

Are you familiar with George Washington’s Farewell Address from 1796? It’s an often overlooked but very significant document, because in it, Washington revealed his decision to not seek a third term. This marked a fundamental shift in governance. Washington had no intention of being President for life. He expressed that clearly in this address, and his love for the country comes through in the way he identifies pitfalls for America to avoid. This Farewell Address continues to echo down to the present. It is read aloud on the Senate floor each year on Washington’s birthday, a tradition that dates back to 1899.

I would like to tell you about another farewell address, which served as today’s first reading from Acts chapter 20. It was not delivered by a president; instead, it was a prominent apostle of God, the man called Paul. In this address, you hear Paul’s love for the kingdom of God come through loud and clear, and his concern for the church is obvious. His words echo to the present as well, over a much greater passage of time. Let’s see why that is.

During his third missionary journey, Paul spent most of his time in Ephesus, a city on the western coast of present-day Turkey. A thriving congregation developed there and the Gospel was preached throughout that region. Paul then left Ephesus to visit all the churches he had planted on a previous journey, returning return by ship to Jerusalem.

During the voyage one of the ports that the ship stopped at was Miletus. While he was there, Paul sent a messenger to Ephesus (which is about 25 miles away) to call the elders of the church to come meet with him. He believed that he would never see them again. And as you might imagine, in a situation like that, he had a lot to say.

A whole sermon series could be developed on this passage. In it, Paul expresses his heartfelt hopes for the Ephesian church. It’s easy to see how greatly concerned he was that the Ephesians should remain faithful. Today, let’s look at three things Paul shared with the elders in his farewell address that can help us in our faithfulness as well.

The first point is found in verse 28: *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with His own blood.”* The Ephesian elders would already have known that they were to guard and tend to the flock, which is the church. But what do you see here? Paul was telling them to pay attention to themselves first, so that they remain spiritually fit for the task.

There is always a danger for those who serve the Lord to get so busy with the logistics of serving that they neglect their own walk with God. As a result of this they become spiritually weak, they fall into sin and become ineffective in their service. If you are serving in any ministry, whether here at St. Mark or elsewhere, please take Paul’s words seriously – pay careful attention to yourself! If you feel like you’re running on empty, running on fumes, you must stop and refuel. You cannot give what you do not have. No matter how hard you squeeze a dry sponge, very little water is going to come out. You have to stick the sponge in water and let it absorb the liquid and then you can squeeze it out to good effect. For your own sake, and for the

sake of caring for the church, you must stop, and put your sponge into the water, you must send your bucket down into the living water of Jesus and His Words of Life. That takes intention and time, yes...and it is non-negotiable. I know, your list is long, and I know, you love to work in the kingdom, but listen: it is OK to stop and refuel. It is not only OK, it is necessary for you to soak up the gospel goodness of Jesus. If you don't, you'll have nothing to give, and you will just feel squeezed and dry.

It's no coincidence that, about ten years later, when Timothy was overseeing the church in Ephesus, Paul gave him the very same advice. In the letter of 1 Timothy he wrote, *"Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."*

A second point Paul shared with the Ephesian elders comes in verse 32: *"I commend you to...the word of God's grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."* He this farewell address he points them not to himself, but to the Scriptures. Paul said this because he had to leave the Ephesians, and would no longer be present to teach them as he had done before. But, they would always have God's Word with them to build them up, as long as they continued to study it. This power source, God's Holy Word, would enable them to remain faithful to the end.

If you want to remain faithful, create sufficient time to the study of God's Word. Actually read your Bible each day. Let God speak to you through His Word. Remind yourself that this is *"the word of His grace, which is able to build you up."* There is a song I sing with the preschoolers that goes: "Don't read your Bible; forget to pray, and you'll shrink, shrink, shrink. Read your Bible; pray every day and you'll grow, grow, grow." It really is that simple. We need the word of grace. We need to know we are loved by God, totally and completely, in Christ. It's the same principle as before. If you're not actively absorbing the gracious love of God in Jesus, your faith will atrophy like an unused muscle. It will shrink.

The third point from Paul's farewell address wisely points the Ephesians to the One who will enable them to do all this, because, let's face it, so far, there has been a lot of heavy responsibility placed in those listening to the apostle. You can almost imagine one of the Ephesian elders sitting there, wondering, "If the work of God's kingdom depends entirely on our faithfulness what assurance is there that it will succeed?" The answer to this is recognizing that, ultimately, this is God's Kingdom. Our confidence must be placed not in ourselves, but in God. We are urged to faithfulness, but it is His faithfulness that matters most.

The third point is embedded in verse 32: *"And now I commend you to God..."* It was God who had purchased them with the blood of Jesus. So it follows that if Christ has purchased His Church at such great cost to Himself, do you think He will leave its fate to be determined by the changing hearts of human beings? No! He will see to it that His Church endures. His faithfulness moves Him to grant all the spiritual gifts which the Church needs for service. His faithfulness sends the Holy Spirit to work within each believer. His faithfulness called the elders at Ephesus and His Spirit enabled them to feed the flock chosen for them. It was through these works of God that the Ephesian church had grown into a thriving fellowship within three years.

The same thing is true of St. Mark. For over six decades, you have seen how faithful God is to provide, preserve and protect us so marvelously despite our weaknesses and faltering faith.

There have been moments of overwhelming joy, and moments where the question may have been, “Will we survive this?” In His faithfulness, God worked to sustain, bless, and build. He has absolutely done that here and He deserves our deepest thanks.

There is of course more that needs to be done as we move forward as a church. A growing number of our members have a sincere desire to make caring connections with people in our community, and thereby show them Jesus. Will we be able to do this well? If we look for answers in ourselves, the best we can say is, “I hope so.” But being commended to God and concentrating on Him, we’re able to say, “He is faithful. He will do it in us.”