**Keep Watch**

Acts 20:22-32

When Paul said these words 2,000 years ago they were much more ***familiar with sheep*** than we are today. Shepherds were almost always around. Sheep provided wool and served as sacrifices - so they were always in rich supply, especially around Jerusalem - but also in places like Ephesus. All of the deities back then accepted sacrifices of different kinds, including sheep.

Think of the **role of the shepherd**. Sheep are utterly helpless. They have no defenses. When they are heavy with wool they can fall over and not get up: very vulnerable as prey. Any large predator would love to find some unattended sheep for their evening meal. This is why David, who was a shepherd, wrote in Psalm 23:

“The Lord is my shepherd… I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 23:1,4

The shepherd walked with a **long staff** with a crook at the end so he could pick up a sheep that had fallen down, or reach one that was stuck in a hole. The staff could also be used to gently separate sheep that were biting or butting each other. And it could provide a gentle nudge or firm whack to a sheep that kept wandering away from the group. Usually sheep responded to their shepherd’s voice or his whistle and usually they walked along with the herd - but the shepherd’s staff was an important tool to keep the sheep safe and together.

But the shepherd also carried **a rod** - which was to protect the sheep from predators, like wolves. The rod could be thrown to scare off an attacking wolf. In addition, some shepherds like David also became skilled with a sling and stone.

Having a good shepherd who keeps watch over you at night allows the sheep to sleep in peace, knowing they are protected. God is, of course, our ultimate Good Shepherd who never sleeps or takes His eye off of us for one second - whose rod and staff comfort us and keep us close to Him. But we are also called to keep watch over one another - to shepherd and protect each other. Look at our primary command for today in verse 28:

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” Acts 20:28 NIV

There are actually two commands here: keep watch over **yourselves** and over **all the flock**. Paul is speaking here to the elders of the church in Ephesus - so that group of shepherding elders had a greater degree of responsibility than the average believer. But the principle applies to all of us - we must keep watch over our own hearts and lives and do all we can to protect one another. Let’s look at **two exhortations** for each of these commands to keep watch.

**Protect Yourself**

* **Fight** your Sin

“Keep watch over yourselves…” Acts 20:28

The ESV says “pay careful attention,” and in verse 31 restates this, “Therefore, be alert.” This **double command** is a strongly emphatic statement, boldfaced, all caps, double underlined. Watch out. Danger. Beware.

In the second half we will get into the dangers OUTSIDE of ourselves but in this first half we will focus on the **dangers INSIDE ourselves** - in our own hearts and minds and lives. “We have seen the enemy, and he is us.” ***Your greatest problem***, your greatest challenge, your greatest danger, is not outside of you, but deep inside of you. This is true for all of us.

The sin that lurks in the deep, dark recesses of our hearts is our greatest threat and danger. We are born with original sin. Before Jesus set you free you were enslaved to sin. But even as a Christian we have the ongoing problem of **indwelling sin**. “Sin is no longer your master but it is still your enemy” (Colin Smith). Paul calls this “the flesh” and it remains our greatest challenge throughout the Christian life. Therefore we must be constantly doing battle - constantly fighting against sin.

John Owen well said, ***“Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.”*** The gospel truth is “my sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought - my sin, not in part, but the whole - is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.” For that reason, it is well with our souls - we need not fear the penalty or power of sin. But the presence of sin remains.

Imagine your sin - your old flesh - as ***a zombie***. At the moment you called on Jesus to save you your old sinful self was nailed to the cross. But every day that crucified, dead and buried old you keeps coming to life and trying to haunt you. So every day you have to ***nail that old creeper back to the cross*** and live in the freedom you already have. The devil’s greatest weapon is the LIE that you are still a slave to sin. The longer sin was your master the more effective this deception can be.

“Keep watch over yourselves.” As Proverbs instructs us, “Above all, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.” Look at Paul’s example, as he has this final meeting with his dear Christian friends.

