
Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R₂L – Resolved to Live: Living Life Without Regrets (Part 2)

Acts 20:17-21

17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. 18 And when they had come to him, he said to them, “You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we are fooled into believing that living with regret is good and spiritual. Living with shame and sorrow over past actions and attitudes seems like a form of penitence, of making amends. We can believe that by not regretting that past, we would be making light of our mistakes, our indiscretions, our sins. And so, we live in a state of “what ifs” and “if onlys”. What if I had not made that choice to engage in that sinful activity? What if I had not driven on the road that night? What if I had worked harder on that relationship? For most of us, we quickly lose count of how many “if onlys” fill our hearts and minds. If we are not careful we wallow in the if onlys of regret and become practically unmotivated to move forward.

The reason why so many of us live with regrets is because we *think* we should. We have come to believe that it is the spiritual thing to do; that it is some kind of responsibility before God; to live with regrets. But let me tell you some biblical truths.

First, do you know that heaven, and the kingdom of heaven of which every believer is already a citizen, is regret-free. Because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, we who trust that He paid for our sins; the very sins that produce regrets, we are liberated from the weight and shame of our past regrets. God will *is* being accomplished through it all. We need to remember that neither our human limitations nor our sins hinder the good plans of our sovereign Father.

Second, while we are to learn from our past mistakes and sins so as not to repeat them, it is God’s will that we repent and then forget what lies behind, and in the words of Paul, that we “press on so that we may lay hold of that for which also we were laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” And what is it that we are to lay hold of; but the holy and blameless position that is ours in Christ. To hold on to and be identified by our regrets is to make ourselves feel unqualified, unfit and therefore we render ourselves unfruitful for the kingdom; something that ought not to be.

What do we find in the lives of those in the Bible concerning living with regret? Men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, Peter and Paul, all had ample examples of things to regret. All could have easily moped under the duress of the “if only’s”. King David’s sin with Bathsheba resulted in the death of their son and his conspiracy to cover up the adultery caused the death of her husband, Uriah. (2 Samuel 12) David also had the sin of numbering the people of Israel that led to the death of 70,000 men (2 Samuel 24). His remorse was great, his repentance sincere, but we do not find him wallowing under regret. Rather you find him giving praise to the Lord who so fully and graciously forgives sins.

Remember Jonah? This “man of God” who ran from the Lord, getting on a ship and nearly being the cause of the death of the entire crew. The result of his actions got him swallowed by a great fish, alive. And while alive in the belly of that fish, I can well imagine the gnawing pain of regret could have filled his heart, saying something like “if only I would have just gone to Nineveh.” But rather than such regret, we find Jonah considering this stinking venue as a holy place where he came to his senses and declared, “Salvation is of the Lord.”

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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And more close to our text, what of Paul? Paul who watched approvingly as Stephen was stoned to death. (Acts 7:59-8:1) Paul who hunted down with fervent zeal the Christians, sending them to prison and approving of it when they were put to death (Acts 26:9-11). Yet, after his conversion, though he clearly disapproved of these things, he did not dwell, linger or all such past sins to paralyze him. Rather he declared in Philippians 3:13-14, **“forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

I share all of this to give us hope. Too often we come to wrongly believe that the Kingdom of Christ is where we pay for past sins, past indiscretions, or just being a human being who isn't omniscient and omnipresent. We mistakenly believe and act as though if we store up enough regret and remorse we can finally sneak out of our self-imposed purgatory. The problem is that we know this rarely works because we also know that we are unable to stockpile enough remorse and regret to cover our sins, because all we are really doing is digging them up after Christ put them in the grave. This is the Kingdom of love and forgiveness where Jesus reigns.

Some of you believe your regrets are like some kind of protective talisman; a lucky charm to keep you from repeating your past sins. Isn't that spiritual? Reminders of my sins to keep me from sin? Beloved, that is a false gospel. Dwelling on sin to keep you from sin does not work. It is dwelling on the sweet mercies of God that compels us to fight against sin. How do you know if you are living by dwelling on regrets or by forgiveness? Do you dwell more on the mercy of God who has forgiven you and empowers you for service; or upon the misery of your past sin that keeps you from serving God fully?

