

Constructive Self-Examination **Acts 20:26-31**

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 12-28-2008

Introduction

As it nears the end of 2008, we are going to do some self-evaluation this morning. But I don't want it to be the kind where you beat up on yourself and feel bad. I want it to be the kind where you are inspired to keep building. I've called this sermon "Constructive Self-Evaluation." How we view God, the world and ourselves makes a big difference on whether we live by faith or are perpetually discouraged.

There was an interesting sign at an employment agency in Tucson, Arizona. It was posted at the top of a full-length mirror. It said, "Would you hire this person?" People tend to blame the boss, other employees who get advanced above them or even bad luck, when they might find some things to improve if they would look in the mirror and ask, "Would I respond any differently than they did if I was confronted with this person?"

Of course, there is a danger in self-evaluation. And there is a danger in my preaching on just one section of Paul's sermon, because it takes it out of the positive context that Paul frames it in. And I will be giving hints of that context as we do this self-evaluation because I don't want you getting discouraged.

Dr. Colbert gave a long list of ways that our perceptions tend to sabotage the very success that we hope for. I'm only going to mention a few. He speaks of overgeneralizations – that if one thing goes wrong, this person begins thinking that nothing will ever go right for him. Imagine if Paul had taken that attitude. Where would he be? He would have given up.

A second sabotaging perception was called a negative mental filter, by which he means that if a person hears a half hour of praise after a job evaluation, he will leave the meeting depressed because of one little area that needed improvement. His mind filtered out all of the positive praise and he saw himself as a disappointment. Some of you respond that way to sermons. You see one area of your life that could stand improvement, and blinded to all the successes that God has given you, you become discouraged.

A third sabotaging perception is called, “disqualifying the positive.” This is where the person thinks he is utterly unworthy of praise, and he discounts the praise that people give. Their focus is so much on their sins that they cannot see all of the worthy things that God is doing within them. Even though Paul saw himself as the chief of sinners, it did not keep him from seeing all of the things that God had accomplished in his life. And he certainly wanted his congregations to take his praise of them seriously. Yes it is all of grace, but you are involved in the equation. And Paul was not friendly to false humility, or what Colbert calls “disqualifying the positive.”

A fourth sabotaging perception is called “jumping to conclusions.” These people don’t want to try because they always predict the worst possible outcome. They will read a text like the one we just read and focus in on all of the people who are against us and conclude that the gates of hell are going to prevail against the church.

A fifth sabotaging perception he calls the mind reader who concludes that someone is reacting negatively to them, but doesn’t bother to check it out. They just assume that the other person has the worst opinion of them. They are not believing all things or hoping all things. I’m not fond of Freud, but Freud would call this projection – assuming that the other person views them the same negative way that they themselves view others.

Others are magnifiers. They exaggerate the catastrophic importance of their goof-up. And they just can’t get over it. They have done a major mess-up, and not only do they not forgive themselves, they are convinced that no one else could forgive them. And they are convinced this has destroyed their chances. Think of Paul’s mess-ups. He had actually killed Christians in the early part of Acts. It would be pretty hard to face some of those widows and orphans if he had magnified that sin to the point that it overshadowed everything. It would have paralyzed him.

Others are feeling-wallowers (not his term). They assume that their negative feelings are a true reflection of reality. They don’t stop to ask if they have maybe not had enough sleep. They simply assume that their feelings are an accurate gauge of the way things truly are. Rarely are your feelings an accurate gauge. You can’t ignore them, but neither should they rule you.

Some people blame themselves for everyone else’s problems. “Daddy left Mommy because I was bad.” They bear the built of the divorce.

Others perceive the need to be liked so much that they sacrifice everything (including truth) so that others will accept you. As we will see in this chapter, not everybody will like you or accept you. Don't worry about it.

In fact, worrying about things you can't control is a one of the biggest of the sabotaging attitudes that destroy the ability of people to proper self-evaluation.

So, if you promise to look at yourself through the cross, we will proceed. Can you do that? Otherwise there is a danger of looking at this section out of context. Paul had six ways in which he had these elders look inward and evaluate themselves.

(Outline from previous weeks.)