**Protect Yourself**

* **Fight** your Sin

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time… serving the Lord with all humility.” Acts 20:18-19

Paul’s first words relate to his character, his example. “How I lived THE WHOLE TIME.” That is **character**. That is integrity - being the same faithful, godly person at all times. And it doesn’t come easy. You have to know your sin and learn how to actively fight your sin so you win.

Paul was brilliant and gifted. He was the **top Pharisee of his day** - and the Pharisees were the top religious scholars of the first century. So Paul was the best and the brightest among all religious leaders in the whole region of Israel and the middle east. ***Pride was, no doubt, an ever present companion*** for Paul - superiority, self-exaltation. As Pharisee, he was commissioned to use this superiority to attack Christians and suppress what he saw as a cult.

But even as a follower of Christ, he must have battled with pride and a sense of being superior. Which is why he had to learn to serve the Lord with all humility. I’m guessing that is why the Lord gave him “the thorn in his side” - whether it was a physical ailment or chronic temptation - something to keep him humble and dependent so he would learn to say, “when I am weak, then I am strong.” ***Paul knew the temptation of pride, and he learned to fight against it.***

***Do you?***

I have always been a good student. I wasn’t always the best athlete and, believe it or not, for most of my school years ***I was not the coolest kid***. I know you’re shocked by that. **But I was a good student**. And I was pretty vocal with my faith. Part of how I coped with being picked on for my small size and lower social standing was by taking comfort in my superior academic performance and - seriously - reminding myself that those kids who picked on me were all going straight to hell. I’m not proud of that now, but it was a real coping mechanism that helped me get through middle school. When you wear sweatpants with high top sneakers and protestant propaganda T-shirts you should expect a degree of bullying.

Throughout my ministry I have had to work to **fight against pride**. You know the best treatment for pride? Prayer. Pride is all about self-reliance and self-exaltation - what I can do, what I can get credit for. What is prayer? Calling on God for what only HE can do, what only HE can get credit for.

One other note here on fighting sin. Why did Paul always ***bring a team along*** with him? Yes, he was all about developing leaders and giving young men like Timothy opportunities to lead and teach and grow. But I bet that commitment was part of his battle with pride. He had to bring others along to remind him that the ministry could not just be about him - he had to be empowering others and always letting go of ministry.

And as a single man, I expect Paul was wise enough to know that ***being alone*** in a very sexualized culture like it was in the first century, was sheer foolishness. So he made sure to always have a team with him. Paul knew his sin and fought his sin. That’s the first exhortation. FIGHT your sin. To guard your own life - you must do battle every day, in the power of the Spirit with the weapons of the gospel, the Word of God, the fellowship of the saints and the obedience of faith. And that’s our second exhortation.

**Protect Yourself**

* **Follow** the Spirit

“I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.” Acts 20:24, NIV

In this meeting with the Ephesian elders Paul was explaining why he was going to Jerusalem, even though he knew it might cost him his life. He said, ***“It’s not about my life. My life is nothing***. To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Having fought the sin of pride for decades, Paul knew that the advance of the gospel did not depend on him. It was the unstoppable promise and power of God. The mission would continue. He just had to play his part.

This verse was a big part of my call to ministry in college. It was the first verse I ever preached - having the privilege of speaking in chapel as a senior at Taylor. “Finish the race. Complete the task.” **The race** for Paul is a metaphor for the entire Christian life. It’s not a sprint, it’s a marathon. You have to watch your step so you don’t stumble or fall or get disqualified. Sadly, lots of prominent Christian leaders have shown us ways they stumble or fall or get disqualified.

***Running the race*** ties into the first exhortation - fight your sin and keep from stumbling.

***Finishing the task*** ties into this second exhortation. Follow the Spirit into the work He is calling you to do. **What is YOUR TASK?**

For Paul it was ***preaching the gospel where it had never been heard***. As a devout Jew and teacher of the Jewish Law this was a difficult assignment since he had to spend a lot of time with Gentiles. But Paul was determined to go where the Spirit led him and he knew it would be dangerous and would almost certainly end in his death. Listen to how he says it in verse 22.

