

Title: Protecting your trust
Text: Acts 20.29-35
Theme: Protecting the church
Series: Acts
Prop Stmt: Protecting the church is how we protect the gospel

Read Text: Acts 20.29-35

I am aware that many of you are watching this who have never physically gathered with this family of believers identified as Cornerstone Baptist Church. At that really is a shame because I am not the church. And while I may be able to explain what the Bible teaches in a way that you can understand it intellectually, the Bible is designed to do way more than give you information. The Bible is designed to transform you, to change you. So, when the church gathers together, we, you get to see, interact with, relate to, eat with, pray with, walk with, people whose lives have been changed and are being changed by God's Word. For those of you who have experienced that in this congregation, then you hear what I say and process it with that context in view, and that is so very important. But, for those of you who are clicking in, perhaps for the first or second time, this may feel like you are parachuting into an island where the language has a different sound to it, the culture has a very different feel to it and you are trying to figure out what exactly I am saying. So, I am going to give you a quick introduction, or orientation that I trust will clarify things a bit.

We believe that what the Bible calls the gospel is without a doubt, the single, most important truth you could ever know.

The entire story line of the Bible in one way or the other relates to the gospel. So, what is the gospel? The word gospel means good news. Here is the good news of the gospel. God, for the sake of his glory, created this world and the human race. We were made in his image. We were made with the capacity to love, to lead, to create, to have a self-image, to have deep and satisfying relationships. But, God is the Creator. We are the creation. Therefore, in order for this universe and our world and our lives to work harmoniously, we have to love, trust and submit to the Creator because He not only knows best, He is best. But, we didn't. None of us! Every single one of us have rebelled against God. That rebellion is called sin. It goes all the way back to the first man that God made, Adam, and we have all followed suit. And here is part of the enormous grief of our rebellion. We, the human race were the chief act of God's creation, because God designed us to rule this earth under his rule. Therefore, when we rebelled, we not only brought judgment on ourselves, but our sin brought contamination and condemnation upon this earth. Why are there evil disease processes like cancer and this novel coronavirus? It is because our world is out of whack. It is cursed by our sin and bad things happen. Cells go rouge from what they should do. But that is not our biggest problem. We are. Instead of loving one another, we instinctively fight, slander, back stab and hurt. Why do we naturally have fear, shame, and guilt? It is because we each have the heart of a rebel and we do things and think things that are in rebellion to our good, wise, and incredibly perfect God. Do you see the paradox? What is natural to all of us (in that we all experience it) is fear, shame, guilt and dread. But, fear, shame, guilt and dread feel un-natural. Even though we all share them, they still feel out of place, because they are.

That doesn't sound like good news, does it? Hang on, the good news is coming. There is more you need to know. Because God is perfectly just and righteous, He has to punish our rebellion. And because our rebellion is SO serious and the consequences so far-reaching, God established that the payment for sin is the death penalty. And God would be fair, he would be just, he would be righteous if he simply let everything on this earth play out, meaning, allowing us to live in our rebellion, kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, fight, claw, destroy, you know, survival of the fittest stuff, they tried to teach you? But God is not only fair, he is gracious. He is not only just, he is merciful. He is not only righteous, he is loving. He is not only powerful, he is patient. But, this appears to be a problem. If God is consistent with his righteousness and justice, then our sin has to be punished. But how does that display his grace, mercy and love? And yet, if God acts gracious and merciful to us, then does he not have to compromise his righteousness and justice?

Are you read for some good news? God does not have to choose between his righteousness and his mercy. God embraces them both with astonishing consistency. And here is how.

