

THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD

Acts 20:17-38

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Acts 20:32. As Paul says goodbye to the Ephesians for the last time, he leaves them with a secret weapon, an infinite power source to insure their long-term future. He says, *“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.”*

Amazing! Think about it for a moment. Paul was leaving this little church behind, forever, only three years after its founding. Paul was no snake oil salesman—here today, gone tomorrow. He was with them three years, teaching day and night (20:31), both in public and house to house (20:20). Yet didn't he have had more to teach them? A fledgling start-up in a cosmopolitan, pagan city 1000 miles from Jerusalem? How could he leave them so soon? What hope could they have for survival? The best, most certain hope of all! *God and the word of his grace*. God's word was powerful enough to build them up and insure their inheritance in God's kingdom.

We continue our series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, with this being the third history lesson about the church in Ephesus from Acts. In this message, we'll look at this certain hope, and how to make the best use of it in our own lives.

DON'T SHRINK BACK. ACTS 20:18-27.

As we read Acts 20:17-38, we quickly discern what Paul was passionate about. He couldn't stop talking about the proclamation of God's Word. His speech is packed with words like testify, teach and proclaim. In these first verses (Acts 20:18-27) in particular, Paul offers a defense of his teaching. He says (20:20), *“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house”* (Acts 20:20). Then he repeats himself in 20:27, saying, *“I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”*

Why did Paul say it this way? If God's Word is so powerful, why would Paul or any of us be tempted to shrink back from proclaiming it?

God's word is challenging. Sometimes it confronts us with something that we would rather not hear. In particular, consider Paul's central message for both Jews and Gentiles, as he summarized it in Acts 20:21: 1) “repentance toward God” and 2) “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Why might we shrink back from declaring such a message?

1) God's word calls us (20:21) to repentance toward God, because in one way or another, we've all rebelled against his authority over us. We've all pushed him out of the way and chosen to live autonomously, outside of his rule. That would be okay if God were a bully, or an incompetent leader, or an upstart without legitimate rights to rule over us. God, however, is thoroughly good, completely loving, utterly just, and as the creator of all things. He has every right to be in authority over us. So he calls us through his word to confess and apologize for our rebellion against him.

2) Then, having repented of rebellion, God's word calls us (20:21) to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, we are to come home to God, to come back from living autonomously, and to submit once again to his loving rule. Faith does not mean simply thinking it through and concluding that Jesus must have been real. No, this idea of faith is much more than cognition; it's supra-rational. Think of it as a pledge of allegiance, a sworn oath of fidelity, involving head, heart & hands. It's a lifelong commitment to the *Lord*, i.e. the king and ruler of the Father's creation..

“Repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” That's the story of redemption, and it's what we often shrink back from proclaiming. We imagine how people will respond to such a message, perhaps taking offense, perhaps going on the offensive against us, and we shrink back.

Let's be clear about what it means whenever we shrink back, because doing so is itself a kind of message. Whenever we shrink back and don't proclaim the story of redemption, we're proclaiming that we've changed our allegiances. When we shrink back, it's because we're more afraid of people than the Lord. When we shrink back, we proclaim that we believe more in the power of our neighbors than we do in the power of God and his word.

Jesus called us to love God first and foremost, and then love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:27). Paul held to these priorities. He understood from the Old Testament that God had called him to be a watchman for everyone whom he met (Ezekiel 33). The watchman served the king by warning his neighbors of imminent danger. If the watchman saw danger approaching, warned his neighbors, but they took no action, then any harm that befell them would be their own fault. But if instead the watchman chose to remain silent and not sound the alarm, then the blood of his neighbors would be on his own hands. This explains why Paul said in Acts 20:26-27, *“I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”*

Because he knew God and the word of his grace, Paul was a faithful watchman. Before he met Jesus, Paul was consumed by hatred and fear—of Christians, whom he worked night and day to arrest, imprison and kill. But then Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul experienced God and the word of his grace first hand. From that point on, he was filled with love and courage to be a faithful watchman. The Lord became so real to him that he was unwilling to shrink back from his neighbors. Even as he anticipated (23) imprisonment and affliction, he (24) refused to shrink back.

Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders is recorded for us in Acts 20 to remind us of the chain reaction that led to the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Paul

passed the mantle of proclamation on to these men, who passed it on to others, and so on, until centuries later it was passed down to us. God and the word of his grace is now calling us all to repentance and faith, so that we can be his faithful watchmen. It's time that we confess any fear of man that would cause us to shrink back. It's time that we renew our faith in the Lord as our rightful king. He will give us the courage not to shrink back.

