

May 8, 2022

Acts 20:17-35:

“What to Maintain in Our Journey”

- I. Repentance and Faith. (vv. 20-23)
- II. How We See Life.
- III. Maintaining Vigilance. (vv. 28-31)

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Acts 20:17-35 (selected verses)

Dear Friends in Christ,

Martin Luther wrote, “You ought to beware thinking that Christ will achieve things in the earth quietly and softly when you see that He fought with His own blood, and afterward with all the martyrs.”

Every generation rises up and wants; always wanting. Every generation makes its noise; gives, to a certain degree; takes what it can. Every generation thinks it has discovered the answers, but the answers are always the same; they are rooted in the past and just given new names and various degrees of intensity in their pursuit. And then it all fades, or will morph into something else. The generation dies, lays claim to nothing, takes nothing with it, and is ultimately forgotten. It's the real history behind human history.

Our first parents defied God, thinking they could make their world a better place, and all they got was a life of struggle, scary nights, disappointment, pain, dying and death. So, what's new? Luther is right: “You ought to beware thinking that Christ will achieve things on earth quietly and softly...”. What Luther said is the way it was, the way it is, and the way it will be to the end. And his statement that “Jesus fought with His own blood, and afterward with all the martyrs” reminds us that Jesus did not come here to make this world “a wonderful world”. He came here to earn eternal life for those who believe.

Age is irrelevant. Every Christian parent and would be parent must understand this: We're on a journey. Life here can end at any moment. The goal is eternal life. The issue is . . .

WHAT TO MAINTAIN IN OUR JOURNEY

I. Repentance and Faith. (vv. 20-23)

We know what it means to maintain something: to take care of it. One definition Webster gives is “preserve from decline or failure.” The first things we want to “preserve from decline or failure,” in our journey through this world are repentance and faith.

Our text is part of the Apostle Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian Elders. At the close of his address the Elders wept and embraced Paul because he had informed them “that they would not see his face again.” (Acts 20:38) However, Paul left them and us critical insights concerning our journey through this world to eternal life. He said, “I did not shrink from declaring anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (vv 20,21)

Repentance and faith. Edward W. A. Koehler writes:

The Augsburg Confession (Article XII) describes repentance thus: “Now, repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that, for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers from terrors. The good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance.” Strictly speaking, conversion takes place the moment a person trusts in Christ for the remission of his sins. (Edward W. A. Koehler, A Summary of Christian Doctrine, CPH, Saint Louis, copyright 1952 by Alfred W. Koehler, p.136)

We want to understand that repentance is not, “Well, I know some sins aren't as bad as others. Jesus will forgive me.” Maybe that was the thinking of our first parents when they ate the fruit. Their thinking was their fall into sin.

Unquestionably, we find ourselves in the same position as Paul, the same position that always takes us to the same words of Paul that we've heard so many times: "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." It's sin. It's always there. Repentance is a constant. The battle rages. The moment any blood bought child of God in Christ becomes tired of hearing about living a life of repentance is the moment the person begins a journey down an eternally dark, ugly alley! The love and forgiveness of Christ must be *preserved from decline or failure*.

II. How We See Life.

Paul then states: "...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." (v.24) Some might say, "Well, that applies to Paul, not to the everyday Christian." And, of course, the question is, "What is an everyday Christian?" And the answer isn't hard: Paul, us. The everyday Christian lives with the same promise the Lord gave to the criminal hanging on the cross next to Him: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." That man's sins were completely forgiven, forgotten, forever removed from him. Could we ever think there is something or someone of this world, just fractionally more important than Jesus and the eternal life He won for us?

We know that we have a purpose for living. To reflect and witness to the love, forgiveness of sin and eternal life won for the guilt-ridden, regret filled soul. He has given each of us a place in life for that very purpose. Paul's words are for us: "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.'" (v.35)

Can you say - can I say - what Paul said: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." (Phil. 1:23b) Can we? How do we see life in this world? It isn't about what I want. It's about our journey with the Lord. We want to maintain our understanding of this.

III. Maintaining Vigilance. (vv. 28-31)

Paul then says to the Ephesian Elders - those appointed to oversee the life of the church:

Pay careful attention to ourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 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... (vv. 28-31)

Fierce wolves will come in among you. That's the way it was at the beginning of the New Testament Church. That the way it was, the way it is, the way it will be to the very end. We've experienced this among ourselves. R. C. H. Lenski wrote:

"Now the fact is, every false doctrine rends and tears to the degree that it is false. It is most destructive when it parades as the true teaching of Christ or of his apostles. One fang of false doctrine may cause faith to bleed.

"Men that bring in destructive doctrine from other churches are bad enough, but still worse are men that arise in one's own church and teach such doctrines, and the worst are false preachers and pastors...The wolves spare not the flock, they destroy souls; but these others (i.e., the ones "among your own selves") actually divide the church by drawing poor, deluded disciples after them." (Lenski, The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles, pp. 851-852)

Again, Paul's admonition to the Ephesian Church is, "Therefore be alert...". In his Epistle to the Romans he admonishes the church "to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught; avoid them." (Rm. 16:17) You see, there is more to our faith than just having a Bible and a handful of verses for comfort.

Our sermon hymn was "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word." Again, the opening words of the first stanza reads, "Lord keep us steadfast in Your Word; Curb those who by deceit or sword..." Deceit - misrepresenting the truth. Lie, as in Satan is the father of lies. Then sword. Sword, as in to cut and kill the truth of "...there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

And then, the last part of the third stanza, the plea to the Holy Spirit to, "Support us in our final strife And lead us out of death to life." We are in a battle, dear friends. I beg us to take and maintain the following, very familiar, selected statements from I Peter 1:3-9:

"He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials (well, we will be grieved by trials - we are), so that the tested (tested!) genuineness of your faith...may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ...(for you are) obtaining the outcome (goal) of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Can you say it...can I say it...and mean it? ***What is the World to Me?!***

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott