

PAUL'S DECLARATION, EXAMPLE AND WARNING

πασαν την βουλην του θεου

Acts 20:13-38

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Last Sunday, in a sermon entitled "Pathos", we dealt with the very emotional farewell that took place between Paul and these Ephesian elders. Today we want to work backwards from that event and deal with what Paul said to the Ephesian elders.

1. **Paul's Declaration.**

Here, more than once, Paul states that he had been faithful in his teaching...

- v. 20 "**I did not shrink from declaring** to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house.
- v. 21 "**Testifying** both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."
- v.27 "For **I did not shrink from declaring** to you the whole counsel of God."
- v.31 "Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years **I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone** with tears."

Paul's point here was that he believed he had been faithful. He had been faithful in preaching the gospel and he had been faithful in declaring to them the "whole counsel of God."

That is an interesting little phrase there in verse 27 – "the whole counsel of God." Westminster Theological Seminary, the school that I graduated from, has made use of that phrase ("the whole counsel of God") but always in the Greek: *πασαν την βουλην του θεου*

πασαν την βουλην του θεου. "All the counsel of God."

It is that kind of theme that, for me, as a preacher, drives me to deal with the texts that some other preachers might simply gloss over.

I'm reminded of sitting in on a Sunday school class at a church back when I was still in seminary. I was just a visitor to the

church. They didn't know me and I didn't know them. The teacher that day was going through Ephesians chapter 1 and came up to verse 4 where it says God "chose us in Him (meaning in Christ) **before the foundation of the world.**" The teacher then said, "Well, that's kind of a controversial section so we'll just skip over it and keep on going."

Whoa!!! Wait a minute, I thought. So I raised my hand.

The teacher called upon me and then I said something like,

"Controversial or not, this is **a great teaching** of Paul's that fits right in with the work of our Lord Jesus. For if you will turn to 1 Peter 1:20, there Peter uses the exact same language to speak of the Lord Jesus. For there Peter writes about Christ that "he was foreknown **before the foundation of the world.**"

I then continued. "Before this world was ever made, God had a plan that included his son, and that plan was to choose, call out, elect and save some. That's why we read in 2 Timothy 1:9 that God called us and saved us in Christ Jesus "before the ages began."

"If we're not willing to deal with God's election of us before the foundation of the world, then we can't deal with Christ's saving us before the world began, for they go hand in hand." And with that I shut up.

You see, the **WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD** includes the **WHOLE** of scripture: the easy parts and the not so easy parts, the parts that we like and the parts that we may not like and would just as happily skip over.

In the back of my Bible I have taped in an advertisement put in a magazine by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. This is an atheistic organization that has as its expressed desire to rid the human race of **all religion**, Christian or otherwise.

But the reason I have their ad taped in my Bible is because they have a photograph of Charles Darwin. Then, next to the photo is a quote from Darwin, which they give. Here it is:

"I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe... will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."

Well, Charles Darwin, who started out as seminary student by the way, understood the "plain language of the text" quite accurately. Call it a damnable doctrine, or a "horrible doctrine" (as I called it at the time of my ordination), either way, it is the same: this is a teaching that none of us are eager to embrace.

Like that Sunday school teacher who simply wanted to SKIP OVER a hard section, we too may like to SKIP OVER some verses, teachings or doctrines that we find here or there in the Bible.

But if you are preaching **πασαν την βουλην του θεου** you don't have that option. **You preach it all or you shut up and go home.** In the words of kids, you "Put up or shut up." **PREACH THE WHOLE TEXT** or go find another job, preacher!

So Paul says he had been faithful in his declaration to the believers in Ephesus and I don't think any of us would question that at all.

2. Paul's Example.

Paul also reminded the Ephesian elders of his example: he worked hard.

vss. 33-35

Are **you** a hard worker?

I grew up under two hard working parents who in turn instilled in us, their three children, a strong work ethic and an appreciation of others who are hard workers.

When I was in real estate, John Hoffer, the broker of record for the firm I was associated with, was traveling with me one day to look at a property. Along the way we were talking about real estate and about making a living. He then said, "If you work 40 hours a week, you can earn enough to get by. If you work 50 hours a week, you will really start to earn some money. But it isn't until you start working 60 hours a week or more that you will ever get rich."

Now, I'm not stating that we each should be working 60 hours or more per week. But I think that what John Hoffer said was basically true: that is, there is a **direct correlation** between HOW LONG one works and HOW MUCH MONEY one will earn. If you're simply interested in "getting by" then you will likely not work very long...or hard. But if you are driven to do more, chances are you will earn more.

