

**Acts 20: 29-32; “Commending God & His Grace”, Sermon # 77 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on July 17th, 2022, in the Morning Worship Service.**

In this last part of his final message to the elders at Ephesus, Paul now turns his attention to the great problem of what would happen after his departure from them. He speaks having the gift of prophecy, and knowing what would take place, he gives them a loving exhortation. 1st of all, he tells them that he would have them to watch. 2nd – He commends them to God and to the word of His Grace. And 3rd – He tells them of the lasting inheritance which will come to all of God’s dear people who are sanctified. Brethren, these are things which were not only given to these ministers by Paul, but these are truths which the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul would have us to receive and live by. Let us learn together at this hour more of what the Christian life is.

1st of all – The Christian life is learning to watch against false men preaching false doctrine from a false spirit.

“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” “Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” In my last few messages to you from this passage I have tried to draw out the significance of every church having a faithful pastor or pastors to shepherd the flock, seeing that it is the Lord the Holy Spirit who has made them the overseers of the flock to watch over the sheep, the members of the church, for their spiritual good. This means that it is their duty to feed them the word of God and to guard them from all that is false.

It is very sad to say, but the same dangers which Paul mentions here in verses 29 and 30 still exist in the church of God today. Men who will come in from the outside acting like spiritual wolves, and men who arise from within the church itself; men who will rise up speaking perverse things in order to draw away the disciples after themselves. Let’s think about this for a few moments and try to discern how we should think about men who act like this. Paul says that we ought to watch against their gaining a hearing, or gaining power in the local church.

Now, you would think that if someone came in acting like a wolf that he would be recognized by Christ’s sheep right away. But this is not always the case. Our Lord Jesus warned his own disciples of this in the Sermon on the Mount. And I think it will be helpful to hear His words on this subject. Turn with me over to Matthew chapter 7, verses 15-23. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” “You will know them by their fruits.” “Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?” “Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.”

“A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” “Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ “And then I will declare to them; I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

The Lord Jesus shows us here what the sinful problem is with men who are spiritual wolves. The problem is that they have never been converted to Christ in the first place. But sometimes this is hard to see. For when a person like this comes into our assembly, you would think that they are a sheep by the way that they talk, when you first meet them. They have sheep’s clothing on, Jesus says here, but yet they are not really one of Christ’s sheep. They come into the assembly

showing a feigned desire to learn and to be with other Christians, and yet underneath this garb of a solid profession of faith there is the desire to harm or take advantage of the sheep. How so? Well, they come to you talking about what it means to know God. And so at first, you think that you should listen to them. They seem very impressive in the way that they speak and act. They appear to be very serious in their own religious practices and observances. They will attempt to show you how “spiritual” they really are, in terms of holding to the Bible and outwardly keeping the commandments of God. They want to show you how very precise they are, how clear thinking that they are, in doctrine and practice.

But Jesus says here that they are actually a spiritual wolf coming in, seeking the people who are unsuspecting, seeking them so that they may deceive them or devour them, or take advantage of them in some way, either doctrinally, or financially, or personally. At first they may seem to be a kind person. But later you realize that their supposed kindness was really a cover; that they really are very authoritarian and demanding in the way that they interact with you and with others. When you first meet them, you perhaps think that they are very spiritually minded. They say that they believe in Christ. Perhaps they even believe in the Confession of Faith. But over time you will come to find out that they have their own strong ideas about how a person should follow Jesus.

These false prophets and teachers, many of them, serve God by a works-righteousness. They believe in themselves and their own perseverance. They are always trying to prove how righteous they are. They would persuade you to trust in your own righteousness, all of the supposed things that you can do to meet God’s approval and theirs. Even though they appear at times to have a friendly concern for you, you find as you get to know them over time, that they can be harsh and domineering towards you. And sometimes you even observe or hear from others that they are that way with their own wife and their own children. And then you begin to realize that this is same way that they are treating you.

It becomes obvious over time that they believe that they are more spiritually correct than you are, in regard to many doctrinal and practical issues. As you talk with them you come to see that they are very proud of what they think they know, and you hear from them of the many good and godly things that they think that they have done. And so, you are told by them in so many words, that they believe that there are things that you need to learn from them in this regard. They want to be a leader among the people, and your leader. And if they do become a leader they will try to make sure that you will do exactly what they are expecting you to do, even if it is not exactly what the Bible says should be done, or how it should be done.

Still, they believe that they are right about every doctrinal and practical issue, even though it is apparent to you that they do not know how to show kindness, consideration, love, or how to patiently work through what true obedience to God and to Christ really consists of. Since this is the case, they are often critical of those who do not measure up their standard of outward righteousness or doctrinal preciseness. They often have their own way of doing things and looking at things, and they want to force you to accept their evaluation of what obedience should look like, to God’s law.

And in that regard, they even want to control what it means to be wise. But their wisdom is an earthly wisdom. And it is often governed by selfish ambition and a love to be seen by other people as a leader. The truth of the matter is that they want to have power and control over other people. They want to take advantage of people who are sensitive to doing God’s will, and use them to promote their own selfish interests and aims. They actually will attempt to promote a false spirituality of acting as though they know better than you on every subject. They will say that they know better than your pastor and your proven teachers.

But Jesus says that you will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? No, it is not possible. Good fruit in a person's life comes from their being a good tree. Every good tree, that is every good person, every truly Christian person, bears good fruit. A good tree bearing good fruit is a word picture of a good heart bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit in right Biblical thinking. And then works of righteousness come forth in a person's actions when they are born again by the Spirit of God.