**Protect Yourself**

* **Follow** the Spirit

“I am going to Jerusalem, ***constrained by the Spirit***, not knowing what will happen to me there.” Acts 20:22

Paul was not just led by the Spirit from time to time - he was CONSTRAINED by the Spirit. He was **bound by his commitment to obey** the Lord - so when the Spirit said, “Go” Paul said “Yes.”

He wasn’t controlled by fear or the desires of others. He was completely surrendered to the Spirit’s leading. ***He didn’t know what would happen in Jerusalem***, but he had good reason to suspect that it wouldn’t be pleasant. Paul was constantly mistreated by the Jews. He was a traitor on their list. He was their most promising young leader yet he abandoned them. So they were united in their determination to capture, punish and eventually have him killed. But Paul would not let that hold him back.

He was “constrained by the Spirit.”

***What is the Holy Spirit leading you to do?*** What is the task He has called you to accomplish? We know from Ephesians 2:10 that every believer has specific good works the Lord has “prepared in advance for us to do.” God has uniquely created you and has designed your life experiences to prepare you to serve certain people and in certain ways - if you will follow the leading of His Spirit.

***Is there risk involved?*** There is always some feeling of risk when we follow the Spirit. There is some change He calls us to. And often there is **a self-humbling part** of it - a calling to confess a sin or struggle to a friend; a conviction to ask for prayer; an urging to trust in the Lord and take a step that doesn’t completely make sense.

And look at verse 26 for what is at stake here.

**Protect Yourself**

* **Follow** the Spirit

“I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” Acts 20:27

Paul was ***a bold preacher and teacher***. He did not hesitate to preach the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike - regardless of what their reaction might be. Nor did he shrink from teaching the demands of the cross from house to house and city to city. He preached the “whole counsel of God.”

Because of his faithful preaching and teaching, Paul could say at the end of this season of ministry, “I am innocent of the blood of all.”

***Can we say the same?*** Do you feel the weight of this? There is a responsibility for the people around you. Their blood, figuratively, is on your hands.

This ties back to the role of **the prophets in the Old Testament**. Ezekiel described it like the job of ***a sentry keeping watch***. If you were on guard duty, up late at night on the wall of the city - if you fell asleep, the blood of the people in the city would be on your head. Or if you saw the enemy coming but did not sound the alarm, the deaths of all in the city would be your responsibility. But if you sounded the alarm, you would be innocent of the blood of any who failed to listen to that trumpet call.

***Think of the people you know who do not know Jesus.*** Are you, right now, innocent of their blood? Have you made a point of connecting with them in order to discern where they are with the Lord and to explain the gospel? In the final judgment, could they make the argument that you never shared with them?

Do you see how ***you are like a sentry for them?*** You are the watcher on the wall. You see the danger of God’s righteous judgment coming - you see the verdict upon them of guilty and you know the sentence of eternal suffering. If we do not sound the alarm, then we are not innocent of their blood. They will die for their sins, but their blood will be on our hands.

The closer you are to someone, ***the more responsibility you have***. Immediate family members, close, longtime friends. Co-workers you see every day. Neighbors you live by for year after year.

And it’s not just about sharing the gospel. It’s about the “whole counsel of God.” What if you know **a believer who has been stagnant** for years - making no progress, and having no joy in the Lord. They are suffering the consequences of their own choices, but you are not innocent of their blood if you have not made an effort to meet with them and encourage and exhort them.

Especially if you know someone who calls themselves a Christian but is living in **unrepentant, ongoing sin** - the Holy Spirit is calling you - constraining you - to address that. You cannot leave it be. Whether the wrong is against you or someone else, the responsibility is on you to address it - lovingly, compassionately, carefully; possibly with one or two others.

May we all reach the end of our lives or the end of a season of ministry and be able to say, “I am innocent of the blood of all.”

**Follow the Spirit**. Whatever He is leading you to do - that is your task right now. Don’t hesitate. Don’t be held back by fear or distractions. Make a plan and act on it this week.

