

Sermon 66, Entrusting Ourselves to God, Acts 20:32-35

Proposition: God keeps His people through His word and through their own hard work — and both of these are possible only through the radical generosity of Jesus Christ.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the final section of this speech at which we've been looking for the past month, Paul commends the Ephesian church to God, and then wraps it up with a final summary of the upright character of his life and work in Ephesus. What do these two parts of the speech have to do with each other? As we have observed, both of them speak to the reality that the Kingdom continues after Paul departs the stage. On the human level, the church is maintained and carried forward by the elders. On the divine level, the church is God's, and in His keeping. Paul mentions both of those, and then reminds the elders one final time, through his own example, about how to minister in the church. What we'll see here is that God keeps His people through His word and through His people's hard work, and that both sorts of keeping are only possible through the radical generosity of Jesus Christ.

I. How to Entrust Yourself to God, v. 32

Our first point concerns how to entrust oneself to God. When Paul says "I commend you or entrust you to God," what does he mean by that? He means that he has placed the Ephesian church in God's keeping. He has placed them at God's feet; God is going to take care of them from now on.

A. The Keeping of God, v. 32a

What is the keeping of God? Essentially, it is the wondrous providence whereby God monitors His people, provides for all their needs, and leads them through many winding ways to their

appointed end. The keeping of God is “ordinary” providence, supercharged in such a way as to care for the church. That’s what Paul meant in Ephesians 1, when he said that Jesus was “head over all things for the church.” Jesus rules the cosmos, and He rules it in particular for the benefit of His people.

Were the Ephesians not in God’s keeping before? No, that’s not what Paul meant. Of course, they were always in God’s keeping. But before he left, Paul was responsible for the Ephesians in some sense. He was the shepherd guarding them. He was the one preaching repentance and faith, the one getting out there and feeding the flock of God. Then he was called to move on. He could no longer get out and feed the sheep every day. Rather than say “Sheep, you’re on your own,” he put them in the keeping of God. That means that though the sheep continue to need human care (which the elders have been commanded to provide), God too will look out for them and make sure they have what they need.

B. The Keeping of God’s Word, v. 32b

But Paul doesn’t just say “You’re in God’s hands, just where you’ve always been.” He specifically puts the Ephesian church under the care of God’s word of grace. What does he mean by that? He means that, by having the word of God, the Ephesians have the divine resources they need to be sure that they are kept. As we’ll see, God’s keeping is something God does — but it’s something He does through our work and obedience. And the biggest way in which He keeps us is His word.

1. God’s Word Is a Means of Grace

Put in the historic theological terms of the church, the word of God is a means of grace. It is a way in which God channels His love and care for you into your life. Do you want to know Jesus, obey Jesus, live for Jesus? You need His grace. Without Him you can do nothing. How do you get His grace? Through His word, through His sacraments, and through prayer. The greatest of these, in a certain sense, the one that generates the other two, is the word. Without the word of God, we wouldn’t know how to serve the sacraments. We wouldn’t know how to pray.

So if you want God’s help with the Christian life, dig into His word. That’s what calling it a “means of grace” signifies.

2. God’s Word Edifies

Second, Paul tells us more specifically not just that God’s word is a means of grace, but that it is able to build us up. The word carries the power of God because the Word is God. Christ, the spoken Son, is intimately related to the written word of God. The word of God carries the power of God just as the voice of God carries the power of God. God said “let there be light,” and there was light. God writes, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” and that word is actually able to change your heart so that you become a more generous person. The word of God builds up the church. Imagine a church with no Bible; could it endure? Could you build a church on the back of *The Iliad* or *Moby-Dick*? The very idea is absurd.

3. God’s Word Grants the Christian’s Inheritance

But Paul doesn’t only ascribe edification to the word; it also grants the inheritance that Christ purchased for us. How do you come into possession of all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly

places in Christ Jesus? After all, He died to leave them to you. You acquire them by paying attention to the word of God, specifically by hearing and obeying it. As Paul is going to say in the next verse, God kept him in Ephesus — and the way God kept him was through his hard work and obedience.

God's words grants an inheritance to you. You can't claim what Jesus died to leave you unless you hear and understand the word of God, because the benefits are heart benefits that are acquired through the understanding and the will. You can't be holy without understanding and apprehending the love of God to you, for instance. The spiritual transformation that comes to us through the death of Christ is not a physical transformation that can bypass your heart. It involves your heart, your whole person. And that's why it reaches you through the word.