God did for us, what we could not do. He provided someone who would take our death penalty in our place. But that death penalty, that sacrifice, that offering had to be sufficient in quality and scope to pay for our sins. That is why God sent his own Son, Jesus Christ to come to this earth 2,000 years ago and become one of us, a human, so that as the God-man, he could live the life that we could not live and then die as a payment, a ransom, a substitutionary sacrifice in our place. And because Jesus offered up himself as the perfect sacrifice, the payment he made was perfect. It was perfect in terms of being holy and perfect in terms of being complete. Jesus paid it all. There is nothing left for you to pay. That is really good news, because whatever good you have is not good enough in quality nor good enough in amount. You cannot satisfy the infinite justice of God by paying for your sins. Only Jesus could do that. And Jesus did that for every single person who would ever believe on him. So, that when you believe that, when you understand that and believe that, and own the fact that your rebellion is not cute, or cool, but is toxic, it is polluted, it is sin, and you become grieved by that and repulsed by that and you turn and embrace Jesus as the only One who can save you, He does! Jesus saves. We are big sinners, but Jesus is a bigger Savior than we are sinners.

That is called the gospel. And people who understand and believe the gospel (as the Bible defines it) are genuine Christians, that is, they are followers of Jesus. God raised up the church to be local gatherings of Christians who assemble to worship God, and learn how to love God and one another. The church is supposed to be a people who will guard the gospel, who will explain the gospel, who will help one another apply the implications of the gospel in their lives and who will share the gospel with others. Jesus is the heart of the message of the gospel. So, guarding the gospel and guarding the message of Jesus is the same thing. That is a huge part of our mission. Faith alone in Christ alone is the only means by which a person can be forgiven of sin and declared righteous. People who genuinely trust in Jesus are put into the family of God and when they die they will live with God and his people forever.

Now, right now, there are a lot of people who are sick and many who are dying and there are a lot of people who very afraid that they are going to get sick and die. These are names. These are people. These are families, not just statistics. Do you see why the gospel is SO important? If you

know that your sins are forgiven, that you are in the family of God forever, that Jesus is your Savior and that God has you in his hand, then your biggest problem ever - dying and facing the consequences of your sin, your biggest worry - dying and facing justice for your rebellion, your greatest fear - dying and having no hope has now been addressed. But not because of what you have done, but because you have trusted in what Christ has done. When you stop trusting in anything that you have done and you trust in what Christ has accomplished in our place, then you are forgiven of your sin and declared righteous in Christ. You are united with Christ - forever!

Now, do you see why this is the most important message - ever? Do you see why it is so urgent that the church protect this message and preach and promote this message? Because Jesus is the only way a person can be saved. But, as a Christian, as a member of a church, as a pastor of a church, I am sadly admitting that the history of the church is full of stories and accounts of how the very people who were supposed to protect this message allowed this message to get watered down, altered, ignored and completely lost under traditions, ceremonies and at times egos.

Imagine this. Imagine that this week a pharmaceutical company has a major breakthrough and develops both an antidote and a vaccination for this coronavirus. However, within the company two teams at the heart of the research and development start fighting over which team gets credit for it. They know that billions of dollars of profits are at stake and a lot of glory and acclaim and they want their names on this and are fighting bitterly about it. But while they are fighting internally, the world is dying. What would you say to them? Hey, we're dying out here. We've got to have this antidote. Stop your stupid fighting and do what you are supposed to be doing. The same thing could be said about the church. And that is what this text is talking about.

The early church grew because of the leadership of the disciples who were now known as the apostles. One those apostles (which means a person who is sent with a message) was a man named Paul. Although Paul was a Jew, he was very instrumental in getting the message of Christ (the gospel) to both Jews and Gentiles in many of the urban centers in the Roman Empire. Paul had been a member of a local church in Antioch and was sent out by his church to establish other churches by preaching and sharing the gospel. Here is the pattern. The gospel is preached and shared, people hear it and many of them come to faith in Christ. Those who do, gather together for Worship, Instruction, Encouraging relationships and to help reach others. Simply put, the gospel creates the people of God. The gospel creates, forms and informs churches that will protect and promote the gospel.

In many cases, Paul would stay in one city for a few months. Then after that church was established, he would get the leadership in place and then go on to the next place. When Paul came to the strategic city of Ephesus, he stayed there for about 3 years. That was longer than any other place. That church became very well established and was instrumental in planting many churches in the entire region of what is now modern day Turkey. Paul's life and ministry had a profound influence upon these people. There were many memories, and very deep affection. He taught them well. In this text, Paul is meeting with the elders (the leadership) of the church of Ephesus for one last time. Paul is on his way back to Jerusalem where he anticipates a lot of trouble. Paul knows how important it is for this church, any church to protect the integrity of their message (the gospel) and the integrity of their lives (which will either adorn the gospel or cause people to be repulsed by it because of hypocrisy).