But is the gaining of wealth what this is all about?

For Paul it wasn't. Indeed look again at verse 35...

v.35

Here Paul makes it clear that he was not advocating working harder so as to earn more for oneself. Rather he is saying, "The more you have, the more you can give away."

Years ago I had a young doctor ask to meet with me. He said that he was just finishing up his internship and would soon be in private practice. As he saw it he was about to earn a LOT of money. The reason he asked to meet with me, he said, was that he **wanted some counsel** on how he might be able to give away a lot of that money.

I listened, and then I said, "It seems to me that the answer to your question is to **live within a budget**." I continued, "Some years ago, a man won the Nobel Prize in Economics for his economic theory. I don't recall what the theory was called but the gist of his theory was that no matter how much one earns, one will tend to spend it. And he won a Nobel Prize for that!" (We laughed). "The key," I said, "is to not let that happen to you. Live within a budget at a set lower amount than the whole of your earnings, determining to take what is above that amount and give it away."

That's what Paul was doing. He wasn't working hard so that he could get a newer donkey. Rather he was working hard so as to help bless someone else with a donkey.

Now, the church **blesses** and thanks those that work hard and who give.

And the church **helps** those that are unable to help themselves and those who have come into a time of hardship.

But the church **has little to no compassion** on the lazy, the uninitiated, the irresponsible. **Justice may be blind, but Mercy sees everything.**

And so when our Hearts of Mercy benevolence fund people here at the church are looking to GIVE AWAY MONEY to those in need, they LOOK **CAREFULLY** into it. Will their giving to someone be an act of needed charity, or will it be an act of stupidity? Will this gift **help** the person in need or simply **help perpetuate** their sloth or poor decision making?

So we pray for these who oversee the benevolence fund that they will give – monies that YOU have given to them (via your offerings) – carefully.

And now for the main point that I want to deal with (from these three points)...

3. Paul's Warning

The warning is given in verses 29-30...

vss. 29-30

When Tim Martin spoke on this text a few weeks ago, he gave numerous examples of just **HOW church leaders** had proven themselves to be "fierce wolves" who didn't spare the flock and how they have come to teach all sorts of **twisted things** to draw away disciples after them. That's Tim's expertise: seeing, studying, understanding and then warning the church about these teachers and their twisted doctrines. And, again, we thank God for the work that Tim is doing.

But my focus today isn't on these teachers or their teaching. What I want to deal with is the question as to **HOW** people go astray.

- How is it that people you or I have known – people who at one time were numbered among us – have departed...leaving the faith...abandoning sound teaching...becoming advocates of all kinds of unbelief?

- Yes, how is it that a Charles Darwin goes from being a seminary student to warning against the teachings of Christianity and the "plain language of the text"? How?
- Or even worse, how does a Joseph Stalin leave his seminary training to become a priest, to becoming one of the worst despots in history?
- Or from this week, how does Bethany Christian Services move from being an organization that (at one time) sought to place children in need of adoption into solid two-parent, Mom and Dad Christian homes to now embracing the idea that the concept of the family has changed and therefore it is the **loving thing** to do to see children placed into **any family structure**, married or not, heterosexual, homosexual, transgender, it doesn't matter. How does this happen?
- Or how did Harvard and Yale and Princeton – all begun as schools of theological training become **bastions of unbelief** in the God of the Bible?

How...how...how? How does this SLIDE into twisted teaching, unbelief or spiritual apathy take place? How?

That's what I want to deal with.

1. Pride. Pride is the #1 answer: Pride in one's own intellect, pride in one's own life, pride in one's own accomplishments. **Pride is the great KILLER.**

Whenever a school or organization or church or person thinks they **cannot** fall, that is when they are PRIMED and ready for a fall.

And here is why...

1 Peter 5:5-6

In this passage we find a promise regarding pride. It is not just a principle, or an axiom. It is a **PROMISE**. And that promise is this: BE PROUD and you be assured that God is going to OPPOSE YOU.

It is not that he will merely tolerate you...or that he will make things difficult for you...or that he will warn you...or anything like that.

No, he will oppose you.

GOD OPPOSES THE PROUD!

When I dropped our son David off at Liberty University some years back, I stood in a room full of parents only a couple feet away from Jerry Fallwell Jr., the president of Liberty University. He went on and on about his vision for Liberty and how he was waiting for the day when Liberty's football team would beat Notre Dame's football team. He was quite bragadocious. And why not? The school had grown tremendously under his leadership.

But did Jerry Fallwell Jr. come across as proud that day? Oh, you bet.