I. A Look Backward (vv. 18-21) "from the first day" (v. 18) and "for three years" (v. 31)

II. A Look Forward (vv. 22-25)

III. A Look Inward (vv. 26-31)

A. *Faithful to warn (v. 26) – Do I care for people's well being?*

The first was to see if they were faithful to warn. Do we care for the well being of other people enough to warn them of danger? Verse 26 says, "**Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.**" In one way, that's a pretty negative way to start. It implies that if he didn't do something, he would be guilty. It implies that people are headed toward death. And that is accurate. That is true. But Paul wants these elders to think about the glory of being used by God to rescue people. His innocence means that Paul was a rescue mission on two feet. When he saw people walking over a cliff, he sought to rescue them. That's a pretty simple and straightforward message: "Watch out! That cliff is dangerous."

But people immediately focus on the wrong thing: "What if the other person doesn't want me to warn them? What if they get mad? They might not like me any more." Where's your focus? It is on self. It's not on the other person's well being. And what's your emotion? It is fear, not faith. And what's the outcome? It is the other person's death. And what is the attitude? It is "I don't care." Put that way, I think you can see that Paul's warnings were indeed a caring testimony in a fallen world. They were words of hope and encouragement, whether others interpreted them wrong or not. So the first point of self-evaluation is "Do you care about a lost world? Do you care about fellow sinners and their destiny? Do you care about the dangers that fellow-believers find themselves in? Do you care about the sheep in your family that God has entrusted to you?" For this next year I want to be a caring person. I want to care enough to make a difference.

B. Faithful to teach (v. 27) – Am I interested in giving solutions?

The second thing we see was that Paul was faithful to teach. Verse 27 says, “**For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.**” Paul knew there were some doctrines that individuals would hate. But he didn’t stick to the popular message. This is where we need to let the Scriptures define what is a message of hope and faith, not the world. The world will ask us to have a Pollyanna kind of false optimism – to only preach on the positive Scriptures. But Paul gave the Word that was needed. His goal was to be faithful in giving what was needed, not simply to be popular. A toddler who wants to get into the chemicals might think that your message of “No” is pretty mean, but you say “No” because you love that child and don’t want her poisoned. When your child was young you didn’t care if you were unpopular with her when you told her she couldn’t play in the street, or that she couldn’t touch a hot stove. You did what was right. So what changed when your children turned fifteen? There are still messages from Scripture that might be unpopular with a fifteen year old, but a parent needs to give what is good. Pastors need to preach the whole counsel. Politicians need to give a message that is in the best interests of the country, not what is popular. And all message givers stand before God when they evaluate their actions.

When you stand in a mirror, would you vote for you? Or would you consider your pragmatism, your compromises and your cowardice to speak God’s Word unworthy of your vote? That’s the evaluation that we need to ask ourselves. Are we interested in giving true Biblical solutions to the problems we face, or are we only willing to give comfortable answers, depending upon which way the wind is blowing? Obviously, this is a chapter that applies to elders, but I think we can all use this same evaluation.

C. Faithful to take heed (v. 28) – Am I a good shepherd?

1. To us – Do I take care of myself?

Third test: faithful to take heed. Verse 28 says, **Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.** What an awesome responsibility to be a shepherd! We elders must evaluate whether we take heed. Fathers need to ask themselves, “Have I been a good shepherd?”

And Paul breaks this down into two parts. First, taking heed to ourselves. Am I taking care of myself? If you were standing before a mirror thinking about being hired for the job of shepherding of your own body,

would you hire yourself? Have you abused your body or have you shepherded it? Have you abused and neglected your spirit or have you shepherded it?

2. To the flock – Do I protect those entrusted to me?

But the elders weren't just to take care of themselves. They were also to (it says) “...**take heed... to all the flock...**” There are things in this next year that I would like to improve in my own shepherding. I'm grateful for what God has enabled me to do, but I also want to improve. I want to excel as a shepherd. And you fathers don't need to beat up on yourselves concerning your shepherding work. But if you see ways in which your shepherding could improve, make note of it and by God's grace strive to grow. Always be growing.