That is what it means to protect ourselves. Now on to part two - protecting one another. You can see the two are related!

**Protect One Another**

* Focus on the **Gospel**

“Care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Acts 20:28

As we keep watch over the flock, we must remember that every member of the church is ***a blood-bought child of God***. Jesus died for you and for me. Every Christian is a precious member of the family of God. If Jesus was willing to shed His blood for this believer, how could we not show the same kind of commitment, the same kind of sacrificial care?

And essential to that care is the ministry of the Word - preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul declared to the churches the “whole counsel of God” his focus was clearly and unapologetically on the gospel. He resolved to “preach Christ and him crucified.” What was the task Paul was given? Verse 24.

**Protect One Another**

* Focus on the **Gospel**

“The task the Lord Jesus has given to me - the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.” Acts 20:24, NIV

This was central to Paul as an apostle and church planter. But it is also central for us. Our goal at Oakwood is to ***focus on the gospel in everything we do*** - from the Nursery to the funeral. In every class, in every Bible study, in every sermon, in every worship service, our goal is to help people see, understand, believe, apply and live out the good news of God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ.

**The gospel** is not just about the blood of Jesus to pay for your sin. It is also about the resurrection of Jesus that set you free from the power of sin. The gospel is also about the return of Jesus to completely remove sin from you and from this world forever. The gospel is the good news of all God has done for us in Christ - there are a million ways to express it and even more ways to apply it.

* When a friend is ***discouraged*** - disappointed by a setback or hardship, a sadness or loss - and you remind them of the fullness of God’s love for them, His compassionate presence, His compassion and care - you are reminding them of the gospel!
* When a brother or sister is ***struggling with sin*** - battling lust or greed or pride or selfishness, or all of them at once - and you read through Romans 8 to review the forgiveness and freedom Jesus purchased for them - you are reminding them of the gospel!
* When a loved one ***needs direction*** - with a major life decision, feeling lost and without purpose - and you show them Ephesians 2:10, that they are God’s masterpiece and Jeremiah 29:11 that God has good plans for them - you are reminding them of the gospel!

This is gospel ministry! Listen to how Paul concludes his message to this small group of dear friends:

**Protect One Another**

* Focus on the **Gospel**

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up…” Acts 20:32

***“The word of his grace” is the gospel!*** The gospel is the “power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” The gospel is able to build you up. Every day with our friends and loved ones we commend them to God and His grace. We lift them up to the Lord and leave them in His mighty, merciful hands. Listen to the rest of verse 32:

**Protect One Another**

* Focus on the **Gospel**

“The word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Acts 20:32

The gospel builds us up and it is what gives us the inheritance of heaven, of righteousness, of joy and peace and everything. The gospel saves us and sanctifies us. It pronounces your sins forgiven and your soul set free. It gives you the hope of eternity and the sure promise of life with God forever more.

This is gospel ministry. How do we protect one another? We focus on the gospel. We delight in the finished work of Jesus and we help each other treasure Christ above all things.

One more exhortation. While we focus on the truth, we must:

**Protect One Another**

* Guard against **Deception**

“Fierce wolves will come in among you… men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” Acts 20:29-30

The main enemy of sheep in the Mediterranean region back then was wolves. Roving packs of ravenous predators, looking for an opportunity. As Paul exhorts the elders to care for the sheep, he exhorts them to prepare for wolves.

What would you think of ***a shepherd who had no weapon*** to fight off wolves, or who had a weapon but had not learned how to use it? You would say he was a fool - risking his own life and the lives of his sheep.

How do we protect one another from deception? We not only need to focus on the gospel as students of God’s Word, but we need to be aware of the dangers and distortions that are out there. These are the primary exhortations in this section:

**Protect One Another**

* Guard against **Deception**

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock… Therefore be alert…” Acts 20:28,31

What are some key dangers to be watching for today? What are some common distortions and deceptions? Here are three.

