

## THE BOOK - HOW WE GOT IT AND HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT - Part 26

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### I COMMEND YOU TO GOD AND TO THE WORD OF HIS GRACE

**Acts 20:29-35** - "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. [32] And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. [33] I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. [34] You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. [35] 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.'"

There are few verses in the Bible that I love more than **verse 32** - "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." These are Paul's parting words to the elders of the church at Ephesus. And I love that description of the revelation from God (the Scriptures) as the "**word of God's grace**." I love it because it directs my mind back to truth about God's Word and away from error.

Here's the **error**. If I'm not very careful I can easily link Bible study more to **duty** than to **grace**. I know I **should** read my Bible - in fact, **must** read my Bible. And whenever I **must** do something the life-giving nature of it can turn to dust. If I do what I must do **well** then I'm fulfilling an obligation. And if I don't do what I must do well, then I'm under guilt and condemnation. And either way, the life has gone out of what should be a love for God's grace manifested in His Word.

I said there was both an **error** and a **truth** in that thirty-second verse. Now here's the **truth**. God's Word is a **grace producer**. That's why Paul calls it the "**word of His grace**" (32). How much of God's loving, empowering, renewing, transforming grace do you need today? Much? That's why God has given us the Bible. The Bible takes **dirty** lives and makes them **clean**. It takes **fearful** lives and makes them **courageous**. It takes **ugly** lives and makes them **beautiful**. It takes **disorganized** lives and gives them **meaning and purpose**. It takes **discouraged** lives and make them **joyful**. It takes lives **imprisoned** in sin and emancipates them with luscious **freedom**.

This is the truth about the "**word of God's grace**." It's the truth hundreds need to hear today. God's Word is a fountain of **grace**. It does nothing but good. Since the Fall of mankind Satan has only had one lie. His one lie is we will live better and stronger and happier believing our own inclinations rather than filling up our minds with the Word of God's grace. No wonder Paul says he "**commends**" these people - ties them closely, intimately and continuously - to God's Word.

I see **two directions** of activity in our text. One is **growing deep** into the grace of the Word and the other is **reaching out** with the grace of the Word. Both of these directions need to take place in a good church. We need to grow **deep** - and then **deeper still** - into the word of God's grace. And we also need to be reignited by the Spirit of God to reach **out** - and then reach **further still** - with that same grace to others. The reason for each challenge is tucked into the context of these verses:

#### 1) **WE NEED TO GROW DEEP BECAUSE THERE WILL BE A CONSTANT FLOW OF LIES AND DECEPTION AGAINST THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD**

**Acts 20:29-31** - "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears."

This is the last time Paul will teach this church and its leaders. It's an emotionally charged time - **Acts 20:37-38** - "And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, [38] being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship."

You choose your words carefully when you know they're the very last words you will speak to someone. And Paul takes this last opportunity to repeat what he has been telling them - **with tears (31)** - for over three years. These are **Paul's** last words, but he knows his words are not the last message this church is going to hear. Right in the church there is going to arise teachings that will pull Christians away from the truth of the Gospel.

Paul says he warned them about this for three years, **“with tears”**(31). Why with tears? Because Paul knew, like any good pastor knows, that this is the one warning the flock won't take seriously enough. Paul wept as he warned because he knew how hard it was to ***impress on people who are already saved just how urgently truth must be guarded and studied, and memorized, and restudied, and treasured and devoured and restudied again, and digested.***

The hard part isn't **discovering** the truth. The hard part is **holding on** to the truth. People love miracles. They love good worship. They love big gatherings. They love fellowship. They love projects. But they quickly develop the mind set that, because they have now been **saved** by the truth of the gospel, and because they **know** the basic doctrines of the faith, they will automatically remain **unshakable and firm** in the truth of the Word. And that's just not so. Not for me, and not for you either.

That's why, one more time, Paul says to these dear saints, **“I commend you to the word of His grace”**(32). That verb **commend** is very carefully chosen. The Greek word is **paratithemi** (par-at-ith-ay- mee). It means to lay right along side, or to place right up against - the way you'd place your pencil right along side the ruler's edge to draw a straight line. That catches Paul's heart perfectly. We lay our lives - not in some **one-time religious decision**, but **moment by ordinary, daily moment**, right along side the edge of God's Word. We don't move the pencil of our brief lives one millimeter out of touch with God's Word.

The reason for such dedicated steadiness and care is spelled out in the text: **Acts 20:29-30** - **“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”**

There are two reasons for Paul summoning these Christians back to the word of God's grace. One is more obvious and one is less. We'll look at the less obvious reason first, then the obvious.

- a) ***The first, and less obvious reason for abiding in the word of God's grace is that only abiding continually brings God's eternal inheritance into our lives.*** Paul makes this very clear in **20:32** - **“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”**

This inheritance is still to come. But what exactly is it? It's referred to over and over in the New Testament: **Ephesians 1:13-14** - **“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”**

**Colossians 3:23-24** - **“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [24] knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”**

**1 Peter 1:3-4** - **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [4] to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you....”**

**1 Corinthians 6:9-10** - **“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”**

**Luke 18:18** - **“And a ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”**

Put these, and many others, all together and we see that the inheritance is the entrance into the kingdom of God. We see that unbelief and sin keep people from obtaining the inheritance. And we see that the inheritance is the receiving of eternal life. All of these things are entered into here and now - in a way - but are not **fully** manifested in this present age.