How might you rid yourself of living in and with regrets? You must repent. You say, but I do repent. Do you? Do you repent of your perceived contribution to past regrets, rather than repenting for the right thing? For constantly repenting of the past is akin to saying, “Lord I do not believe that You cover *my* past, though You probably cover the pasts of other people, and I certainly do not believe that confidence in Your goodness and hope for tomorrow is even permissible.” We might call this unbelief. We might rightly call this attitude pride because you have come to believe yourself rather than in the Lord. The bottom line is we must repent and then resolve to live a life without regret. This is what we find in Paul's farewell speech here in Acts 20. Last week, we noted that if we are to live a life without regret, it begins with the resolve to live in the will of God. I would encourage you to go back and review how a fervent pursue of the will of God enables you to live without regret.

Now, as we come to Acts 20:17-21, we find the second commitment of Paul which enabled him to live his life without regret. In addition to resolving to live in the will of God, which we saw in Acts 20:13-16...

II. We must resolve to live by the Word of God (17-21)

When it came to the Word of God Paul was passionate; he was committed. Some people would call him intense; unwavering. I would say that Paul was fully resolved to live by the word of God. Paul wanted to know it; he wanted to make it known to others. Somehow Paul was able to incorporate the Word of God into everything he did; every thought he had; every action he took. I love how when Paul said something, it was not from a lack of experience; it was not theoretical; but something he himself had come to know and practice. So when Paul wrote to the Colossians, **Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).**

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

We know, we can see from his very life that he modeled these things, allowing the Word of God to richly, deeply, thoroughly dwell within him so that it affected all that he did. In fact, I would give you this simply little test by which to measure your own passion, commitment and resolve to the Word of God. Until you are finding yourself sharing the Word of God, until you are encouraging others in practical Christian living, until you are reflecting the joy of Christ in verbal ways, and until you are revealing to others your gratitude for all that God has done for you; until such things are true, you are not richly dwelling or fully resolved to live by the Word of God.

In our text this morning, we find Paul's resolve to live by the Word of God and it is revealed in how he lived his life before others. And our lives, like Paul's, is to be a showcase of what happens when we are committed to God and His Word.

Our text begins in verse 17 with the words, **“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.”** Some of you asked for a visual, so here now is Paul's course from Troas, walking himself to Assos, then they all set sail to Mitylene, right past Ephesus (notice how close Paul was) and finally arriving at Miletus, some 60 miles south of Ephesus. Paul called for the Ephesian elders to meet him at Miletus.

Let me remind you that Paul had already taught the Word in Ephesus for nearly three years up to this point. But, because of the will of God, he did not go back to Ephesus believing he had to get to Jerusalem to preach the gospel to the Jews. But since he had such a deep affection for the church at Ephesus, he did the next best thing; calling for the Ephesian elders to come to him. And they did.

Notice in verse 17 that Luke uses the term **“elders,”** *presbuteros* in Greek. The word “elder” speaks of a mature man selected to serve in a leadership role (Acts 14:23). Please note that down in verse 28 he refers to these same men as **“overseers,”** *episkopos*, sometimes translated “bishop.” Additionally there in verse 28 Paul used the term **“shepherd.”** They were to “shepherd the flock.” The word *pastor* means “shepherd.” In the New Testament these three terms are used interchangeable. When Paul called for the **“elders”** of the church, he intended to meet with those who led the church (the overseers), the pastors, the men gifted and called by God to feed and lead the believers in Ephesus.

Then, beginning in verse 18, Luke records Paul's farewell speech to these church leaders. We have about eight of Paul's messages recorded in Acts, and of those eight, this is the only one addressed specifically to Christians. This makes it noteworthy and unique as it reveals Paul's heart as a pastor rather than as we usually see him as the evangelist or apologist of the faith. Let me read the first part of this speech again and I would like you to listen for Paul's passion concerning the Word of God:

18 And when they had come to him, he said to them, “You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

From Paul's words we learn much about two things; first, how to live a life without regret, achieving that sense of having accomplished something worthwhile and worthy of the Lord; and second, we learn about what it takes to have a successful ministry. Let me put this another way; you will not live a life without regret apart from a resolve to know, live and communicate the Word

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

of God. Never forget that if you are a believer, you are a minister, a “servant”. And so, if we would be Christ-honoring servants; and if we would have successful ministries, acts of service, in the terms of how God’s defines “success,” then we must know, imitate and demonstrate the character of Paul, the servant of the Lord. In our text, there are six clear characteristics of Paul that show his servant’s heart and his commitment to the Word of God, allowing him to live his life in Christ without regret. So, if we would live our lives without regret and in accordance with God’s Word...

A. We must strive to live a transparent life (18).

You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time...

