



35a | ACTS 20:25-28

A FAREWELL PLEA: COUNSEL YOURSELF

Don't follow your heart. You must counsel yourself with the word of God.

Outline

1. A FAITHFUL MINISTRY
2. A DIVINE DIRECTION
3. A CLEAN CONSCIENCE
4. A NOBLE LEGACY
5. A PERSONAL CARE

Call to Worship

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy ¹³ before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness. —Psalm 96:11

Songs

Behold Our God

Love Ran Red (At the Cross)

It is Well with My Soul

His Mercy is More

I Surrender All

Introduction

A man has written a book talking about how to be successful by managing your life and your time. It has a really **helpful story** in it. It's the story of a teacher who stood before his class, and he had a wide-mouthed jar.

In that jar he'd put some **large stones**, and he filled it up to the brim with these large stones. And then, he asked his class, "Is the jar full?" And some of the students carelessly said, "Yes, the jar is full." It was up to the very top with those large stones. He said, "No, the jar is not full."

Then, he took some **scoops of gravel** and put them in the jar and shook it 'til the gravel filled all the crevices there. Then he asked the question: "Now is the jar full?" Of course, the students were a bit wary. They didn't want to answer. But, one or two said, "Yes, now it's full." He said, "No, it's not yet full."

Then, he took some **sand**, and poured the sand in over the gravel, and shook it, and compacted it, and smoothed the sand off up at the top. “Now,” he said, “is the jar full?” No one wanted to lift their hand anymore, but maybe one said, “Well, it looks full.” He said, as you can guess, “No, it’s not full.”

And then, he took some water and poured **the water in over the sand** ’til it came up to the brim. And then, he said, “Now is the jar full?” And, they had to admit it certainly looked full. Then he asked this question to this class: he said, “Now, what is the truth, the lesson, in what I have just done?” He said, “Here is the lesson: **if I had not put the big rocks in first**, there would have been no room for them later on.” And so it is for us: if we don’t put in the “big rocks”—the most important things—first in our lives, there won’t be room for them later. Remember the words of Jesus.

Matthew 6:33 | Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

What are the big rocks? What are the things that really matter, things that you may be leaving out of your life—a lot of smaller things that have filled the capacity of your life, and you have left out the things that really matter, the big rocks? That’s what we’re going to be talking about—things that really, really, really matter.

In our text in Acts 20, the Apostle Paul is giving his farewell address to the elders at the church of Ephesus. They met him in **Miletus** because it was too dangerous for Paul to go back to Ephesus. He’s had taught them, disciplined them, and mentored them. Now, he’s **saying goodbye to them** for the last time. This is Paul’s final farewell. They know that perhaps the next time **they meet it’ll be on the shore of eternity**.¹ Paul gives them the five “big rocks,” or the five foundations of a fruitful, supernatural ministry for the Lord.

Key thought: Lay the foundations of your life on Christ, and he will give the increase of supernatural influence and legacy, long after you are gone.

The first thing he tells them to prepare for when he is gone is that they need to **care for their own spiritual walk**. They have to be in the habit of counseling themselves and living according to the word in faithfulness. Paul had done that for them.

1. A FAITHFUL MINISTRY

When Paul says, “**Pay careful attention to yourselves**” in verse 28, he is preaching what he practices. Paul has faithfully cared for his own spiritual walk with God that he could “proclaim the kingdom” with power and conviction.

Acts 20:25 | And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.

Paul has faithfully preached the kingdom, and now he will never see them again. He has given **them an example of faithful ministry** to follow. He preached the kingdom to himself first, and then to others. I love the words of Martyn Lloyd Jones.

¹ Adrian Rogers, “Things That Really Matter,” in *Adrian Rogers Sermon Archive* (Signal Hill, CA: Rogers Family Trust, 2017), Ac 20:17–38.

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?... Talk to yourself, and though the devil will suggest that because you do not feel, you are not a Christian, say: ... ‘Whether I feel or not, I believe the Scriptures. I believe God’s word is true and I will stay my soul on it, I will believe in it come what may.’²

We must be constantly teaching the word of God to each other dear saints, but first we must counsel ourselves. That’s where faithful ministry comes from.

Choosing to walk in the word on a personal level, counseling yourself on a daily basis, is going to result in a life of fruitful and faithful ministry like Paul. He was constantly proclaiming the message of the kingdom because it had changed his life so much.