And Paul says the complete **delivery** of the inheritance is brought about by abiding in the **“word of God's grace”** - **“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”**

In other words, it is not merely some **past** experience with the word of God's grace that brings about this divine inheritance. It is the **ongoing** power of divine grace manifested in a life **abiding** in the word of God's grace that brings the inheritance. My life is to be so shaped by the word of God's grace **today** that it causes me to hate sin - **today**. It causes me to love truth - **today**. It causes me to embrace holiness - **today**. It causes me to resist temptation - **today**.

The way Paul makes this point in our text is in the way he describes the Word of God's grace as a **building word** - "**And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up....**" The grace of the Word is constantly **constructing**. It is always in **process**. It never **arrives** in this earthly life. It's aiming at the complete future inheritance.

And it's right at this point that we find the first reason for caution in the face of a world system that pushes against love for Christ. We are none of us immune to the proud heart that would assume spiritual safety and maturity based on the mere accumulation of years or perhaps ministry accomplished since we first responded to God's grace. We can make the life of the Word **static** and **complete** rather than **living** and **constantly constructing**.

That's why I need this picture of Paul committing these elders at Ephesus - these spiritual **leaders** - commending the word of God's grace to them "**now**" - in the present tense - **Acts 20:32** - "**And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able [right now] to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.**"

- b) But there's a second reason we need to grow deep in the word of God's grace. The first is our proud tendency to rely on a past encounter with grace. The second is the increasing tolerance of false teaching in the church of Jesus Christ - **Acts 20:29-31** - "**I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.**"

Here we see the context for an unbreakable law in the Christian life. The power of truth is never - not ever - self-sustaining in the Christian mind and heart. The spirit of the age never lets truth alone. He never lets it go unchallenged. He constantly posits **counter arguments**. He dulls the sharp edge of truth with dark and selfish desires. The truth of the word of God's grace is always **threatened truth** in the church.

Also, notice that the most urgent diligence must be directed against untruths that arise in the church itself. Paul seems to want to emphasize this fact. He says it once and then immediately says the very same thing again - **Acts 20:29-30** - "**I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.**"

Interestingly, they won't do this while Paul is right there. They will wait until he's gone. Never underestimate the power of any voice unafraid to proclaim truth in the church. But once Paul's gone leaders will teach ideas that will be like **wolves fangs** to the faith of the church. False teaching isn't **tolerant or kind**. Even though it proclaims what people like to hear it tears tender flesh off the bones of God's children. Error is always first and foremost the ultimate **unloving act**.

**John Piper** talks of the most common trait in the teaching of wolves in today's church: "**Let me mention one feature to watch out for in the recognition of wolves. As I have watched the movement from Biblical faithfulness to liberalism in persons and institutions that I have known over the years, this feature stands out: An emotional disenchantment with faithfulness to what is old and fixed, and an emotional preoccupation with what is new or fashionable or relevant in the eyes of the world....Let's try to say it another way: when this feature is prevalent, you don't get the impression that a person really longs to bring his mind and heart into conformity to fixed Biblical truth. Instead you see the desire to picture Biblical truth as unfixed, fluid, indefinable, distant, inaccessible, and so open to the trends of the day....So what marks a possible wolf-in-the-making is not simply that he rejects any particular Biblical truth, but that he isn't deeply oriented on the Bible. He is more oriented on experience. He isn't captured by the great faith once for all delivered to the saints. Instead he's enamored by what is new and innovative.**"

So for both these reasons we need to be constantly growing deep into the Word of God's grace. I have one more thought from this great text:

2) **WE NEED TO REACH OUT WITH THE WORD OF GOD'S GRACE BECAUSE THE ONLY SURE SIGN OF HAVING RECEIVED GOD'S GRACE IS EXTENDING IT**

This is the last thing Paul leaves with these saints in Ephesus: **Acts 20:33-35** - "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. [34] You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. [35] 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.'"

You have to know Paul's heart in these words. He's not **bragging** here. He's setting an **example**. This is especially true in **verse 34** where he talks about working with his hands to meet his own needs and **"those who were with me."**

Paul had people with him in ministry. He had people who traveled and represented him. He had young people like Timothy. Luke was also with Paul. Probably there are others we know nothing about. And Paul worked hard with his hands. But it wasn't just to meet his **own** needs. There were bills to be paid. There was ministry to be carried out. There were needs to be met.

That's the example Paul holds out to these saints at Ephesus. And remember, this is his **last face to face session with them**. What should he say? He's talking about **commending them to the Word of God's grace**. Very well. What happens when people receive that Word? What happens when they **grow and live** in that Word? And the thing Paul points out is this: **People who receive the Word of God's grace will follow his example**. They don't just **bank** their money. They don't just **invest it on earth**. They **minister** with their money. They extend the kingdom with it. This is what gladdens their hearts the most.

There is a sick, twisted lie making its way through much of the evangelical church. It's marching virtually unchallenged through the ranks of many P.A.O.C. churches at this point. Let me denounce it as bluntly and vocally as I possibly can. Away forever with the myth that people who are concerned with teaching and propositional, absolute truth are dividing the church while the people who de-emphasize teaching and doctrinal truth are the culturally hip, relevant saints who are caring for the needy and incarnating Jesus all over the world.

It just isn't so. The Word of God's grace is the only Christ-pleasing fuel for compassion just as it is the only fuel for truth and holiness. It keeps the church exporting an authentically transforming message. What does the Word of God's grace build into our lives when we truly believe it? Our text tells us. People who are growing deep in the Word of His grace have the back of **greed** broken in their hearts. They have a **noble indifference to their own wealth**. They are the only ones in the whole world who have the **proper motivation for a compassionate reach and touch**.

And so the last recorded words in person from Paul to this congregation aren't that surprising at all - **"Remember the words of Jesus - 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"** So preach the **"word of his grace."** And that's what it will do.