**Three Dangerous Lies:**

1. Believe in yourself
2. Love wins
3. Be healthy and wealthy

You hear me rant on the Disney deception all the time - ***“Believe in yourself,”*** is the mantra of modern times. It’s all about you! Ask Josh Groban - “You have everything you need, if you just believe.” Believe in what, Josh? Of course, believe in YOURSELF. Queen Elsa says, “Let it go! You can’t hold me back anymore.”

This is a deadly lie that grew out of the enlightenment. Before Kant and Rousseau and those guys everyone was pretty universally convinced about things like SIN and coming judgment. People knew NOT TO believe in themselves and they knew the converse - believe in God, trust in Jesus, call on the Lord to forgive your sins. No longer. Along with believe in yourself comes the denial of the problem of sin, the elevation of the self, the worship even of the self, the belief in the fundamental goodness of man and the corresponding denial of the goodness or even existence of God.

“Believe in yourself” is the message of religion and of modern pop psychology. The second prominent lie is ***“love wins.”*** This is the message of liberal Christianity and universalists who emphasize the fatherhood of God and the mercy of Jesus while denying the need for justice or even the real death and resurrection of Jesus. They see the cross as a symbol more than a real event and the person of Jesus as an inspiring idea about love, not a real historical person. The Christian version of this denies the existence of hell or at least an eternal hell.

One more lie that is common today is ***“Be healthy and wealthy.”*** This is the “prosperity gospel,” that says if you believe hard enough or sincerely enough God will bless you. Televangelists love this because it justifies their lavish lifestyle, their fancy cars and jets and mansions - because those prove that they believe so much which is why God has blessed them so much. If you are not healthy or wealthy it means you are not believing enough, so suffering is your own fault. This is a terrible distortion, crushing to personal faith and a total reversal of the message of the cross.

Beware of false teachers who will bring these kinds of deceptions before you. Be prepared. Study your Bibles. Know the truth so well that error becomes obvious to you.

Here is our summary for today.

**Protect Yourself**

* Fight your sin
* Follow the Spirit

**Protect One Another**

* Focus on the Gospel
* Guard against Deception

The Christian leader who embodies all of this best for me was **Billy Graham**.

https://harvest.org/resources/radio/greg-laurie-interview-on-billy-graham-the-man-i-knew-2/

Though he was the most **prominent evangelist** of the 20th Century and was rivaled only in history by men like John Wesley and D.L. Moody, Billy always said, “I’m just a country preacher.” Records indicate he preached live to more than 210 million people in 185 countries. His TV and radio ministries reached upwards of 2 BILLION people, conservatively. Yet he was humble and always ruthlessly committed to giving God all the glory.

He was aware of the deep and ***deadly nature of sin*** - and worked carefully to guard himself and his team from it. He became famous for the “Billy Graham rule” that he would never be alone with a woman other than his wife for any reason. This was part of his Modesto Manifesto that he and some friends designed early in their ministry to protect against financial deception, sexual misconduct and even the exaggeration of numbers being reported at their events.

Graham knew how vital it was to fight sin. And his whole story is one of following the Spirit. His crusades were not a brand new idea but big evangelistic gatherings had never been tried at the scale Billy introduced in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s. It’s hard to imagine the risk this entailed for a 28 year old preacher and the courageous faith it took to begin and continue for almost 60 years.

According to Greg Laurie, who worked closely with Graham for years, Billy could have been successful in any field. He could have been a famous movie star. He could have been president of the United States. But he was clear about his calling to preach the gospel - a calling he received just east of us off the 18th hole of a golf course in Temple Terrace.

Billy Graham fought sin and followed the Spirit to protect himself. And he also worked to **protect others**. His focus and his genius was the gospel -the clear, simple, unifying gospel. He was a unifier and a peacemaker - drawing people together from mainline and Catholic backgrounds to winsomely lift up the cross of Jesus Christ. He was well aware of the deceptions in the religious landscape and knew the best antidote to false teaching was the clear proclamation of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Let’s follow the example of Billy Graham and obey the exhortation of Paul:

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” Acts 20:28, NIV

Pray.