



## "Keep Watch Over Yourself"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

*Acts 20:28-38*

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It's been some time since I last preached, so it feels like I have about three hours worth of material to fit into twenty minutes. The aim of our little time together will be to focus on the word, **keep watch over yourselves and to focus on that so that we can be encouraged to grow in Christ likeness**. The aim of this message is to focus on the phrase, "keep watch over yourselves" so that we might be encouraged to grow in Christ likeness.

Let us pray.

*Most gracious, merciful and most wondrous God, we thank you for calling each one of us here this morning. We thank you for holding us together in your love while we grow. We thank you for the life that we know is in your word. Lord help us come open minded and open hearted, willing to be shown what it is we need to see to live the life that you have made for us to live. We pray these thoughts and intentions in the three-fold name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Dennis read for us Paul's farewell speech and Paul began that speech with the phrase and the imperative to the elders and to the people in that church to keep watch over yourself.

Well, there are lots of things that we keep watch over in our day-to-day lives, so to connect with this analogy you might start by thinking about the things you keep watch over. For example, you might watch television. You might watch your kids while they play. You might watch your neighbors come and go. There are some things we really pay careful attention to and we watch very closely in particular our waistlines and our bank accounts. I watch very closely for that sneaky police officer on Loop 360 when I'm coming to church.

All these things are external that I've brought up. These are the easy things to watch in our life – the external things. **What Paul is really intimating though is that we are to keep watch over** something that is more subtle and more difficult, but it is closer to us than close. It is **ourselves**. This includes **our thoughts, our feelings, our moods – the internal state**

**that we bring to church, that we bring to our relationships and that we bring to work.** To give you a little bit of the trickiness of this process of watching over yourself, I'd like to share a story.

This Lent, Christina and I did something we had never done before together and that was to go on a ten day centering prayer retreat. On this retreat the boys and the girls sleep in their own separate rooms, there is silence for ten days. We do centering prayer for three periods a day, totally about three hours and right now, I know you are thinking we are crazy, but it is actually the most relaxing vacation we've ever had.

On this at the centering prayer retreat we were learning about God in the silence and we're also learning about ourselves. A lot of healing on the inside happens. About three to four days went by and Christina and I hadn't spoken to each other. Now, we had seen each other because there were only about twenty-five people on this retreat together. It is a beautiful retreat complex and there are dense areas of cedar trees. I went for a walk and I came around the bend and lo and behold there is Christina on a walk too, walking toward me. The second that I recognized it was Christina, my heart kind of leaped because we hadn't spoke to each other or interacted in any way. I was curious to find out how God was helping her grow.

We kind of kept walking toward each other. We didn't run because we are contemplatives and when I finally go to Christina, my heart was happy, you know how that is...and the first words out of my mouth, you won't believe it...I kind of noticed something and I said, "Is that a nose hair?" As I said that I couldn't believe that these words were coming out of my mouth. Now, I was observing, I was watching myself and I thought to myself, what part of Peter needs to point this out to her?

Well on this centering prayer retreat, you couldn't design something like this, you couldn't make this up...God does this, just for the wondrous gift of humiliation. God arranged this little rendezvous in the woods. God was working on me in the silence of that retreat. God was healing this little addiction I have to judgment – especially based on appearances. I was really feeling the heat of the fire of that healing presences, that healing activity of this issue. Then I got to see it so clearly, and so stupidly over such a stupid little thing like a nose hair was absolutely wondrous. Christina looked at me the kind of look you give to a child who has done something really foolish – with such compassion and kindness.

I learned something about myself that I didn't want to see. Even after four days in the silence, there is this thing at me that leaps out uncontrollably. I observed and I grew from it and I will never again.

