
ENDING WELL: PAUL'S FAREWELL SERMON

TEXT: (1CO 15:58)

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

TEXT: (ACTS 20:24)

But none of these things move me, neither do I count my life dear to myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus *Christ*, to testify fully the gospel of the grace of God.

PRAYER:

Grant me, Our Father, the grace to speak so that your people will be encouraged in their faith. In Christ's name I ask. Amen.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul writes, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." In the New Testament the Greek word is *paradosis*. In the Latin it is *traditio* and it means something valuable that is "handed down." It is not a chronological word as if it meant for us to keep using a horse and buggy. It is naïve to see everything in the past as if it were the type of the things Jesus rejected about the Pharisees. Their "traditions" were placed higher than the commands of God and Jesus rebuked them for it.

In 2 Thessalonians Paul is talking about a "living faith," a faith that has been entrusted to us so that we may hand it on to the next generation as it was handed on to us. It is a relational term. The *traditio*, the *paradosis*, is personal and relational.

So, we must affirm that we are related spiritually to every martyr, every early pioneer, and every loyal pastor who has ever had a part to play in the proclamation of the faith and the development of Christian communities. We mustn't assume that we have to reinvent the faith

every season. We cannot despise or betray Christian heritage and expect to restrain God's blessing.

THE LEGACY OF THE HOLY GOSPEL

Those who have gone before us have trusted us with a legacy of the holy gospel and an absolute dependence upon a sovereign God. The success of our ministries is because we have received what has been handed down to us. We have received the truth as a treasure. We didn't invent the Gospel. We have nothing we have not received. And, the orthodox believer is confident that the quest for truth is valid because God has made truth knowable.

David F. Wells, in an issue of Christianity Today (October 7, 2002), wrote: "Christ is not a product to be purchased, and the gospel is not up for sale. It is **truth** that the church has to offer, and when this is treated indifferently, the church loses its reason for existence."

Christians must be faithful to the Gospel. We don't change it, add to it, subtract from it, modify it, or try to improve on it. We hand it on as it was handed down to us. As Paul said to Timothy, "What you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

SAYING GOODBYE TO THE EPHESIANS

In the text, which we have read in Acts 20, we see four important ideas that may be understood as working principles for effective Christian ministry. I find much encouragement in this verse. You may be familiar with the context. This is Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. The people to whom he was speaking most likely were part of the original Ephesian revival we read about in chapter 19.

Paul had found certain disciples there in Ephesus who had not even so much as heard about the Holy Spirit. Paul explained the gospel to them and they were baptized in water and then he laid his hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Paul spoke boldly in the local synagogue for three months with mixed results. There was much conflict. Eventually he broke with the synagogue and started preaching in the

school of Tyrannus. Probably he rented the facility. He kept this up for two years and Ephesus became such a ministry centre that “all in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.”

Unusual miracles happened by the hands of Paul. Something like anointed prayer cloths were so powerfully used that people were healed of diseases and evil spirits were driven away from them. People abandoned their witchcraft and their magic, even burning their books! “The word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed” we are told. Paul eventually decided to leave Ephesus to take the gospel to other regions. So, he headed off on a missionary tour. On his returning trip, he came near Ephesus and he called the elders together. It’s a moving scene.

What is Paul saying? He says, “But none of these things move me, neither do I count my life dear to myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus *Christ*, to testify fully the gospel of the grace of God.”

1). I LOVE THIS PHRASE: "NONE OF THESE THINGS MOVE ME."

Popular culture does not set the agenda for the church. Circumstances do not provide, in themselves, the "to do" list for ministry. I love this phrase: "None of these things move me."

What does he mean by “these things?” The passage does not give us details. But, from other places in the New Testament we can surmise that Paul may have had in mind several things.

In Acts chapters 20 and 21 we know that Paul was persecuted for his faith and deeply moved by the weeping and pleading of his brothers who sought to prevent him from it. We know that the care of the churches was a burden to him. He was deeply saddened when things weren’t going well. In Galatians 4, and 2 Corinthians 11, we know that Paul was discouraged when his ministry was under attack from false prophets. Paul endured severe criticism in his ministry. He seemed very upset in Galatians 2 at the failure of those who were leaders to remain true to the gospel he preached. He even rebuked Peter to his face. Yet, none of these things moved him.

How unlike us! We are so easily moved by the desire to be popular. We are so easily moved by the desire to make a name for ourselves, and to be admired. We are so easily moved by the lure of the limelight. We are so easily moved by the love of money. We are so easily moved by the love of pleasure. We are so easily moved by the love of power. We are so easily moved by the popular opinion. We are so easily moved by the latest trend.

Let some popular writer put forth a book about the latest cool ways to do church and we immediately set about to tear down our barns and build greater ones. In many ways the world rides the church and dangles a carrot on a string in front of it and we follow blindly.

But, none of these things moved Paul. Why? Is it because Paul does not wish to engage the culture? Is it because he does not think himself intellectually adequate for the task? Is it because he wishes Christians to cloister themselves and hide from the world? No! Paul felt that effective ministry did not depend on dancing to the world's tunes. He did not think the effectiveness of ministry, in his world, depended upon being able to analyze every facet of culture.

Now, Paul is not insensitive to the needs of people. He is not deaf to the cries of a hurting world. Why is it that he can say, "none of these things move me?" The answer is this. It is because he himself has been moved in the presence of God and it is in God's presence that he found his calling and purpose. He comes to the circumstances with an agenda already set--an agenda from above not an agenda from below. This perspective is absolutely crucial.

2). FAITHFULNESS TO MINISTRY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE FAME OF THE MINISTER.