And what has God promised to the proud: I WILL OPPOSE THE PROUD!

Anyone hearing anything about Jerry Fallwell Jr. these days? I don't suspect he is speaking at many conferences. I doubt his phone is ringing off the hook.

Yale College began out of concern that Harvard (in neighboring Massachusetts) was being taken over by the Anglicans. This was back around 1699. And as the Church of England Anglicans were viewed as being only a step away from being Roman Catholics, the Puritans of Connecticut wanted to make sure that there was at least ONE SCHOOL of higher learning that would remain true to God's word. So, forget Harvard, we'll found Yale!

So they proudly founded Yale, and in the end both became shipwrecks for men's souls.

Or consider the names we have heard now for many years: Jimmy Baker, Gordon MacDonald, Ted Haggard, Jimmy Swaggart, Bill Gothard, Bill Hybels, James McDonald, Robert Tilton, Mark Driscoll, Joshua Harris, Jerry Fallwell Jr., and, most recently, Ravi Zacharias...to name a few.

Every one of these men have, before the church and before the world "bit the dust."

How did this happen to these men? PRIDE. These men became "big names": they became popular speakers, popular writers, and in Evangelical circles household names.

But where are they now?

I saw a note this past week that it was the anniversary of the funeral for Billy Graham, a preacher (and this is how it was worded) who PRACTICED WHAT HE PREACHED.

That's a rarity!

2. Longing for the world.

The old line is that the three things that get people into trouble are "wine, women and song." I understand about the wine and the women, but have never really understood about how "song" could be such a trap for a downfall. Nate, you'll have to instruct us about that!

1 John chapter 2 verse 16 gives a slightly different description of these things that cause great problems to Christian people...

1 John 2:15-16

Three things: the desires (or lusts) of the flesh
the desires (or lusts) of the eyes, and
the pride of one's possessions or the pride of life.

There is, in this world, a great temptation to simply want MORE of this world...to want to find satisfaction in this world.

The men's names that were listed a couple minutes ago almost all succumbed to the lusts of the flesh.

I am in no position to evaluate their situations, but to my knowledge every one of those men (except for Bill Gothard) was married. Could they not find their fulfillment in "the wife of their youth"? Or are we to think that every one of these men was somehow cursed with a frigid and unalluring spouse? I highly doubt that.

But instead of following the instruction of Proverbs 5:15-20 about **finding one's pleasure in one's own wife**, most of these men went after others. And in so doing they violated the covenant they had made with their wives.

Fleshly desires, the desire for money, a pride in one's things or one's position in life...these are what a LOVE FOR THE WORLD is described as. And if one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

I was reading some time ago about a certain preacher who had died. I wish I could remember who it was. But the point was made that he died rather poor and that that simple fact **made a great impression** upon the people who knew him: that he had truly been one who while he had ample opportunity to gain and hoard much, had learned to give it all away.

3. Lastly this morning, as to this question of how people we have known can so turn away from God and the truth of the gospel...

I believe this can happen out of simple **neglect**.

Luke 9:62

The picture here is one behind a plow. And either you are going to plow your field and do it well, or you are going to look back...or look around...get **distracted** maybe. And if that happens, your field plowing is going to be a mess.

Some years ago I was with a pastor at his home. We were having a meeting about some things that needed to be done with children's education when suddenly the doorbell rang. He went to the door and then went with the person at the door out to the garage. After awhile he returned and explained that he had bought out an old drug store and was now selling all of the stuff from the drug store out of his garage. We started back in when the doorbell rang again. Another buyer, and again he left. This went on and on until after some time I finally left.

I have nothing against that pastor trying to make some money on the side. Indeed, I always liked him very much as a

man and as a preacher. But in my opinion he was distracted.

There is a balance here...

- Christians and Pastors alike can have hobbies and, in my mind, I think they should have hobbies. I see nothing wrong with having hobbies.
- And it is great to be able to go on a vacation.
- And there are few things as important as family

All these things are true.

But there also is **a balance**. And once that new boat becomes the focus, or buying some antique, or shooting a round of golf, or going fishing, or...you fill in the blank...once these other things become **SO IMPORTANT TO US THAT WE ARE DISTRACTED FROM THE MAIN THING**...the plowing of the field that God has set us upon...then, Jesus said, we become no longer "fit for the kingdom of heaven."

So hand to the plow my brothers and sisters.

Don't let go of the handle.

Keep looking ahead and don't be distracted by anything or anyone else.

Hand to the plow and whatever you do, don't let go...ever...not ever.