4. God's Word Creates a Community of the Holy

Finally, Paul makes one more giant claim for the word of God: It creates a community of the holy. All those who are being sanctified gain the inheritance together; Christ is *ours*, in community. That's what the Lord's Prayer means when it says "Our Father," and what Paul is talking about when he says in Ephesians that through Jesus we both, Jew and Gentile, have access through one Spirit to the Father. The word of God doesn't just save individuals; it gathers a single body, the church, all of whom are known as "those who are being sanctified." God is making you holy; in fact, He's making us holy, together. Don't plan on getting holy without your brothers and sisters.

Well, the word has the power to edify the individual and create the church. It has the power to make you holy; it has the power to make us all holy. And so Paul left the church in the keeping of the word of God. But of course, to be in the keeping of the word of God requires you to keep the word of God.

II. How Paul Entrusted himself to God, vv. 33-35

And that's exactly where Paul takes it next. He takes the final opportunity to talk about how he entrusted himself to God in order to show how the keeping of God's word works. In brief, you will be kept by God when you keep His word. Entrusting yourself to Him looks like obedience.

A. Paul Was Not Driven by Greed, v. 33

The first thing Paul says about how he was kept by God is the statement that in Ephesus, he beat his besetting sin. Remember how he says in Romans 7 that this is the sin that showed him his lack of obedience to the law? He was a covetous man. He wanted things that weren't his. No surprise; it seems that his was an ambitious temperament, that the reason he was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his peers was that he had the drive to do so. That drive can often be paired with a covetous longing to have things that aren't yours, and it seems that in Paul's case it was. But in Ephesus, he overcame that desire. As Luke has shown us many times, power over money (or lack thereof) is a barometer of spiritual faithfulness. Someone who is able to beat covetousness is someone who is sold out to God. Someone who is in the grip of covetousness, like Ananias and Sapphira, is in bondage ultimately to Satan. The Kingdom of God runs on people who aren't lovers of money, coveters of silver and gold.

B. Paul Worked to Support Himself, v. 34a

The second way God's keeping is seen in Paul's life is that Paul worked to support himself. God kept him from laziness and other sins by giving him a job.

It's amazing what a force for good in this world work is. The first part of the dominion mandate tells us to have children — undoubtedly the greatest blessing that can come into a human being's life. But the second part of it tells us to work — undoubtedly the second greatest blessing we can enjoy. Yes, work is under a curse, but still — to work is to be kept by God from many great sins. And conversely, to be underemployed is to be in big trouble. There is a direct link between unemployment and the social pathologies of our time, especially opioids and porn.

C. Paul Contributed Generously to Others, v. 34b

God also kept Paul through Paul's generosity. He didn't just support himself; he supported others. Men, isn't this a blessing — to be able to support not only yourself, but your family and others with your labors? I know how generous this congregation is. You provide for your families. You give generously to Heritage Christian School and the Women's Resource Center and dozens of other non-profits, locally and globally. That is a way in which God keeps His people. If you aren't giving, know that you are not doing what you should to experience the protective keeping of God, who keeps you through your work.

D. Paul Taught Hard Work and Generosity, v. 35a

Paul was kept not only by what he did, but also by what he taught. He reminds us that he didn't just practice; he also preached. Why is this important? Well, in our culture of hypocrisy, there are quite a few people who "talk left" but "live right." You can, in theory, support feminism and the sexual revolution while still having a faithful marriage and even a happy home. You don't dare say what you're practicing, though. You are afraid to openly teach the things that you do that cause you to live right. You won't say that work is better than laziness, that faithfulness is better than affairs, and so on.

That's not how Paul was. He was ready and willing to openly explain his manner of life and to encourage every Christian to work hard and give generously. He did not say that laziness is just as morally worthy as hard work; far from it.

E. Paul Taught the Words of Jesus, v. 35b

Paul also taught the words of Jesus. His mission was not to set a good moral example (or to serve the sacraments, for that matter — "Christ did not send me to baptize") but to preach the gospel. The gospel is good news about Jesus, and as such it includes His teachings — including the teaching about giving.

F. Paul Sought the Blessing of Giving Rather than Receiving, v. 35c

Paul makes it clear that one way God kept him was that Paul sought the blessing of giving. He worked and gave to support his own mission work and the mission work of others. And frankly, if you want to be kept by God, you should be generous too.

G. Jesus Gave Rather than Receiving, v. 35c

After all, Jesus was. He gave — everything. That is why God can and does keep you. He keeps you for the sake of His Son, who bought you with His own blood.

So stay in God's keeping. Live for it. Die in it, and be received into Heaven to see your Savior. Amen.