**We are encouraged to keep watch over ourselves.** I want to tell a little bit about the presuppositions underneath why that may be the case. Why are we encouraged to keep watch over ourselves? **I think there are two primary presuppositions why we are encouraged to keep watch over ourselves.**

**The first is that we have the possibility of further growth.** Also, the counterfactual is true. **We also have the possibility of regression actually.** We have the possibility of not reaching our full potential – our God intended destiny. This possibility is available for humankind. You probably know someone who is living it to the full this possibility. You also probably know some people who are living their growth out to the full. But these are the two presumptions as to why anyone would need to watch over themselves, because you can actually grow in this lifetime and you can actually regress as well.

From the theoretical, now a little more practical illustration of this process from a theoretical standpoint. Think about an acorn. Now, an acorn contains within itself everything it needs to become what it was designed to become – a beautiful oak tree. Now, this oak tree is latent within the acorn. There is no guarantee that every acorn is going to become a majestic oak tree. It depends on a lot...an acorn could fall on the cement, or it could be eaten by a chipmunk or a squirrel, or it could simply rot in the ground and not grow.

The oak tree and the acorn are different from you and me in a very important way though. The acorn, as far as we know, doesn't have a will, a conscious or an intelligence like we have that can compare, contrast and choose this over or again another that can hunger for the good and can ask, "Why am I here?" The acorn cannot say, "God, who are you?" Nor can the acorn say, "I love you." But human beings can. You might want to know what you are made for. If an acorn is made to become an oak tree, what is a little human made for?

We too need to come under very different kinds of influences in order to grow into what we can become. There is a big difference between the influence of the New York Times and a worship service on a Sunday morning. It will influence your day. I'm just simply saying – if you stay in bed on a Sunday morning, you are going to come under different influences

than the influences of worship and these influences shape us as we grow. They influence us. What you watch, what you listen to, who you are around, what you choose to do with your time – these are all influences that shape a life and that needs no self-explanation. We know this to be true, just from the simple example of what we eat and we know that phrase we become what we eat.

Well here is another example from the early church. The early church understood the importance of growing Godly people, of growing people that were becoming what God intended them to be and they developed a word for this process of watching over yourself and that word is the Greek word *nepsis*. It literally means vigilant or watch care. You watch over yourself. You guard your heart, the center of your being. You protect what influences you take into your senses.

Now, the early church on understood this very clearly that people just didn't become Christians. They had a process. **In fact the early church had a three-year catechismal process where people were then baptized after they had studied for three years.**

They also had, what we now today call **spiritual mothers and spiritual fathers**, who in addition to the novice watching over themselves, the spiritual mother or the spiritual father watched over them. This was a beautiful arrangement. It didn't always work perfectly, but spiritual mothers and fathers are one of the most undervalued quality in our culture. We are not talking about elders necessarily in age, although that tends to be the case, but we are talking about our elders in understanding. Understanding is something different than just knowledge. Understanding is the combination of knowledge, personal being and personal experience. The teacher is a community is always the elder of understanding. So, these spiritual mothers and fathers watched over these novices as they were growing. They helped them to choose the good and the wise. They helped them to do their *nepsis*. They also listened to their troubles and concerns and gave them wise counsel. Spiritual mothers and fathers are not necessarily in any office of the church, they are a quality of being that you can feel because they exuded love and understanding. This too is what a human can become.

Well let's dig a little bit more into these **two pre-suppositions of the possibility of further growth and the possibility of further regression**. When I think about what culture can become or what humans can become when they regress I think about total chaos and images of destruction.

One of the gifts of being alive is that we were created in the image of God. Now all of you know this, this is not new information. This maybe new information, what I'm about to say – that in addition to being created in the image of God, we were also created in the likeness of God. Now, what theologians described that happened at The Fall, is this story that is recorded in the Book of Genesis of this archetypal loss of something that Adam and Eve experienced when they disobeyed. What was lost friends was the likeness of God. Now this maybe a new idea to some of us. Now all of us are created in the image of God and nothing can take that away – from the moment of conception...nothing can stop it, nothing can take it away – even if a child is born deformed, that is the image of God, because it is not just physical. The image of God is something that is impressed upon the sole of the being that comes into this world and it is the same for every single one of us, it is what really makes us one.