What about you? Have you tapped into the word in such a way that it is personal and enriching to you so that others can follow your counsel? Are you able to read the Bible on a constant basis so that you are growing and changing into the image of Jesus Christ? This is one of those **“big rock” foundations in your life**. Daily walking with Christ, proclaiming the kingdom, will result in a faithful ministry.

2. A DIVINE DIRECTION

Another way Paul counseled himself was in the word of God. He got his direction from God’s word. This is the last time Paul will see the Ephesian elders. Paul knows by prophecy that he’s on his way to Jerusalem to get arrested. God’s going to have him write his prison epistles.

Acts 20:25b | I know that none of you... will see my face again.

Now **Paul’s face and physical appearance** wasn’t much to look at. One early record gives us a description of the great apostle.

A man small of stature, thin-haired upon the head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, his face, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.³

Regardless, it wasn’t Paul appearance they would miss. It was his love and **devotion to God and his care for their souls**. But now Paul was on a journey to Jerusalem. He had received this direction from God through some of the New Testament prophets.

Now I don’t know of any prophets today that can tell you God’s will for your life, but I do know that New Testament prophets today are pastors and elders of local churches who teach the word of God. **They lift up the word of God which is sufficient** to direct your life.

Perhaps you lack discernment for direction. I believe every Christian can have discernment. There is no “gift of discernment” just like there is no “gift of love” or “gift of patience.” There are certain number of virtues that all Christians are called to have and have access to, and discernment is on the top of the list. We are all called to be discerning

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 20-21.

³ Jeremy W. Barrier. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Tübingen, Germany: Gulde Druck Publishing, 2009), 73.

by studying and applying the word of God. If you lack discernment, you need to get vitally connected to the word and to mature saints in your local church. Being around wise people will make you wise. You cannot live the Christian life alone. You need to be vitally connected to the saints if you are going to have God's divine direction.

3. A CLEAN CONSCIENCE

The reason Paul could counsel himself so well, was that he had a clean conscience. Listen to his amazing testimony.

Acts 20:26 | Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all.

Paul believed the gospel that he counseled himself with. He knew the peace of God that passes understanding, **and he did everything he could to protect that peace.** The direct result was that he wanted others to know this peace. In fact, he thought it would be criminal, like worse than murder, to not tell people about the threat of eternal death in the lake of fire. That's why he says, "I'm innocent of the blood of all." What's he saying? **He was concerned for the lost.**

He's referring back to Ezekiel 33:8, where God says, as the **watchman of Israel**, if you don't warn the wicked that God is going to judge their sin, then their blood is on your hands. But if you warn them and they still don't repent, you are free from their blood. Paul said, "As a watchman, I'm innocent because I've given the warning. I've given the gospel. I'm called people to repentant faith in Jesus. That's all I can do."

Young person, you are walking with Jesus, but you have a friend who is lost. You need to warn them. Let them know about Christ. It might be a friend at church. They need you to tell them.

My brother, you might have a co-worker at your place of employment, and you care about them. But do you care about them enough to warn them about the wrath of the Lamb that is coming. Right now they can escape that judgment through faith in Christ. Will you tell them? Tell them of Christ's sacrifice.

Dear sister, you live in a neighborhood with somebody who's not saved—you are the watchman on the wall. It's fine to talk about your kids, but are you praying for an opportunity to tell them about Jesus?

Brothers and sisters, do you have clean hands when it comes to evangelism? God calls you to be his instrument. You are the watchman. If you don't tell them about Christ, then who will? Where you have failed confess it and be cleansed. But Paul didn't have to confess. Every opportunity God gave him, he took and lifted up Christ.

God is calling every mother's child in this building to be a soul winner. You say, "Well, God didn't call me to be a soul winner. God called me to be a mother or father," or, "God called me to be a musician," or, "God called me to be in business." God calls all of us to seek his business and his kingdom first. He says to go into all the world and evangelize. That's not a spiritual gift, but it's a command for every Christian. **If you're not interested in bringing souls to Jesus Christ, you are guilty of high treason against heaven's King.** Listen to Spurgeon's conviction about soul winning.

"Oh!" says one, I am not my brother's keeper." No, I will tell you your name; it is Cain. You are your brother's murderer; for every professing Christian, who is

not his brother's keeper, is his brother's killer; and be you sure that it is so; for you may kill by neglect quite as surely as you may kill by the bow or by the dagger.⁴

May the Lord give us grace to see souls as Paul saw them, as those under the attack of the enemy. He saw himself as the watchman to warn the people that the enemy was about to destroy them. Are you sounding the alarm to your family, friends, and neighbors?

