

“PAUL’S EXHORTATION IN EPHESUS, II.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

October 17, 2021, 10:30 AM

Text for the Sermon: Acts 20:28-38

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you for your Word, the life giving truth of Scripture. Thank you for your Holy Spirit who inspired it and has preserved it all these centuries. Thank you for the folly of preaching by human preachers, which is always an opportunity for you to display your power and glory, so may your wisdom increase in us to your glory and our spiritual edification and benefit. Help us in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Introduction.

This morning we return to the second half of Paul’s last words to the Ephesian elders. He turned from being an example to bringing an exhortation or admonition. On the basis of his example having lived among them for three years Paul has authority to charge them or urge them to do certain things.

He gives a two-fold charge followed by a three-fold reason for the charge. The two-fold charge was to *pay close attention to your own life and doctrine* and to *pay close attention to the flock*.

The three-fold reason for the charge was *first*, the Holy Spirit has called you and made you overseers of the flock. You are not just elected, you are called by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Second, the church of Jesus Christ is bought by His precious blood. The Church is not just another club or group or association or institution, it is not for this life only. The body you have been called and set apart to serve is no less than the eternal fellowship of believers which has been bought and paid for by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. You are watching over eternal souls.

This morning we now take up the *third* reason why Paul urges these elders and indeed all leaders and all those who have responsibility over others, to pay close and careful attention to themselves and to those who have care for and charge over. Remember I cast the net far enough to include husbands and fathers, wives and mothers, grandparents, leaders, teachers, all those who have responsibility for and influence in the lives of others.

Third reason, fierce wolves will come in to destroy the flock of Jesus Christ which is bought by His precious blood.

“I know after my departure fierce wolves will come.” Indeed he does know. Every one of Paul’s letters deal with this problem, as do the letters of Peter, John and Jude.

II Timothy 4:3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, **4** and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

II Peter 2:1-2 False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. **2** And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.

I John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Jude 4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed ... ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jesus warned of it in His Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:15 Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Wolves are the natural enemies of sheep. I suspect most of us here don’t think of ourselves as sheep, so we don’t think we are susceptible to wolves. Don’t be deceived into thinking that it can’t happen here. That is exactly what Satan wants you to think, so you let down your guard. Of course it can, stay alert.

There has never been a time when the church has not been attacked by wolves, often in sheep’s clothing. It always has been and is to this day the perpetual fate of the church to be under attack.

As one ancient pastor put it, “Christianity shows its greatness when it is hated by the world” (St. Ignatius of Antioch). Christ shows His greatness by how He is hated.

The world hates the Church because we follow Christ, and the world hated Christ and still does.

The world hates Christians because they don't belong to the world and don't conform to the world.

John 15:18-19 If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

The darkness always hates the light, darkness loves lies and sin.
The world hates Christianity for holding firmly to the Truth. So the wolves attack.

There are two breeds of wolves. Wolves come in two ways, outside wolves and inside wolves.

Some will come from outside, vs. 29.

There are all kinds of cults and heresies and secular religion on the outside. We should not be surprised by how many false teachers and heretical teachings there are. Jesus said it would be that way and it always has been and certainly is today. The truth is you can't keep up with all of them.

The internet has made it easier than ever for wolves in sheep's clothing to infiltrate and harm the flock. We must be more vigilant and more discerning, testing the spirits and the teaching. Teach your children and grandchildren to be discerning.

It is mind-bogglingly insane how much falsehood and heresy we allow into our homes and into our minds every day through the TV, computers, and smartphones. Why do we think our kids and us can drink from the fire hydrant of the internet and not be influenced by it?

Who is discipling our kids today? Tiktok, Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram?
You will become what you binge watch.

Psalm 1:1-2 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Some will come from the inside, vs. 30.

I Timothy 4:1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

These wolves are the most dangerous and deceptive. They reside in denominations, seminaries, Christian schools, churches and Christian publications and books. They

subtly twist doctrine, pervert truth, and lead us to compromise or division and strife. They slowly undermine our confidence in the truth of God's Word.

When Paul later writes his two letters to Timothy who takes over as the pastor of the church in Ephesus, Paul has to address all of this again and warn Timothy.

I Timothy 1:3-7 As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations.

I Timothy 4:7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.

II Timothy 2:23 Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.

