Faithfulness Over Success Curtis Graham

~ Acts 20:33–35 March 15, 2026

1. Opening – How We Measure Success

Before we begin, I should probably say something about this new pulpit. Apparently, I'm the first person who gets to use it, which feels a bit like being handed the keys to a brand-new car while everyone watches to see if you scratch it. Rene, I promise… I'll be gentle.

Let me ask you a question before we begin.

How do you know if a life has been successful?

Most of us already have an answer in our heads, even if we've never said it out loud.

If you've ever written a résumé, you know the game. Ordinary tasks suddenly sound impressive: "Answered emails" becomes "Managed digital communications," and "helped a coworker" becomes "provided cross-departmental leadership." Beneath it all sits one question: **Why should someone believe my life has been successful?**

Our culture trains us to measure life this way. We instinctively evaluate outcomes—Did it work? Did people respond? Did it grow?—and over time we begin measuring our own lives the same way, quietly keeping score.

Now imagine the Apostle Paul writing a résumé. If Paul had a LinkedIn profile, it probably wouldn't say "Influential church planter." It might look something like this:

- Frequently imprisoned
- Regularly misunderstood
- Chased out of multiple cities

- Financially unstable
- Constantly in danger

Not exactly LinkedIn material.

By most modern standards Paul's life would look unstable—no permanent home, no predictable career, constant opposition, and frequent danger. Measured by our usual standards, it might even look like failure.

And yet when we arrive at this moment in Acts 20, Paul is the most stable person in the room.

Because by the standards most of us naturally use to measure success, Paul should be the **least stable person in the room**.

So why does the church keep returning to him? Because his life revealed something deeper.

Paul shows us what a human life looks like when it is **anchored in Christ**.

And in Acts 20 he isn't giving the elders a résumé of achievements.

He is showing them what **maturity in Christ actually looks like**.

2. The Setting of Paul's Farewell

Paul calls the elders from the church in Ephesus to meet him in the nearby port city of Miletus.

Earlier in the chapter he says, "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, 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." (Acts 20:22–23)

In other words, Paul knows the road ahead will not be easy—yet he goes anyway.

This moment in Acts is deeply personal. Paul gathers the elders not to celebrate success but to reflect on the life he lived among them.

Paul begins by reminding them of something they already know: they witnessed his life up close.

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.” (Acts 20:18–19)

Notice how Paul frames his ministry. He does not point first to the results of his work. He does not highlight how many people believed or how influential the church in Ephesus became. Instead he speaks about humility, tears, and trials.

That is not usually how we summarize success.

But Paul is not trying to prove that his ministry was successful. He is reminding them that his life was faithful.

And then he says something that reveals the center of his heart:

“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.” (Acts 20:24)

That sentence explains the entire shape of Paul’s life—and it sounds unmistakably Pauline: everything is oriented around the **gospel of the grace of God in Christ**.

Paul did not measure his life by comfort, stability, or recognition. His measure was much simpler: finish the course Christ had given him.

Faithfulness—not success—was the aim.

The elders listening to Paul would have understood what he meant. They had watched him teach publicly and from house to house. They had seen him endure opposition. They had observed the consistency of his life over years of ministry. Paul was not presenting a theory of Christian leadership; he was pointing them to a lived example they had already witnessed.

And as this farewell continues, Paul begins preparing them for the reality that the church will need to continue without him. The stability they experienced during his years in Ephesus will soon be tested. The storms that every generation of the church eventually faces will come to them as well.

Which makes what Paul says next all the more important.

3. The Warning

Paul now turns from reflection to warning. The elders have heard about the pattern of his life, but they also need to understand the reality that will face the church after he leaves.

He tells them plainly:

“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. Therefore, be alert…” (Acts 20:29–31)

Those are sobering words.

Paul does not describe the future of the church as calm or predictable. He describes it as vulnerable. Wolves will come. And even more unsettling, some of the distortion will arise from within the community itself.

The danger Paul describes is not merely disagreement or personality conflict. He uses the phrase *speaking twisted things*. The image is one of something that was originally straight being bent out of shape. Truth becomes distorted so that it serves a different purpose.

And Paul identifies the motivation behind that distortion: *to draw away the disciples after them.*

In other words, the problem is not simply incorrect teaching. The deeper issue is the desire to gather influence and followers around oneself rather than directing people toward Christ.

That warning is not unique to Ephesus. Every generation of the church faces the same danger: confident voices that slowly pull people away from the center of the gospel.