Since the gospel is the most glorious news that any person could ever hear, then you and I know that Satan will work like hell (right?) to destroy it. Since the gospel (that is Christ) is where our ultimate trust is placed, then our mission in part is to protect the trust. We are to be on guard against those things that threaten the church because the church's job is to protect the message of the gospel and to promote it. Let me put up a graphic that may help you understand the heart of this text. (Explain graphic)

This is why we are called to be on high alert about potential threats to the church. But, what is so interesting and honestly, so very humbling is to see that when Paul challenges these guys to protect the church, that he does not worry so much about the enemies outside of the church, but he calls them to be on guard against the things inside of the church.

1. **Anticipate threats in the church.** (29 - 30)

The imagery of fierce wolves and a flock would be well understood by Paul's audience. But, the church is vulnerable to being abused because we are people who love. We are people who give. We are people who hope. We are people who trust. We tend to believe the best about others. We are people who are willing to forgive and give people another chance. Therefore, (and this is hard on us to come to grips with), but there are people who want to hurt others and they will try to do that from within the church.

A. People who want to hurt others. (29)

The church should be a safe place for people and we want the church to be a safe place, don't we? We want to be a people who display the gospel in our lives, not just explain the gospel with our words. Displaying the gospel means to be people who are full of forgiveness, full of kindness, full of charity, etc. But, we are naive if we think that the church is going to be safe without people guarding that.

I remember a few years ago, there was a guy who started attending here who had a rough go of it in life. Our hearts went out to him and we did all sorts of things for him and for a while it looked like he had found a home with us. But, then several of us began to notice a pattern. He always managed to get himself next to girls who were young and had blond hair. In fact, he managed to find ways to sit very, very close to these girls, who at first were sympathetic to him and his story, but it quickly became obvious that he was exploiting that for all it was worth. We had to quickly switch gears from giving him mercy, to warning him with justice. He interpreted the safety he found with us to be an opportunity to prey upon others. But, that is an easy thing to spot and deal with it. What is more challenging is when there are people in the church who subtly and almost inconspicuously start twisting the truth. That is what Paul is addressing in v.30

B. People who twist the truth. (30)

The word picture that Paul paints here is of a path and there is a guide who leads people off of the path and starts to take them a different way. That is exactly what happens when people try to add to the gospel things that are not there, like you have to do these sacraments. Or when they

take away from the gospel and assure you that as long as you are a nice person and you mean well, that God will smile upon you. Now, there are some really nice people who's twist the truth. Some of them are on T.V. But, when you read their books or listen to their talks, they do not address sin, rebellion, the righteousness, holiness and judgment of God. They do not talk about our need for repentance and the exclusivity of faith alone in Christ alone for justification. They tell people things that feel good. Your miracle is just around the corner. You are unlocking your next great achievement. God is ready to pour out a new blessing on you. And, they say this stuff winsomely. But, they are twisting the truth and the message they preach is not the gospel and it has NO eternal value.

Let's say that this afternoon you are in the ICU at the hospital as a physician. Your patient is dying and you know it and he knows it and he is terrified and his family is absolutely distraught. What can you tell him? Do you tell him how he can have his best life now, that his miracle is just around the corner? That would be a disgraceful mockery? No, but you can tell him about the gospel. You can tell him what Christ has done on the cross and the salvation that Christ has provided and if he trusts in Christ he will be in Christ and with Christ - forever.

This is my point church. If the message of the church does not work on the Covid floors of our hospitals and prepare the dying for eternity, then we have no message and we are not a church. Therefore, we have to protect the message of the church from being twisted either deliberately or through neglect. We protect the message by being proactive.

2. **Be proactive.** (31)

A. **With faithful and careful teaching**

For three years, Paul admonished them. He faithfully and carefully taught them, so that they would not only know what to believe, but so they could spot false teaching. The church has an enormous responsibility to admonish through the Word. I know that not every sermon that I preach is going to be the greatest thing, the most amazing thing you have ever heard and wow you. But, by feeding you a steady diet of the Word, you will be less inclined to be attracted to junk food Christianity. But, notice that Paul said that he admonished them with tears. In other word, he did more than just give information, he put his heart into them.