KEEP WATCH. ACTS 20:28-32.

The Ephesians must have been rather intimidated, knowing Paul was commissioning them to carry on in his absence after he left for Jerusalem. It was like being called out of the bleachers, to step out on the field and play in the Super Bowl. Yet Paul was able to entrust them to God and the word of his grace—all the Ephesians needed for maturity and longevity.

Paul did not, however, reconstitute the church as a democracy, leaving every member with equal authority. He spoke to the pastors (or elders, Gr. *presbyteroi*) in Ephesus, whom he was raising up to a higher level of responsibility over the rest of the church.

Later in this series, as we work through the second half of Ephesians, we'll discover that Paul had a lot to say about hierarchy. He taught headship and submission everywhere—in marriage and parenting, in the workplace, in the government, and in the church. But he never taught hierarchy without also going to great lengths to teach unity and equality. Clearly God doesn't value a child less than a parent, nor a wife less than a husband, nor a parishioner less than a pastor. Paul says that everyone in Christ is equal in value, but there's also hierarchy everywhere, because order is essential for life. Order and roles are gifts from God. In virtually every context, God calls someone to take the lead, and the others to follow.

Since Paul spoke to the pastors in Ephesus, you may rightly be wondering whether Acts 20 applies to anyone other than ordained clergy. It does! Let me assure you that Paul's words are indeed for us all. Paul never intended for his mantle to pass on to the Ephesian pastors and then come to a full stop with them. Rather, he expected them to carry his message back to everyone else in the church, who would then pivot and pass it on to others.

Likewise, the Church of the Resurrection on Capitol Hill isn't a democracy. As pastor, I share this message with you, trusting that you will then pivot and share it with others, because all of you are pastors in one way or another. Maybe you bear a responsibility within the church, like leading a home group, or helping with a particular ministry. But even if you don't bear any specific formal responsibility, you're still called to pastor, because you're responsible for loving your neighbor—whether the person cutting your hair, or delivering your mail, or bagging your groceries, or sharing your cubicle, or living next door. We all serve under the authority of others, and we all are being served by others who are under our authority, even if only for a moment. Don't be a fool like Jonah, who thought he could run away from his pastoral responsibilities. Unless you take to the desert, there's no place you can go where you won't have neighbors to love, especially by sharing God's story with them.

Hierarchy within the church is a blessing and a means of God's grace to us. I'm very thankful that we have a wise and godly bishop, Steve Breedlove, who is a pastor and a blessing to me. And I'm very thankful for Shawn Honey, another wise and godly man who blesses us all as the Assistant Pastor here. And I'm very thankful that you all are pastors in one way or another in all the spheres where you have been given headship and responsibility, and you're blessing many people through your pastoral care.

Paul speaks to our common pastoral calling in Acts 20:28. He says, "*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.*" Do you see the order here? Pastoral care begins at home, with the care of your own soul. Pay attention to yourself first, and then to those whom God has put under your care.

In other words, because of your pastoral calling, you've got to take responsibility for your own relationship with God. This isn't a task that you can outsource, because it's not a task, it's a relationship. It's not something your parents can do for you. You've got to love the Lord yourself. If you don't, then the hypocrisy that takes root may eventually result in your becoming a threat to the neighbors you're supposed to be loving. This is what Paul is talking about when (20:29) he describes the fierce wolves that will someday come among them. Where will they come from? "*From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them*" Acts 20:30. Sadly, there are people like this within the church everywhere. They are those who have rejected the Lord's authority, and have begun to draw the Lord's people to themselves rather than closer to the Lord. They're wolves in sheep's clothing, because they once were trusted leaders in the church, and they still use very religious language, but they aim to build their own kingdom rather than God's.

Pretty scary, isn't it? Makes you wonder who you can trust, doesn't it? But remember that God and the word of his grace "*is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*" How can you tell a true pastor from a wolf in sheep's clothing? God's powerful word. If your pastor always tells you what you want to hear, always rolling with the culture, then take heed and compare what you're hearing with God's word. Within Resurrection, I hope that you'll always find what our pastors are saying comes straight from the Scriptures, and I hope you'll talk with us if you ever find that it doesn't. Why? Because you're precious in the sight of the Lord. "*He bought you with his own blood*" Acts 20:28.