Storms like this can shake a community of believers. That is why Paul reminds them that faithful leadership is not built on control or personal authority but on devotion to Christ and care for the people entrusted to them.

And then Paul does something profoundly reassuring. Instead of asking the elders to hold everything together by their own strength, he entrusts them to something far more secure.

In the next verse he says:

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (Acts 20:32)

Paul knows he will not always be there.

But he also knows the church does not ultimately depend on him.

The church is sustained by God and by the grace revealed in Christ—**the same grace that saves us, sanctifies us, and holds us when our strength fails**.

That grace—not human success—is what anchors the people of God when the storms come.

4. The Pattern of a Faithful Life

After reminding the elders of the storms that will come, Paul returns again to the example of his own life. In many ways this is the heart of the passage we are looking at today.

He says:

“I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. 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 way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:33–35)

The first thing he says is surprisingly personal:

“I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel.”

Paul begins with the inner life.

Coveting begins quietly in the heart. It whispers, *Why do they have that and not me?*

It is the subtle desire to build a life around acquiring what others possess.

Paul says that was not the engine driving his ministry.

His life was not oriented around taking.

The second thing he says moves from the inner life to daily practice:

“These hands ministered to my necessities.”

Paul worked.

The apostle who planted churches and wrote large portions of the New Testament also spent long days working with leather and canvas, stitching together tents to support himself. He supported himself and often helped support those who traveled with him.

In the ancient world traveling teachers sometimes used their position to gain financial advantage. Paul deliberately avoided that pattern. He wanted the churches to know that the gospel was not something he was using for personal gain.

Then Paul expands the purpose of that labor.

He says that by working in this way “we must help the weak.”

In the kingdom of God strength is not given for self-advancement.

Strength is given so that we can lift others **because Christ has first served us**.

The Christian life reverses the direction of many of our natural instincts. Instead of asking, *How can I benefit from this?* we begin asking, *Who can I serve through this?*

Finally Paul anchors all of this in the teaching of Jesus.

He reminds them of a saying of Christ:

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Those words summarize the posture of Paul's ministry: not taking but giving, not accumulating but serving.

A life slowly shaped by the teachings of Jesus until generosity, humility, and service become the natural direction of the heart.

Paul could say, “I have shown you,” because the elders had watched this pattern unfold over years of ordinary life.

5. Faith That Becomes Visible

One of the striking things about Paul’s farewell speech is how often he reminds the elders that they *saw* his life. Again and again he says, “You yourselves know,” or “I have shown you.” Paul did not simply hand them a set of ideas. He lived the gospel in front of them.

The Christian faith is never meant to remain theoretical. The truths of the gospel eventually take shape in the way we live.

We see this pattern most clearly in the life of Jesus Himself.

Jesus did not only teach sacrificial love—He embodied it. He welcomed the outcast, served His disciples, and ultimately laid down His life on the cross **to reconcile sinners to God**. The love of God was not merely spoken; it was lived.

This is one reason the church practices acts like communion: the gospel is remembered **and proclaimed** not only through words but through actions.

In the same way, mature faith begins to shape the ordinary practices of our lives. The way we handle money. The way we treat people. The way we respond to hardship. The way we serve when no one is watching. These things begin to reveal where our lives are anchored.

Paul understood this deeply. That is why he could say to the elders, “I have shown you.” They did not only hear Paul preach about generosity—they saw him refuse to take advantage of people. They did not only hear him speak about humility—they saw him endure trials with tears. They did not only hear him teach about serving others—they saw him work with his own hands so that he could help the weak.

In other words, the message and the life matched.

That kind of integrity is one of the quiet marks of maturity in the Christian life. Over time the distance between what we say and how we live begins to shrink. The teachings of Jesus slowly shape the habits of our lives.

Over years of walking with Christ, faith matures into a consistency people can recognize.

And that consistency becomes one of the ways God strengthens His church.

6. Stability Redefined

Here we see a paradox in the Christian life. From the outside Paul's life looked unstable—travel, opposition, conflict, and persecution. Yet the people who knew him best saw something very different: steadiness.

Why?

Because stability in the Christian life does not come from calm circumstances. It comes from being anchored to something deeper.

Scripture describes this kind of stability in a powerful image. In Hebrews we are told that our hope in Christ is "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul."

That image is important.

An anchor does not stop the storm or calm the waves. What it does is prevent drift.