I Timothy 6:3-5 If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, 4 he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, 5 and constant friction.

Titus 3:9 Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.

This is as great a danger now as ever. Everything related to Covid has become a tool of Satan to bring about division and strife, to stir up false teaching, controversies, speculations, endless debates, conspiracy theories. Churches all over the country are being torn apart and split, and yes even Reformed churches.

Don't take Satan's bait, avoid the endless speculation, foolish controversies. Don't get into that 200th debate about whether mask or vaccines do any good. It is unprofitable and worthless. Turn conversations to that what is able to build up, that is edifying and sanctifying, what glorifies God and exalts the truth.

The world is never far away. We are in a constant state of war with the world, the flesh, and the devil. Where there is truth, falsehood is close behind.

How can I warn you about the world?

Beware of your attachments to the world.

Beware of drinking too deeply from the fountains of the world.

Beware of taking all your counsel from the world.

We live in a world of counterfeits. Fake news, social media, websites, if we spent as much time in the wisdom of God's Word we would be truly wise.

What we believe matters, it matters eternally. Eternity is at stake. These are life and death concerns. So we must be vigilant to watch our own life and doctrine closely. Guard your souls.

We must pray for our spiritual leaders, pastors, elders, deacons, each other. The enemy is real, he is real in our midst, we must be vigilant and prayerful.

Acts 20:32, commend you to God.

Paul is very much aware that what he has said is very weighty and hard. In fact it is far beyond the ability of these men. Rather than leave them overwhelmed he commends them to God and to His Word and to His grace that comes to us through His Word.

God will build you up and strengthen you, He is the builder of His church, what He has begun He will complete.

Paul acknowledges the only hope in the midst of trials is God and His grace and His protection. And God's protection comes best in the form of His Holy Word.

If you have the Word of God you have the very best you can be offered in this life. If you have the Word of God you have life and salvation. If you have the Word of God you have what is able to build you up and strengthen you and assure you of an inheritance that is everlasting.

In Paul's absence, these elders have something better, they have the Word of God, the Words of life and truth and hope.

Our greatest weapon and our greatest defense in the face of our enemies is the Word of God. Depend on it, lean on it, read it, pray it, and use it. Seek it, receive it and give it.

Trust God daily by depending on God daily in prayer and Word. Only those who renounce all confidence in themselves and rely completely on the Lord will be strong.

Matthew 22:29 Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God."

Your only defense is the truth. You must know the truth. You must know the Word of God. If you know the real thing, then you will recognize the counterfeit.

John 8:31 If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

If you neglect the Word of God you will be easy prey for the next wolf in sheep's clothing. Part of the reason false teachers have such large followings is spiritual blindness which comes from spiritual laziness. They don't bother to check and test and read. If we blindly follow blind guides we should not be surprised if we end up in the ditch.

Truly blessed is the person who prays over their Bible as they read it and wields the sword of the Spirit wisely and well and can cut to the truth and cut off error, who sounds the trumpet of warning and doesn't follow every wind of doctrine or every new guru who comes down the pike.

Conclusion.

I commend you into the hands of the good shepherd who will take care of you, protect you and provide for you. Whatever you need, look to God in utter and absolute dependence on Him. In the very worst of circumstances you have the Almighty God to turn to, to hold you up, to build you up, to deliver you.

I commend you to the providence of God, apart from which not even a hair can fall from your head. I commend you to the providence of God that removes every fear.

I commend you to the Word of God by which you have everything you need, you have all the tools necessary for living in this life so that you will have life in the world to come.

I commend you to the Word of His grace, take hold of the Word of God for your provision and protection. I commend you to Christ who bought you with His precious blood.

Prayer: Holy Father, as we go out from this place we enter into a hostile and evil world filled with snares and temptations. There is a great enemy of our souls, a roaring lion, an angel of light, a deceiver. And your Word says the way is hard and few there are who find it and stay the course. So Father I plead with you to take pity on us, for the truth is, we are finite and flesh, we are weak and foolish. By your Word and Spirit guard our hearts and minds, give us spiritual wisdom and discernment. Protect our leaders in our church and in our homes and country. Protect your church, the flock under your care, the precious blood-bought body of Christ. Be to us our heavenly Father and the Redeemer of our eternal souls. For the sake of Jesus, Amen.