The image of God is like the big cookie cutter, it does the same thing for every single human being and you don't have any less or any more than anyone else. Everyone is created in the image of God and it is what makes it so precious. It is what gives everyone the capacity to love and to be loved. It is what makes them lovable by God.

Now what has been lost in almost all of us is the likeness of God. This is where the problems that we experience in our lifetime come from – that we don't have this likeness of God. You might ask how do we get that likeness back? What does it look like for a human to have the likeness of God? Good question.

For most of us we have been told that Jesus came into this world to save us from our sins so that we could go up to heaven. But there is a lot more to the story. Here is a little bit more color.

God loved humankind so much that God wanted to show us what it looked like for one of us to bear the likeness of God again and I'm going to show you how on the stage of history right in front of your years from birth to day I'm going to let this thing play itself out. I'm going to show you what someone with the likeness and the image of God looks like. It looks like our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

Now it is not just locked there in history on the pages of scripture friends. It is not like we should build a statute of Jesus and bow down to Him, no – although a lot of people do that. Actually you'd want to know that this is template, this is the rescue plan, "Follow me," he said, "I'll show you the way back to the likeness of the Father."

Now He is the template and this process of becoming more and more formed by this template, more and more transformed from the inside out into the image of the likeness of God is what is required of the spiritual journey. That is why we come to church so that we can be transformed more and more into this likeness.

Now, you may think I'm making this up, but I'd like to share with you from Mr. Reformation himself, my hero and your hero, John Calvin. **Listen to what John Calvin says** and I will then interrupt it, hopefully. "Therefore that indwelling of Christ in our hearts.." I'm sorry to have to say this, notice he did not say Jesus in our hearts. "That indwelling of Christ in our heart – in short that mystical union – accorded to us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside of ourselves from afar, but because we put on Christ and engrafted into his body – in short because he deigns to make us one with him."

Here is what this means. There is a mystical union that is possible and each child knows this when they say they fill God in their heart or Jesus is in my heart. What they are talking about is the likeness of God, that we use the name Christ to talk about or the Holy Spirit. But, Jesus showed us how this happens to a human being. That means to say that you don't have to heroically become Jesus yourself – it has actually be done, the likeness has been restored in the person of Jesus. Now, all you get to do is like your computer, you get to hook up to the Internet and let the Internet ride on your system and you get to become something amazing. What is that? You get to become a child of God. You get to become love, life, wisdom, goodness, joy, peace and patience – all the beautifully fruits of the Sprit. That is what we get to become when we step into this union.

Now notice 2Peter 1:4, it teaches us that we are to become participants in the divine nature. This isn't some new age program here. We don't have to become little gods. That is not the message. Notice that you become a participant in the divine nature. You don't get it yourself, as some sort of heroic, spiritual program, you get to receive it as a gift through your union with Christ by the power of your Holy Spirit, symbolized in word and sacrament. You get to feel it and it gets to feel you. Now this union is the Christian life and growing in that union is like the acorn becoming a majestic oak tree and there is such more for us to grow.

If you read Paul's writings, he will say things like, "I am in labor pains...until Christ is formed in you [he is talking to the Galatians 4:20]." That is St.

Paul, read those letters and see all the times Paul says, "in Christ." This is amazing. It is so much more than just knowing some information that God loves you and died on the cross so that you could go to heaven. Actually, "Follow me, come to the Father, I know the way." You want it more than anything else, I know you do, but your fear gets in the way and this is the invitation and this is the theological foundation for the process of growing in Christ and it is one of the primary reasons we must watch over ourselves so that we continuously guard our heart from experiencing influences that counteract beautiful, unfolding mystery of our union with Christ.

One example about regression because I think that regression of human kind is occurring and always has been occurring and anytime I see a movie where you see people rapping or pillaging or wars, I sometimes wonder, is that what we do? Is that what human kind does? Do we do war? It seems to be the one constant. Weren't we made for something more than war?