It has been said that there are three kinds of lives people tend to live; yes three. The first is a person’s public life; the way they behave; the things they say to others in a public setting. The second is one’s private life; this is the life a person lives at home, around family and friends. The final kind of life people tend to live is what I will call one’s secret life. This “secret” life consists of the things you think, entertain and dwell on; things that no one else (but God) knows or sees. Beloved, the goal of the Christian is to have one’s secret life be so Christlike that it bleeds through into our private and public lives. In fact, our goal ought to be to live just one life; a Christ-like, Christ-behaving, Christ-speaking, Christ-honoring, Christ-glorifying life. This is the kind of life Paul sought to live; an open, transparent, Christ-centered; Christ-focused life that all could see and examine. As the people in Ephesus and Asia saw Paul’s life, everyone knew his commitment to Jesus.

There were four preachers who got together for some encouragement and challenge. As their time progressed, one preacher said, “Our people come to us, pouring out their hearts, confessing sins and needs. We ought to do the same. It is said that confession is good for the soul.” They all agreed. The first pastor confessed he liked to go to movies and would sneak off when away from his church. The second confessed liking to smoke cigars and the third one confessed to liking to play cards. When it came to the fourth one, he refused to confess. The others pressed him saying, “Come on, we confessed our sins to you. What is your secret or vice?” Finally he answered, “It is gossiping and I can hardly wait to get out of here.”

What kind of skeletons are in your closet? Even though Paul had done things in the past that were horrific, everyone knew what he had done and how his life had been changed to live and breathe Christ upon his conversion. It was all out in the open and so there were no skeletons in Paul’s closet. His life was an open book.

If we are to live lives without regret, we need to live transparent lives. If there are secrets or vices that would embarrass you and would taint the name of Christ, then get them dealt with. If they are from your past, before coming to Christ, then remember the promise of Romans 8:1

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And while this truth is just as true for your present, if you are struggling with secret sins and vices, if there are skeletons in your closet, then confess them first to God; agree with God that if you are a saint, a holy one of God, a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ, that such things do not belong in your thoughts, your heart or your behavior. And, if you would live your life without regret, you need to consider confessing your sin to a trusted brother or sister in Christ; a godly spouse or parent; a true disciple of the Lord. As James 5:16 reminds us:

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.

In other words, live a transparent life. There is not one of us in this room who has arrived, who lives a perfectly transparent, Christ-exclusive life. We need the healing that comes from having that person who keeps us accountable for our thought-life and our behavior. By doing this, we are reminded of the damaging effects of unconfessed and unresolved sin in our lives and thus kept from a multitude of evils. To live a life without regret requires and transparent life. If we would live our lives without regret and in accordance with God’s Word...

B. We must strive to develop a servant’s heart (19).

...serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;

Will it may seem to be to the contrary; there are no rock stars in God’s kingdom. Jesus Christ is the King of kings, the Lord of Lords. The rest there are but servants, and those who serve God’s way must see themselves as servants. Notice that being a servant of the Lord requires three things. The first is “humility”. Humility is really a mindset by which keeps you from being arrogant, puffed up and self-absorbed. I love Ken Blanchard’s definition of humility. He said, *“Humility does not mean you think less of yourself. It means you think of yourself less.”* Paul’s priority was in communicating Christ, the gospel of Christ and the word of God to others. Often it meant to put the needs of others before his own. Not only was Paul humble, but second, he was tender. He served the Lord with tears and with trials. When one understands the will of God and the word of God, he or her heart will ache for the salvation of others and sometimes be torn when the kindness of sharing the gospel of life is received with plots and threats on one’s life. And yet, this is what Paul says is serving the Lord; maintaining a humble and tender heart for others. This is what the Lord Jesus said in Mark 10:43-45 saying,

43 but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

If we would live our lives without regret, it will come as a result of living out a humble and tender heart before others. But there is more if we would live our lives without regret and in accordance with God’s Word...