So "*pay careful attention,*" Paul says. Keep watch, first for your own relationship with the Lord, and then secondly for those whom God has placed under your care. And remember, you have all you need in God and the word of his grace. As you trust in the Lord to make you a faithful watchman, you become a part of the great chain reaction, the eternal cascade of God's grace, flowing through you to the people under your care. Whether you have biological children or not, the neighbors you love are your spiritual heritage, those from whom you did not shrink back, but whom you served as a faithful watchman, by sharing God's story with them.

IMITATE CHRIST. ACTS 20:33-35.

All this talk of hierarchy and headship might leave you feeling uneasy, especially in the capital city of democracy. What about corrupt leaders, whether in government, business, family or the church? Is self-policing our only line of defense against fierce wolves?

Thankfully, no. Not only ought we to scrutinize the *words* of our leaders, measuring them against God's powerful word, but we're also to scrutinize their *lives*. We have every right to ask, "does my pastor's life tell a story that resonates with the story of God's word?" In other words, as the old adage says, our leaders must walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

In this regard, you may have noticed how self-referential Paul was throughout his speech. In the first section:

- v. 18. *"You know how I lived among you..."*
- v. 19 I served *"the Lord with all humility and tears and trials..."*
- v. 20-21, 26-27. I didn't shrink back. I'm innocent of your blood, I didn't shrink back.

Now again in this third section:

- v. 33. *"I coveted no one's silver or gold or finery."*
- v. 34. *"I worked with my own hands,"* to take care of myself and my companions.

Why does Paul devote roughly half of his speech to a defense of his record? Because he knows that our actions often speak louder than our words, and he doesn't want the memory of his life to undermine or cancel out the memory of his message.

No matter what people say, leadership is always about both word and deed. When we consider men and women for public office, there's often pushback about public scrutiny into their private lives. Why pry into their histories, looking for skeletons in the closet? What does the personal life of a particular candidate matter, we're asked, when it comes to government service? But deep down inside, we all know that it does matter, because we're integrated human beings; no public servant is fully compartmentalized. Leadership always demands a higher morality. We have every right to ask whether our leaders walk their talk.

Paul would have us go even further in our defense against fierce wolves. *"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 20:35.

For Paul, it's all about Jesus. Everything he does is in imitation of Christ. That's why he's saying, "look at my life." He's testifying to Jesus' presence and power within him. All that he did among the Ephesians was for Christ, in imitation of Christ. And now, as he prepared to return to Jerusalem, where he anticipated being imprisoned and afflicted, he undoubtedly sensed the parallels between his own story and that of Jesus. How could he press on ahead towards Jerusalem? Paul was transformed by God and the word of his grace, which gave him the courage—and joy—to finish the race.

Sometime before Paul left Ephesus, he wrote to the church in Corinth the letter that we now call 1 Corinthians. And right in the midst of that letter's talk of unity, equality, and hierarchy, Paul declares the golden rule for all Christian leaders when he says (1 Cor 11:1), *"Imitate me, as I imitate Christ."*

Jesus is our gold standard. No other man in history has quite walked the talk like he has. He said, *"Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends"* (John 15:13). Then that very evening, when he could have blown away every enemy, he did exactly what he said he would. He lay down his life for his disciples, both then and now. Because he walked the talk, we can be free from the crushing weight of sin and death, and have abundant life in his name.

"Imitate me, as I imitate Christ" is our strongest defense against wolves in sheep's clothing, because wolves always want to draw followers to themselves, but good pastors lead their sheep to Jesus, the bread of life and the living water.

Ultimately I evaluate the leadership of Bishop Steve in these terms. I ask, "does my imitation of the bishop make me more like Jesus?" Likewise, that's how you ought to evaluate my leadership within the Church of the Resurrection. As you imitate me, does it make you more like Jesus? Believe me, I don't want you to follow me unless it helps you follow Christ. Likewise, that's how you ought to be leading in every relationship in which God has given you responsibility. Ask yourself, am I laying down my life for this person as Christ did for me? Jesus is the gold standard for us as leaders.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER. ACTS 20:36-38.

Finally, don't miss the love that Paul had for his flock, and the love that they had for him. See him leading them in prayer in v.36, see them weeping and hugging and kissing him goodbye in v. 37. Here's a beautiful picture of what it's supposed to look like when we fully trust God and the word of his grace for maturity and longevity. God and his word bind us together in love into a tight-knit body, in anticipation of our Father's great inheritance. In other words, we become family—something which I'm so thankful is part of our life together here at Resurrection. It's the unmistakable fruit of God and the word of his grace at work within us.