

Graduation Sermon 2006

Finish the Task Christ Gives You!

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Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, especially you, the Graduating Class of 2006. You're not done yet!

Oh I'm well aware that today is graduation day, a day meant to proclaim to the entire world that your seminary training is complete, and that you have been equipped with all the basic skills we look for in a pastor. But you're not done yet.

And I know that you've gone through years of study to be here, endless hours of Greek and Hebrew and papers and papers and more papers. But you're not done yet.

And I also know that, to get to this point in your lives, you've already experienced no little heartache and trouble. You've endured sleepless nights, and days of worry, wondering whether you were going to make it, worrying how all the assignments were going to get done—or if they would get done—anxious about bills and families and wives and children. But still, it's not over yet. You're not done with all that.

It isn't over until Jesus says it's over. We won't be done till our Lord says, "Well done!" At the point Paul was at in his life when he spoke the words of our text, he understood that, too. That's why, in them, he expresses such a powerful sense of mission and purpose. In effect, what Paul says is a call to missions for you, for me, for all of us. Through these words he urges us

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- 1. Going Forward with Bold Confidence**
- 2. Testifying Faithfully to His Grace**

You all know that Paul was at the end of his third missionary journey when he spoke these words to the elders at Ephesus. In the space of a few years, Paul and his companions had worked hard in the east, going from one end of it to the other, preaching the good news of God's grace. In one of his letters written around this time he could say, "There's no more place for me to work in these regions" (Ro 15:23). But he didn't consider his task complete. He had plans, big plans, bold plans, to go west to Rome and from there to Spain! In other words, this great theologian did not see his God-given task as being a great theologian locked up in a study all day. His God-given mission was to get the message out! "Jesus lives! Your sins are forgiven!"

But before he felt free to go on to Rome, Paul was determined to complete the delivery of an offering that had been gathered from all the Gentile churches for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. Paul knew perfectly well that going to Jerusalem would not be an easy trip. "Prison and hardships are facing me!" he says. "[But] I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me."

Now some might be inclined to dismiss Paul's words here as bravado—a sort of Larry the Cable Guy 'Git 'r done' routine. They would say, "Paul, don't be dumb! Why ask for trouble? Why go to Jerusalem where you know they hate you?" Others might be inspired to make Paul into some kind of hero. "Look at him! He's walking into the lion's den. What a brave guy! He knows what has to be done, and he's going to do it. Yup, that's a purpose-driven life for you!"

But they'd both be wrong! This is neither bravado nor a matter of mere human bravery. Paul put no confidence in his flesh. This bold confidence stems from one source and one source only. The gospel of God's grace! You just can't understand Paul unless you understand that his is not so much a purpose-driven life as it is a grace-driven life. Paul was well aware of what a frail, weak man he was. A man who at

times had approached his mission with fear and trembling. A pot of clay he once called himself. Paul also knew from sad experience how his own bold plans and purposes could set him at odds with God. At one time, thinking he was heaven-sent, he became hell-bent on destroying the church of God's chosen Messiah!

But Jesus had mercy on him. Jesus took that vengeful zealot, that proud sinner who thought he was blameless, that reckless and murderous man. He took that man and turned him around, first striking him down with his law, and then shining on him with his gospel grace and pardon. Through it all Paul came to understand how utterly unique God's love was, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Paul came to understand, "God loves not the pretty good, not the ones who mostly have their act together. He loves sinners of whom I am chief. He loved me when I hated him. He wanted me to be his own when I wanted to destroy him. By the grace of God I am what I am."

That grace for him became the driving force in his life, "The love of Christ compels us, for we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). That's why now he could go forward in bold confidence and finish the task Jesus had given him. He knew that the whole path of his life was built on and guaranteed by the Son of God who had loved him and given himself for him. If he lost his life he would find it still in Christ. If he kept his life, he would have more opportunities to serve his Savior while on earth.

So when we send you out from here, when we say, "Finish the task Christ gives you!" we're not asking you to be brave, to be bold, to be confident in yourselves. You and I both know there's no hope down that road. You know as well as Paul what clay pots you are. You know you still have a sinful flesh to contend with. You know how many of your own plans and purposes can seem so good and righteous in your own eyes, yet still be perverse and sinful in God's. But you also know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. How though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor so that you through his poverty might be rich. As the church sings, it is his grace that has kept you safe this far. And his grace will lead you home. So finish the task he has given you by going forward in that bold confidence.