B. **With heartfelt ministry.**

False teachers can get influence because they can appear to care more about the people. Remember the story of Absalom? His father, David was the king of Israel, but David had become distant from the people and the Absalom exploited that by pretending to care about the people and being available to them more than his dad was. That created an enormous problem for David, when Absalom led a coup that almost succeeded.

Some people can be influenced by really bad teachers and teaching because those bad teachers appear to care for them. When we are inconsistent with the gospel by not loving one another like we should, we are not protecting the flock, because loving the flock is proactively protecting

them from false shepherds who would lead them away to their own demise. Genuine ministry is not just teaching right, it is putting your heart into it and sometimes that will bring tears.

3. **Recognize what only God can do and what you can do.** (32-35)

Go back to the end of v.28 that we looked at last week. The church (that is the people) have been obtained by the death of Christ. Jesus bought his bride. Jesus gave his life in order to pay for his bride, the church. And because he has bought us, he will keep us. Only God can keep the church.

A. Only God can keep. (32)

Paul commends these men, and in a sense the church at Ephesus, to the care of God because Paul recognizes that only God can keep them, he can't. Paul can die because he cares for them, but he cannot die for them like Jesus did. Paul cannot pay for their sins, only Jesus can do that. Paul himself is going to face hardship, imprisonment and eventually death. He cannot keep them as much as he would like to. He entrusts them into the hands of the Only one who can. And not only God can keep, but God does keep. But notice how God does this.

God keeps us through his word that build us up and guarantees our (plural) inheritance that we share with one another and with Christ. It simply does not get better than this. When you come to faith in Christ, you are born into the family of God. God, the Father becomes your Father. That is why Jesus taught us to pray by saying, "Our Father..." Jesus is our brother. The Father created the universal and this world as a gift for his Son whom he loves and delights in. The church is the bride of Christ, that Jesus died for. As the bride, we get what Jesus gets. We inherit what Jesus gets and there is so much to share, that we will never exhaust it, which is why we want everyone single person to understand the gospel and come to faith in Christ so they can enjoy life in Christ and with God forever. I know that what God started, he will finish. He will keep. He will get you home before dark. He will never leave you nor forsake you. You may die in an ICU without any family or friends around you, but as a follower of Christ, you can never and will never be alone. I know that and that is why I, like Paul can commend you to God's grace. But, here is what I, the leaders and us as a congregation can do, and must do. We must live with integrity. I will pick it up here in two weeks, but I will conclude with this.

B. You can live with integrity.

One of the condemnations that people outside of the church level against the church is "they only want my money." Why did Paul say what he said in v.33? Because sometimes it is true, that there are "churches" that only want your money. You are a means to an end. If that is repulsive to us, can you imagine how wrenching that is to Jesus? It goes against everything that he is and everything that the gospel is.

Coveting is dehumanizing. Coveting is the idolatrous act of assigning more value to things or false images of our selves than valuing other people. Coveting money and using the church as a cloak for covetousness is particularly hideous because it goes against everything that we are to believe in, stand for and protect. But, when the church has done that, and she has done that, it is devastating to the church and basically damning to the people because the message of the gospel

is lost. Love people and use things for people vs. love things and use people for things. Jesus did not die for things, but for people. That is why it is more blessed to give than to receive.

This is hard. And many people who consider themselves Christians are not ready for this because they've embraced a happy, happy, clappy, clappy, sappy, sappy worship experience they call church. But, you cannot run a marathon on cotton candy. Christianity is not denial. It is not escapism. Genuine Christianity enables us to look eye to eye with the evil of this disease and this world and feel the loss, feel the sorrow, weep over the brokenness but not back down or run away. We lament in hope. We grieve even in confidence, Covid-19 does not get the final word. That has already been written and the final word is Jesus. Covid-19 will not last. Jesus will. The gospel will. Trust in Jesus. And share the gospel.