C. We must strive to make known all that is profitable for Christian living (20a).

...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable

We live in a world that wants to reduce the gospel to what is the barebones minimum. People today are more “relational” and don’t care and don’t want doctrinal teaching or deep theology. Therefore, the gospel of our day is generic and so it produces a generic result. Nothing specific concerning sin, true Christ-likeness and holy living is taught. Yet Paul’s approach was different. Paul’s message was an example of “evangelism in depth” whereby he shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. (Adapted from John Stott). Paul’s message was the complete package. Notice down in verse 27 how Paul said, **“For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose (the full counsel) of God.”**

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

We are not to hold back on the truth. In fact, it is the truth that is to be the goal of every conversation. Consider what Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus. ^[slide 14] In Ephesians 4:29 we read: **“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.”** Notice the exclusive intent in **“only such a word”**. Notice the purpose, to edify or build one another up. And notice the thoughtfulness, **“according to the need of the moment.”**

And then just a few verses later we read in Ephesians 5:3-4, **“3 But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; 4 and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.”**

Let me be clear; if you would live your life without regret, it will be done in part by the way you speak to others. Your language, your vocabulary, the things you say to others, the tone by which you deliver it; the jokes and stories you tell – they will all contribute to your either being fruitful for the kingdom of God; or unfruitful. And an unfruitful Christian, if there is such a thing, would be a Christian full of regrets. We are to make known all that will help a person know, love and serve Jesus. When we do this, we will be able to live a life without regret. But there is more...

D. We must strive to share the truth of Christ everywhere (20b).

...and teaching you publicly and from house to house...

I would just draw your attention to two commitments of Paul here; two areas in which Paul sought to teach. First, he taught *publicly*, meaning he spoke about Jesus in public venues. I know, a seemingly daunting task, to unashamedly proclaim Christ in work venues, at school, in the park, or wherever we find ourselves. Jesus made a convicting statement that I want you all to hear in Luke 9:26. May it be our prayer that this not describes us:

For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

We may never proclaim Christ to great audiences like Paul did, but a resolve to live by the Word of God is a resolve to proclaim the word of Christ publicly. But notice that there is a second venue as Paul taught *from house to house*, meaning he was engaged in targeted discipleship, speaking to specific people and educating them in the things of the Lord. Do you seek out public and private opportunities to teach or make known biblical truth? A life that would live without regrets strives for such opportunities. If we would live our lives without regret and in accordance with God's Word...

E. We must strive for impartiality in sharing Christ (21a).

...solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks

We can often think of just certain times or places as appropriate for seeking to make Christ known. It's okay to talk about God, Jesus and salvation at church, or when we are doing door-to-door inviting people to church, or if someone asks us. But injecting Christ or the precepts of His word in other areas are off limits. We might talk to someone we met who tells us his Christian about Christ, but we might rarely think of telling a person about Jesus who is either undeclared in his commitment to Christ or has stated he is not a believer. Paul did not change his message just

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

because of the audience. He gave the same truth concerning man’s sin and man’s need; of God’s remedy and of Christ sacrifice regardless of who was listening, Jews or Greeks.

The word “solemnly” means...sacred duty; and “testifying,” being a witness of the things of Christ. That is all that is required, a consistent telling to others of the person and work of Christ regardless of their background, upbringing, appearance, race or any external thing. Finally, if we would live our lives without regret and in accordance with God’s Word...

F. We must strive to call people to repentance toward God and faith in Jesus (21b).

...testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Anything we tell people about God, the Bible, Jesus, salvation and the like that does not call people to turn to God and to believe on Jesus is an incomplete message. Our goal for others is twofold; faith and repentance; of turning to God from the idols of sin, self, greed, and impurity and of believing that life is truly lived by becoming like Jesus who saves us.

Too often when we share Christ it like learning to shoot a bow and arrow. I remember watching Luke shoot at a balloon when he was given an opportunity to shoot. His arrows went all around that balloon, sometimes close, sometimes off the mark, but never striking the balloon. Beloved, we need to hit the mark. What was Paul’s objective in preaching? What was it that he wanted people to do having heard his message? Tell him, “Nice sermon, Paul; thanks?” No! We are told in verse 21. Paul preach **“of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Nothing else would do. Beloved, this is to be our prayer and goal, seeing people repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rather than define success in ministry by the size of the membership or of the budget, God defines success in ministry (and thus success in life) by these six characteristics: a transparent life, a servant’s heart, all that is profitable for Christian living; biblical teaching, sharing the message impartially, and maintaining the clear objective of calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus. This is what a resolve to live by the Word of God looks like.

As those Ephesian elders listened to Paul say these things, I believe one thing was clear: they saw this man’s passion for the Word of God as he instructed them from the Word of God. I cannot help but believe that as they listened to Paul, they were reminded of all that he had instructed them.

Let us pray that our lives would incorporate and imitate these characteristics of Paul so that we might live our lives without regret and to the glory of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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