A ship may still feel the force of the storm, but if the anchor is secure, it holds its position.

This is the kind of stability Paul had discovered in Christ.

His life still had wind. There were trials, opposition, and uncertainty about the future. But his identity, purpose, and direction were anchored in something that did not move.

He was anchored in Christ—**trusting the grace of God rather than the outcomes of his ministry**.

That is why Paul could say earlier in this speech:

“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course…”

Paul was not trying to control every outcome. He was simply committed to finishing the course Christ had given him.

This is a very different way of measuring a life.

Success asks questions like: Did it work? Did people respond? Did the results justify the effort?

But the mature Christian begins asking a different question.

Faithfulness asks:

Was Christ at the center of it?

When Christ becomes the anchor of a life, something begins to change. Our sense of stability is no longer dependent on outcomes, approval, or recognition. We are no longer trying to extract peace from circumstances that constantly shift.

Instead we discover a deeper steadiness. Even when the wind blows, the anchor holds.

And that kind of stability allows a person to remain faithful even when the results remain uncertain.

7. Proximity and Formation

When Paul says, “I have shown you,” he is reminding the elders that much of their formation as leaders did not come from a classroom. It came from proximity. They lived near him. They watched how he handled pressure, how he spoke to people, how he worked, how he endured hardship, and how he trusted Christ when the future was uncertain.

In other words, maturity in the Christian life is often caught before it is taught.

Many of the deepest lessons of faith come not from lectures but from watching someone whose life quietly reflects Christ.

You saw how they handled difficulty and served others without needing recognition. And over time, simply being near that kind of life began to shape your understanding of what following Christ looks like.

That is one of the quiet gifts of the church.

From the outside, church life can look ordinary, yet within those rhythms people grow through proximity.

You watch someone walk through grief and continue trusting Christ. You notice someone serve quietly for years without needing recognition.

And slowly, almost without realizing it, your understanding of faithfulness begins to deepen.

This is exactly the kind of environment Paul had cultivated in Ephesus. The elders had not only heard the gospel; they had seen what it looked like lived out over time. Paul’s generosity, humility, and endurance were not abstract ideas—they were patterns the elders had witnessed for years.

And now, as Paul prepares to leave, that pattern becomes their responsibility to continue. Faithfulness multiplies when people live close enough to one another to see Christ shaping a life.

That is how maturity spreads within the body of Christ.

Not primarily through impressive moments, but through steady lives that remain anchored in Christ over many years.

8. Illustration and Invitation

[The fan has been running quietly on stage throughout the sermon.]

[Walk toward the board and the fan.]

You may have been wondering why this fan has been running up here the entire time.

Let me show you something.

[Hold up the first sheet of paper high enough for the back of the room to see.]

Most of us know what it feels like when life is unsettled. Opinions shift, outcomes surprise us, and circumstances change faster than we expected—each new gust pushing us somewhere else.

But watch what happens when something is anchored.

[Pin the paper firmly to the board so it is clearly visible and not moving.]

The wind didn’t stop.

The fan is still blowing just as strongly as before.

The difference is simply what the paper is anchored to.

This is the image Scripture gives us when it describes Christ as the anchor of the soul.

The Christian life is not about eliminating the wind.

It is about anchoring our lives deeply enough in Christ that the wind cannot move us.

Paul's life still had storms—trials, opposition, and uncertainty—but his life was anchored in Christ.

Now notice something else.

[Hold up a second sheet of paper.]

Faith does not grow only through words. It often grows through proximity.

[Place the second sheet near the first anchored paper so the wind moves it slightly, making the contrast visible to the room.]

You watch someone whose life is anchored in Christ.

You see how they endure hardship and remain steady when circumstances shift.

And slowly, simply by being near that kind of life, you begin to understand what faithfulness looks like.

[Pin the second sheet beside the first.]

That is what Paul meant when he said, "I have shown you."

The elders in Ephesus had lived near his life long enough to see the pattern.

Faithfulness spreads that way.

One anchored life begins to shape another.

And that is one of the quiet ways Christ builds His church.

So perhaps the question we leave with today is not the question our culture keeps asking.

Not, "Will my life be successful?"

The question is simpler.

Will I be faithful to Christ?

Because when Christ becomes the anchor of a life, something deeper holds steady.

The wind may keep blowing.

Storms may still come.

But a life anchored in Christ does not drift.

Because the One who holds us is more faithful than we are.