D. Faithful to see the positive (v. 28b) – Can I see the good in God's people?

The fourth test is to see if we are faithful to see the positive. I want you to see the description of the church in verse 28. He doesn't describe them as a pain in the neck (or a pain in some other part of the anatomy). He doesn't even first and foremost describe them as sinners. He doesn't describe them as a vomitous mass of putrefying excrescence, as someone worded it on the movie, *the Princess Bride*. Yeah there were sinners in the church – sinners saved by grace and turned to saints and highly valued by Jehovah God. Look at the description. “**Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.**” The church of God, which He purchased with His own blood! All of a sudden, this job of shepherding is a great honor. God's most treasured and highly valued possession has been entrusted to His overseers. How awesome can that be? In this next year I plan to adjust my thinking about sheep that want to wander. I want to constantly view them as God's treasured possession.

And the question is, “Can you see the good in God's people?” Or is all you see the portions that have not *yet* been transformed by His glorious grace. Of course, even those portions are legally made perfect by God's justification. This can help fathers to see what could be, not just what *is visible* in their families.

The founder of IBM, Thomas Watson, once said, “The way to succeed is to double your failure rate.” That's kind of a strange comment. But it was his way of saying, “Don't let your failures stop you. If you're not failing,

you're not trying. Some failure is just a part of the process of winning." Or as Thomas Edison said, "There is only one good idea in 100 so I want to discover the 99 failures as quick as possible." His goal of course was to find the way that *would* work, but he saw all those supposed failures as stepping-stones to victory. It's an issue of perspective.

I always give the men I shepherd a little one-page summary of a book called *Failing Forward*, by John Maxwell. And I give it because I know that as I point out ways in which they can improve the shepherding of their homes, they will tend to get discouraged over their failures, or they may even begin to fear failure. But if you realize that everyone fails on the way to victory, and without some falls you won't gain the victory, it can help you to gain perspective. NBA coach, Rick Pitino, said, "Failure is good. It's fertilizer. Everything I've learned about coaching I've learned from making mistakes." If instead of constantly saying, "I'm a failure" you instead learn to say, "I guess there's a better way of doing it," you might have more patience with the failures of others.

If anyone had a right to be negative about the failures that occur within the church, it would be Paul. We have seen many of the ways in which he was hurt and tackled. But Paul constantly saw good in the church – even the church of Corinth – because he saw that the church was God's precious possession. He was looking at the church through the eyes of the cross. I think it was one of the reasons why he had so much praise for the church. He knew that God had already been at work in the church, and He who has begun a good work in them will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It didn't stop him from correcting them, but it helped him to take their sins and mistakes into perspective as he corrected them.

Just as an illustration, let me ask this question: "Do you quit basketball simply because statistics say that only 60% of all basketball shots actually go into the hoop and 40% don't?" No. So why do we get discouraged when 40% of what our family does ain't perfect? And I can just hear some pessimist thinking, "I would be happy with 40%. My family only get's 10% right." I heard that the average for oil companies is that only 10% of wells drilled hit oil. Do they focus on the 90% failures? No. They glory in the riches of the 10% and they keep trying. I think John Maxwell is right when he says, "We need to take success and failure concerning ourselves much less seriously and take God much more seriously. We need to seed a risk-taking mind set. We need to constantly be planting seeds that will develop a mind set that is willing to take risks." Is it a risk to shepherd the flock that God has given you? Of course it is. But what a glorious privilege

God has given you. You have actually been entrusted with God's most precious possession. In 2009, try to have a more positive perspective of your family and of the church by looking at their preciousness through the lens of the cross.

E. Faithful to protect (vv. 29-30) – Am I prepared?

1. Dangers from outside – “wolves” (v. 29)

The fifth test naturally flows from this. Are you faithful to protect the precious resource that God has given to you in a family, or in our case, in shepherding the church? Verse 29 says that there are dangers from outside: **“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”** I would hope not one of you would throw your little children to the wolves. No, you would protect them. Yet Christians are doing exactly this by sending their six-year-olds to government schools. And people get tired of this and they tell me, “Cut it out Phil, and stop preaching such a negative message. Let parents do what they want to do with their kids.” And I think, “Negative message?” How is it a negative message to tell you to cherish God's most precious possession? How is it a negative message to tell you that your office of pastor and teacher of your home is the greatest honor God could bestow upon you? Is it not negative to despise a little one by deliberately letting him or her be savaged by wolves? But Paul is simply saying, “Hey Shepherds. I know you love and value your job. I know you value your sheep. I'm just giving you a heads up that there will be wolves who want to brain wash and destroy everything you are doing good in God's sheep. Watch out for wolves outside.” That's one of the most important messages I could bring to the church today. And if I love you, I need to warn you about the wolves that attack the church of Jesus Christ.