I noticed a second principle for effective ministry. It takes a long time to get to this place. Our text says, "Neither count I my life dear unto myself." Faithfulness to ministry is more important than the fame of the minister. I am not the centre of the universe. The world doesn't revolve around me. I should not seek to order my own personal world so that I have veto power over everything. I am not the centre.

The curse of the pastoral ministry in our times is the idea that pastors are CEOs over their church corporations. We are to be servants of the servants of God. We are under-Shepherds who are given the direct command to feed the flock of God under our care. We are to treat them, not as employees, but as a mother nurses her children, or as a father loves his family. Our people are not pawns in some scheme to fulfill our personal vision. It is amazing that the word "vision" has been redefined in our day. No longer is it a sovereign gift from God, no longer is it a sacred encounter with God. It now is not much more than a code word for a business plan. If you doubt my conclusions, I invite you to go to the local bookstore and read some books, almost any book, on management theory. Many pastors are courting worldliness by reading more on management theory than on pastoral theology. Paul says, "Neither count I my life dear unto myself." Paul is not at the center. His ego has been crucified with Christ. He is a slave to Christ and a servant of the servants of God. Paul would not see himself as a CEO. It is not the best image for a pastor.

3). OUT TEXT POINTS OUT ANOTHER INTERESTING THING. PAUL WRITES, "SO THAT I MIGHT FINISH MY COURSE WITH JOY."

Completing the race is what counts, not how you began. Our political history is full of stories of great beginnings with great promises, but it is how you finish that really counts. People will be impressed by the glitz and the glamour only for so long. Eventually, no matter how much spin you put on it, the truth emerges. Do you have what it takes to finish well?

In the old movie *Chariots of Fire* Harold Abrahams, the British track star, loses a 100-meter preliminary race. For a long time afterwards, he sits in the empty stands staring at the track in front of him recalling the pain of the moment when one of his competitors crossed the finish line a fraction of a second before him. His future wife, Sybil Gordon, came and offered him her consolation, but Abrahams turned and said, "If I can't win, I won't run." Sybil replied, "If you don't run, you cannot win." Facing bravely that simple truth, Abrahams goes on to win the final race.

Paul, "so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus." It's important to finish one's course and ministry well. That's the desire of every Christian. It may have not started out that way. It may not have begun on the mountaintop. Your course may have started in the valley. Maybe it was a tragedy? Maybe when you started sowing, you

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sowed in tears. What counts is that you can reap in joy! You can finish the course with joy. You can complete with joy the ministry that you received from the Lord. Why? Because the seeds that you planted will bring forth fruit. One plants, another waters, but it is the Lord that gives the increase. God's word will not return void. The Holy Spirit will see to that.

4). SO MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, BE STEADFAST AND UNMOVABLE ALWAYS ABOUNDING IN THE WORK OF THE LORD.

That's the fourth principle of effective ministry. It sounds like a paradox doesn't it? Unmovable but always abounding. Staying focused on the mission will keep you on course. Our mission is to announce the gospel and urge people to accept the salvation of God--"to testify fully the gospel of the grace of God."

I don't mean to be offensive, but I wish to say that missions is necessary because people are lost without Christ. This is a major point of contention in our politically correct pluralistic world. Even within evangelical circles, the lines are being drawn between those who think that God saves us in a variety of ways and those who hold to the common faith of the church that "there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."

To use a phrase of A.W. Tozer, I want to be *gently dogmatic*. I believe what I'm teaching you. I believe it deeply not easily. I do not find it pleasurable to believe that those outside of Christ will suffer a godless eternity. There is no sense of satisfaction from in this belief. It would be much easier to believe that everyone is already saved because of Christ. I would rather believe that. There is a part of my heart that wishes God had done it all himself without using missionaries or preachers. Wouldn't it be nice if all the people in the world would be eventually saved while we can worry about things closer to us? But as Martin Luther said at the beginning of the Reformation, "My mind is captive to the Word of God."

Some of my beliefs I believe with tears and this is one of them. I am constrained to "testify fully the gospel of the grace of God." Why bother with it if it is not absolutely necessary that

people believe it? People need the Lord! And, before we get the message out we have to get the message right as Clark Pinnock used to say.

And Paul is living for this. And it had a dramatic effect on his life. His utmost desire is ". . . to testify fully to the gospel of the grace of God."

What the church needs is a rededication to the cause of Christ. We have to find out what it is. We have to re-discover the word of God in our worship and in our preaching. Let's have done with lesser things. We must "lay hold on hope," says Hebrews 6:18. We must not be moved away from "hope of gospel" we read in Col. 1:23. We must not be "carried about by every wind of doctrine," according to Ephesians 4:14. We must be "steadfast, unmovable and yet always abounding," I Cor. 15:58.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS AT WORK

Today the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work bringing into being a new call for a return to orthodoxy in Christian beliefs and practice. This return to the core of our faith will be a source of lasting renewal in our churches. The Holy Spirit is urging many pastors to recover the joy of preaching from the biblical text and seeking renewal through expository preaching. The Holy Spirit is moving those in charge of music ministries to broaden and deepen their knowledge of the history of worship. Liturgical renewal will happen even in Pentecostal churches. The Holy Spirit is raising up those who, with keen discernment, will combat false teaching in the church. The Holy Spirit, in convicting power, is urging preachers to design their sermons to evangelistic ends and not just as a cheap form of popular psychology. The Holy Spirit is helping us to truly make disciples of people and not just to entertain them with a good show on Sundays.

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Text: (1Co 15:58) Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, guide us through this confusing culture by your sovereign power. Lord Jesus, keep your call ringing ever clearly in our ears. Holy Spirit, empower us anew so that we may be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of testifying fully of the grace of God in Jesus. Amen.