Because they have believed in Christ, they are learning the way of God's helping them by grace and teaching them by His Spirit, to walk in humility before God and men. They love God and want to keep His commandments. But they are not willing to have proud men stand before them and teach them anything. For there really is nothing that can be taught by that person who believes only in themselves and their own righteousness. And they do not want a hireling for a shepherd. And so this is why, not only the pastor, but also the sheep need to watch against spiritual wolves coming in among us.

As Jesus says in John 10: 11-14 – "I am the good shepherd." "The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." "But a hireling, he who is not shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them." "The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care for the sheep." "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own." "As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Let us conclude this, my beloved brethren; that we will watch against men coming to us from the outside who are wolves in sheep's clothing. Wolves are sly, and cruel, and fierce creatures. A true Christian will want to be wise as a serpent, but innocent as a dove. And so, let us watch against wolves. And let us also watch in a most loving, caring way for people in our own midst, even; people who might rise up for selfish reasons, speaking perverse things. Let us be watchful, and let pray for God to raise up men to leadership in our church who will truly meet all of the qualifications listed in 1st Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

2nd – Paul commends these elders to God and to the word of His Grace.

It is truly wonderful how Paul spoke in the way that he did, to the elders at Ephesus. He knows that he will not be able to be there with them when they encounter these false prophets and false brethren who will come to them, and arise among them. But he knows that God would always be there to help them. This is a truth that you and I need to lay hold of, as well, in our most dark and difficult hours. The apostle commends them to God Himself. He knew that God the Father's purposes were sure, that He would never fail them or forsake them. He knew that the Lord Jesus, God the Son was their Advocate and Intercessor at the Father's right hand. He knew that the Holy Spirit would be in them and with them as their Helper and their Comforter, their Paraclete; the One called alongside to help.

Sometimes the forces of falsehood and wickedness may threaten to overwhelm you dear Christian. You may at times feel overwhelmed by the opposition of the devil and wicked men. Will you not remember that God is still there with you? Christ your Savior is a Friend who sticks closer than a brother. This is a song that we sing. Jesus! what a Friend for sinners, Jesus, Lover of my soul; friends may fail me, foes assail me, He my Savior makes me whole. Jesus! What a Friend in weakness! Let me hide myself in Him; tempted, tried, and sometimes failing, He my strength, my vict'ry wins. Jesus! What a Guide and Keeper! While the tempest still is high, Storms about me, night o'ertakes me, He, my Pilot hears my cry. Hallelujah! What a Savior, Hallelujah! What a Friend! Saving, Helping, Keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.

As John Wesley said on his death bed – The best of all, God is with us. It is a good thing to remind ourselves of this often, that we are complete in Christ. Therefore God is, and He will be enough for us in any situation, because of what Christ has done and is doing for us continually. Listen to how Paul words it in Colossians 2: 5-10 – “For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.” “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.” “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily: and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.”

Paul also commends them, and us, to the word of His grace which is able to build us up in our faith. The essential word of God’s grace is Christ Himself. The word of His grace that builds us up in our faith is the word of Christ’s grace, which is set forth in the promises of God’s giving us all grace in Him. More particularly, the word of His grace is God’s written word and Christ’s grace that accompanies it, by the power of the Holy Spirit’s working so that we are changed and transformed by it from one degree of glory to another. It is good for us to often think about the value the word of God; valuable to us above every other source of what gives us life and strength.

Psalms 119 is evidence of this. Verses 105-107 say – “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” “I have sworn and confirmed that I will keep your righteous judgments.” “I am afflicted very much; revive me, O Lord, according to Your word.” So the word of God is what illumines our darkness and it shines light on the spiritual path that we take, every day. From it we not only receive guidance, the word directing our way into all of His commandments and what He would have us do in every situation, but with the Spirit’s help, we may resolutions to keep His righteous judgments.

And even when we are afflicted very much, we pray that we would be revived according to God’s word. That is, that we would be given spiritual wisdom, strength, and joy in doing His will in every situation. We find this coming to us as a reality because of God’s faithfulness to His word. Psalm 119: 14-16 – “I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches.” “I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways.” “I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.”

3rd – Paul tells the elders of Ephesus, and us, of the lasting inheritance which will come to all of God’s dear people who are sanctified.

Verse 32 says – “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” This inheritance that Paul is speaking of here is our being able to enter heaven itself because we have believed in the word of Christ’s grace. And accompanying this, there is also the prospect of someday coming into eternal inheritance of the New Heavens and New Earth. Christ, by His sacrifice purchased these future things just as much as He purchased the New Heart. His purchase encompasses our whole salvation from beginning to end.

In 1st Peter 1, verses 3 and 4, Peter says this: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance in corruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” We are kept by God’s power for this. And in the process of our living our life to Him, we become sanctified; more and more holy and righteous

in our heart and our behavior. Our greatest joy is thought of as going home to God. It is the prospect of being made holy and righteous forever the moment that we enter into the presence of the Holy God and of Jesus Christ, His glorified Son. All sin will be taken away from our spirit forever, at the time when we die, because of Christ. And our physical body will someday on the Day when Christ returns, be changed to be like His glorious body. And thus we shall forever be with the Lord, beholding His glory, His glory which outshines the sun in an infinite way. Let us live in light of these certain realities which are most certainly coming, and glory in Christ now, and live to His glory.