2. Dangers from inside – “from among yourselves” (v. 30)

Then he warns them equally about dangers from inside: Verse 30 says, **“Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after themselves.”** He is saying that shepherds need to protect sheep from the abuses of sheep. They need to protect sheep from false doctrines. Sometimes they need to protect sheep from themselves.

Here's a letter I got from a professor in seminary. This professor said, He was graduated from the finest four-star Christian college. The product of a distinguished evangelical church, he had a good personal grasp of the Scriptures. From a strong Christian family, he was a personable and handsome green shoot -- the whole nine

yards! Like many in his league, however, he was riding rather than building on his background. At seminary he was acceptable, certainly not outstanding. He suffered from a severe case of the blahs, turning in papers that would make better kindling than academic projects. He generally frittered away his time. Toward the end of his four-year tour of divine duty, I had developed an excellent personal relationship and I called him into my office. "Bill, I'm disappointed in you." "Really, Prof, why?" His eyes widened and blinked. "Well, I could be wrong but my evaluation of you is this: you are a ten-cylinder man operating on about three, and comparing yourself with others who have only two." The atmosphere electrified. He flushed, stifled internal anger, and left. Apparently he felt he had been misunderstood and our friendship bond weakened. Upon reflection he cooled to thinking temperature. "Maybe Prof is right. Could it be that he's the only man who loves me enough to tell it like it is? He blew my cover." In time our rapport was mended. Bill went on to become a military chaplain, serving with distinction and impact. One of the cherished letters in my file is from Bill, thanking me for caring enough to face him with my convictions. Counselors can often be cowards, not caring enough to confront.

Wow! Mothers and fathers, does that last sentence describe you? "Counselors can often be cowards, not caring enough to confront." Are you willing to warn? In John 10 Jesus said that a shepherd who does not protect his sheep is a useless shepherd. He says, "**The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.**" Warning shows our care. The good shepherd of John 10 is willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

Fathers and mothers: do you care for the sheep God has entrusted to you? Then you will warn them about dangers from pornography that every family is exposed to at some time or another. Without adequate preparation, they will not be prepared. Have you talked to your kids about how to handle their hormones? Don't let fear stop you. If you are a good shepherd, fathers, you will warn your sheep about bad friends, financial dangers, doctrinal, educational and political dangers. In 2009 I hope to be more loving and more proactive about being a good shepherd. And part of that is warning. I want to grow in my shepherding every year. I urge you fathers to do the same with your flocks in 2009. And I urge every one of you to grow in receiving this love from your shepherd. The sheep need to grow as well.

F. Faithful to be alert (vv. 31) – Do I take needed precautions?

The last test is faithful to be alert. Verse 31 continues to speak about Paul's warnings, but it starts by saying, "**Therefore watch...**" Do I take precautions? Do I watch? Am I alert to what is happening? "**Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.**" He took precautions, but not in a legalistic way. He did it with care, with heart, with tears. As shepherds we need to be alert, whether we are speaking of elders of the church or fathers of the families.

Again, I know Satan's tactics. He will try to make you toss this whole sermon out as one more thing for you to fail on – why even try? Next time I plan to spend a whole sermon on verse 32, which answers that doubt. But let me at least read that verse so that these tests that I've just given are not taken out of context. It says, **“So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”** You may not think you are able, but you are not alone. And I want you to repeat after me, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Can you say that? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” That's not just wishful thinking. That comes from God's Word. And God wants us to adjust our failing attitudes to winning attitudes by His Word, which (verse 32 says) **“... is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”** What a precious promise.

You may have heard of Victor Seribriakoff. He was the chairman of the Mensa Institute, which requires a minimum IQ of 140. He had an IQ of 161. But you know what? When he was 15 years old his teacher told him that he was a dunce and that he would never finish school and that he should just go ahead and drop out. Victor took that advice and jumped from job to job. He was told he was a “dunce,” and for 17 years he acted like one. Why? He believed the lie. When he took the IQ test and saw his score, he started realizing that there was more to him academically than he had realized, and he started acting the part. He became a successful businessman, securing a number of patents for his inventions and writing several books. Now I don't have an IQ like he did, and I'm not going to try to aspire to be like Victor. But I do want to live to my full potential. That's the point.