4. A NOBLE LEGACY

One major way the **pastor counsels himself and the entire congregation** is considering the entire counsel of God's word.

Acts 20:27 | For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Paul preached to himself the whole counsel of God, so he could teach it to others. We are not called to preach our own pet doctrines or new psychological insights. The whole counsel of the word is sufficient for life and godliness. In the time that I have ministered among you (in the last fifteen years), there have been around 2000 sermons preached from all but six books of the Bible from your pastors and elders. I know you are wondering which books we have not preached from. According to my records the books are 2 John, and five of the minor prophets (Amos, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah). Many of the series have gone through entire books of the Bible. It is my desire to preach through the entire Bible with one congregation. Please pray that I will be able to do that.

Why do we preach expositively—**"line upon line, precept upon precept,"** chapter by chapter, and book by book in the Bible (Isa 28:10)? Because it is the safest way to preach the whole counsel of God. Spurgeon did not preach book by book, but in his ministry, he preached most of the contents of every book of the Bible over a span of 3600 messages during thirty eight years of ministry at one congregation.

5. A PERSONAL CARE

Are you counseling yourself with an attention to personal care? This is something Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to do, but every Christian should participate in the means of grace with the direct intention of applying the word to our own hearts.

Acts 20:28a | Pay careful attention to yourselves.

Sound doctrine is vital, but alone it is not enough, because according to Scripture, the fundamental qualification for pastoral ministry is **godly character**. This is what Paul is getting at when he tells the pastors and elders at Ephesus to "pay careful attention" to their personal walk. The elders are to **keep a watch on their own lives** lest they **set a bad example** to those they shepherd. It is a fact that the saints of a particular congregation will hardly ever rise to greater expressions of holiness than that of their

⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *We Endeavor: Helpful Words for Members of the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897), 67.

elders.⁵ Oh, that we as your elders would have a heart for Christ above all else. Neither skill, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, nor reputation, nor personality, nor apparent fruitfulness of public ministry is enough. Look carefully at the qualifications for the elder in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and you will encounter **a profile of personal holiness**. Listen to Paul's admonition later to Timothy.

1 Timothy 4:16 | Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Ah, but one task is easier than the other, is it not? Don't you find it far more appealing and enjoyable to study doctrine than to study your own heart? Isn't it much more pleasant to examine our books than to examine our motives? Aren't we far quicker to apply ourselves to a specific text in preparation for a sermon than to apply that same text to our own heart and life? Listen to what Puritan Richard Baxter wrote.

It is a palpable error of some ministers... who study hard to preach exactly, yet study little or not at all to live exactly.⁶ —Richard Baxter

He goes on to speak of the damage done by inconstant elders and pastors.

Take heed to yourself, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling blocks from your own life before poor blind sinners, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your life, what you have proclaimed with your tongue.⁷ —Richard Baxter

The saints need a consistent walk from their elders just as much as the sound teaching. They need to see that **sound teaching results in holiness of life**. We cannot be content with merely understanding robust theology if we don't worship Christ from our hearts and in our walk. Bad living almost always reveals bad theology on the heart level. See a minister **start to morally compromise** in his life, and you will find a minister who **does not believe what he is teaching or is beginning to teach falsely**.

There ought to be the fruit of the Spirit that emanates from our attitudes and life. Indeed, **no matter how extensive one's scriptural knowledge, how amazing one's memory, it is self-deception if that is all there is**. Sound doctrine is the foundation for godly living, and it is not mere proclamation, but obedience to the word that demonstrates genuine faith.⁸ Spurgeon said it well to his pastor's college.

Our characters must be more persuasive than our speech.⁹

Pray for your elders that each of us would persevere in the power of the Holy Spirit and live a life of holiness and joy as we endeavor to preach the word and live a humble example before the flock.

Conclusion

Don't listen to your heart! Counsel yourself! I want to give you homework for this week. Start reading a book of the Bible. If you don't know where to start, try John or Ephesians. Read two chapters this week and write out five questions about the text and

⁵ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 582.

⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1974), 63-64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸ Peter H. Davids, *New International Biblical Commentary: James* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 41.

⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1881), 13.

answer them. Share this with someone in your home or at church before we meet again next week.

I'm burdened that discipleship is not happening the way it should in our church. We need to be very familiar with the word, not just in theory, but in our lives. We need to walk in the word, talk about the word, ask questions about the word. Let's commit ourselves to that today.