His disciples.

Consistency is not assuming perfection or even complete maturity. Paul wrote to his protégé / disciple Timothy, who was serving in Ephesus, to make sure his progress in maturing in the Lord was evident to all (1 Tim. 4:11-16). Are we consistently growing in our spiritual lives into people of Christ-like character?

As we look at this scripture in the weeks ahead, ask the Lord to help you increase and deepen your ministry, that in your contacts, you would be a person of consistent character. Oh to be able to say to those in our sphere of influence: “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corin. 11:1).

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