So I want to end by giving you an SQ test this morning. This is a spiritual quotient and reveals the level of your spiritual resources.

Question one: Who are you? Satan may be tempting you to say, “I am a failure.” Ignore the advice of that lousy teacher to quit and give up, and instead say, “I am a child of the King. I am more than a conqueror through Him who loved me. That's who I am.” If you keep telling yourself that, you will begin living in terms of your true SQ, not in terms of what Satan tells you.

Second question: How much capacity do you have to love the unlovable person you are tempted to give up on? Satan might tempt you to answer, “I've done everything I can. I give up.” Instead, put down on your quiz this answer: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. And

since He has shed abroad His supernatural love in my heart, and since He has offered to give me as much as I need of that love, I can love my neighbor as myself by His grace; I can love my enemies; I can love my wife and children with a patient love that believes all things, endures all things and hopes all things. I will not be overcome by evil, but I will overcome evil with good. When your wicked teacher, Satan, tries to tell you that you are a spiritual dunce, ignore him. Don't let him be your teacher. Remind yourself of your true spiritual resources and claim them by faith.

Third question: What is your capacity to discern truth from error and to be able to warn your family? That was one of the points, right? And you might think, "I'm no Phil Kayser. How could I do that?" Satan may tempt you to say that you have failed in the past and there is no point in trying in the future. But instead, put down the genius answer from Scripture: **"I am indwelt by the Spirit of God who has promised in James, 'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man supposed that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.'**" I choose to believe that God will give the wisdom for the things I need to do with my family. I will not doubt that God will equip me to be a good shepherd of my family. That's genius answer, and as you consistently believe it, you will start to live the part, just like Victor started to live the part of his IQ.

Fourth question: What is your faith? Satan will take the last Scripture that I just read and twist it around to say, "Lord give me more faith." But I would encourage you to put down the genius answer and say, "I don't need more faith because Jesus said **"if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.**" (Matt 17:20). This is not simply positive thinking unfounded on fact. This is faith founded on the promises of a God who cannot lie. Say with 1 John, **"Everyone who is born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith."** Now that's a genius answer. 1 John also says that each of you has an anointing and can be taught directly by God and can discern truth from error.

We could keep giving you the quiz, but I think you get the point. You can only achieve what you have faith to achieve. And there is no reason why every one of you cannot make great leaps forward in 2009. After all, the one

who created this universe indwells you. Think of that! In Romans 8:11 Paul said that the same Spirit who raised up Jesus from the grave is right now at work in your mortal bodies. If He raised Jesus from the dead, do you think He could work through you when you anoint your child with oil, lay hands on her and pray for her healing? You have His promise that if He is for you, who can be against you. And He *is* for you. Ephesians 1:3 promises that you have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This is why Jesus says, **“Most assuredly I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full”** (John 16:24). James says, **“You have not because you ask not.”**

Shepherding a church is a task too big to do apart from God’s promises and His grace. So in 2009 I plan to shepherd by asking and receiving from God all that I need to do so to His glory. Shepherding your families is a task too big to do if it were not for God’s promises and His grace. I urge you to ask and receive from God as well. Loving your shepherds and loving each other as *God* commands us to do is too tall a task apart from His promises and His grace. But the point is, you have His promises and His grace, so it is not presumption to make a New Year’s Resolution to strive for more this next year.

It’s true that we live in an evil world, and Paul does not ignore it in this passage. But we live and move and have our being in an even greater God. Amen? Let’s not let our past failures get us down. J.M. Barrie said, “We are all failures – at least, all the best of us are.” His point was that if you are not a failure, you haven’t even tried. If you have never failed, then you have likely not yet succeeded, and will not succeed. Don’t be afraid of failure in 2009. Instead, commit yourself to fail forwards into victory after victory by the grace of Almighty God. Are you with me for 2009? If you are with me, quote out loud the “I can do all things” verse with me. Here goes: **I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.** Amen. Let’s pray.

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D. Faithful to see the positive (v. 28b) – Can I see the good in God’s people?

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