2. And finish the task by testifying faithfully to that grace.

As Paul says, "The Lord Jesus gave me the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." What does it mean to give *faithful* testimony to grace? Well it means, first of all, understanding that gospel ministry is not about you, it's about him. This is God's grace we give testimony to. "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord." In other words, the task of a gospel herald is not to attach disciples to himself, but to point people to the one who takes away the sin of the world. If I can put it even more bluntly: you can't save anybody. But Jesus died for everybody. Point people to him, and so let him be what he alone is for them and what he alone can be for them.

Giving faithful testimony also means keeping the gospel pure, undiluted, and unconditional. Think here of how hard Paul worked in his ministry to keep the gospel he preached free of strings. He would allow no hedges of law to be built around the gospel to protect it from the unworthy and the undeserving. The fact is, none of us deserves such grace. That's what makes it grace. God's love in Christ is for those who don't deserve it, who deserve the exact opposite. That's what makes it good news for sinners. It's the only message that can lift us up when we are helpless, give hope when we're in despair, give strength when our strength is gone, give life when we feel the hand of death grip us. Without this grace we can never find our footing, but living in this grace we will stand firm even if it all falls down.

We see this easily enough, I suppose, in our own struggles with sin and guilt. But when the days run more smoothly, it's easier to believe that, having gotten our start in grace we can run the rest of the race on our own. What's more it's fairly easy to preach unconditional grace when we first lay eyes on our congregation, to say then, "Jesus died for all!" But as we begin to experience the effects of sin in the lives of our members, we are more inclined to hedge our bets. To say, "The Lord loves you if..." or "provided you do that..." There's no pastor here, there's no Christian here who hasn't struggled against pride or legalism. This

rebellious spirit is as close to us as our own sinful flesh.

That's why it's so important for us to live in the Word daily. To let the law expose our sin, blowing the lid off all our self-deception and empty excuses, our egotism and self-assertiveness. And then to daily drink in the Spirit as we remember our Baptism, as we draw strength from our Savior's doing and dying and rising for us. As we live daily from forgiveness, we will never tire of preaching forgiveness.

Finally, a faithful testimony points to grace by word *and* deed, by the boldness with which we get out with the gospel, *and* by the patience with which we bear the sufferings that come with the gospel. The world will still crucify whatever belongs to God. Our Enemy still sends his wolves into the flock of God's own. We must daily do battle with the sin inside ourselves.

As you prepare to go out and finish your task, do you think any one of you is made of the right stuff to take those enemies on? Do you really think you can handle it? I didn't think so. I can't either. But Jesus can. And he already did. For all of us. Through him who loved us we will more than conquer. By his grace we will do and endure all things and live and die fully confident of his mercy. "Courage, my little flock," Jesus says, "my Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom." "Take heart," he says, "I have overcome the world."

There's just one more thing I have to say before I'm done here. Finish the task Christ gives *you!* Christ didn't call me to go to Jerusalem, to get arrested, to get sent to Rome. That was the task, the ministry, the calling he gave to the apostle Paul. That was how he wanted Paul to testify faithfully to his grace. And Jesus kept him as he walked that path. Jesus has asked me to walk a different path. I know he will keep me as I walk mine.

So, too, brothers think of all the many different calls and callings God has given each one of you. Some are tutors and some are tent ministers. Some are parish pastors and others are missionaries. Some may not now have calls to serve, but have been asked to wait on the Lord. Tom Park may only be serving a few months here before he has to return to South Korea. Jeremy Koehler is not here at all. Though he has completed his pastoral training, the Lord has asked him to serve his country in Iraq.

My point? Finish the task Christ gives you. Walk the road he has set before you. He has designed it especially for you, with love and care and with your best interests in mind. Don't worry about what he's given someone else to do. All the Lord's ways are full of grace, and he will give you many opportunities to testify to the gospel of his grace on the road he has set before you. The one who has called you is faithful. He will keep you till journey's end, until you hear those glad, good words:

Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Lord! Amen.