Well think about King David. I try to understand this regression that is in all of us. I can of embarrassed myself by telling you a stupid little story about how I pointed out the nose hair – but when you elevate that on a vast social scale like worldwide hunger or the destruction of natural resources and all of a sudden that nose hair – it's the same principle, we are ignoring the deepest truth. Why are we regressing? Why aren't we growing?

King David gives us a good example of this, because here you've got a guy who is apparently one with God's heart. He writes all these beautiful Psalms. God says he is beloved. This guy is super spiritual, right? I mean, who can write Psalms like that. I can't. You every think about God like that? Think about it. This guy knew God. This guy was a spiritual guy. This guy was developed, but he is sitting up on his rooftop and he sees a naked woman bathing. He is the king, why not? Well it could happen, maybe it couldn't happen, but something in him triggered and he wasn't watching over that part of himself, that lower nature of himself that lusted, that wanted something that wasn't his. He didn't guard his heart. They say the first look is grace – the grace of the woman's beauty. The second look is your downfall. In his case it was the second look and he did not guard his heart and he lusted and from that one decision this great man of God initiated a series of foolish mistakes and horrendous decisions including essentially the murder of his general, the husband of Bathsheba so he could be free and clear to have Bathsheba.

Now this is the story of humankind. David like me has a bad case of the human condition, just like you do. This is the story of humankind. Does that

make him bad? Does that make him a sinner? It makes him a guy who is forgetting who he is in that moment, because he wasn't guarding his heart.

But here is the rub for you and for me. We often times say why do good people do bad things? We can't understand how these super religious people can do really mean and violent things. Well, I've been helped by a writer on those who has helped me see the spectrum of human development, not only what is possible, but also the nuance of adult growth. You see we all think that we've reached the highest level – we're adults, right. Some of you are very, very successful in this life and you've figured well there is nothing more for me, I've kind of got it, I've done it all, I'm well educated, wealthy or well off at least. I have a nice family and everything is good and I go to church and you figure everything is good. Maybe I'll read a bit more and kind of learn, go to church, learn, do a Bible study. Well, this is the case for most of us. We think that we have become what we were meant to be.

But a writer by the name of Ken Wilber has helped me understand why good people can do really bad things, especially religious people, super spiritual people can bomb abortion clinics or fly planes into the towers. How is this possible? We call them fundamentalists. Well there is an interesting psychological and sociological study done by Ken Wilber as to why that is the case. I have been greatly benefitted to see why that may be, why King David could both be very in tuned with God and then also give in to his lower level impulses. You'd want to know this about yourself, wouldn't you? You'd want to know where your weakness are, not so you can feel ashamed and guilty. It is not about all the naughty things you do, watching and seeing if you are going to get into trouble. That is not the message. The message is are you giving yourself over to God in such a way that you are becoming God's intended destiny for you? Are you being transformed more and more into the likeness of God. What does that look like and how can you tell if that process is occurring? Love is a big indicator. Are you more loving? Are you less impatience, less angry, irritable, resentful? Look at 1Corinthians 13, look at that list of what love is and what it is not. That is a huge give away of what the likeness of God is.

What happens in communities and in nations who give themselves over to this God intended destiny could be amazing. Thus can you see the importance of why this imperative to watch over yourself, to guard you heart, to watch what is happening in you. Now, sometimes this can come across as being too speculative and too theological, I know. But here are a few simple exercises for you this week.

When it comes to watching over yourself, just start simple, start small. Don't try and change something you've been doing something for twenty or thirty years, a big addiction. Just start small. Start for example with your tone of voice, just observe your tone of voice in one particular relationship, maybe with your spouse or with a child or with a colleague. Make an aim this week to observe your tone or voice. Or how about to make it into observe your facial expressions with that person. Just these two simple things as a way of practicing watching over yourself.

You know we are saved by grace, so I'm not introducing a whole program for working to become a better Christian. What I'm suggesting is what the spiritual mothers and fathers have suggested for centuries and that is it is up to you and you and you – all of us to work out our salvation. Take it totally personally. But this suit of salvation on so that you wear it and you walk it around in this world. Be the Christ that people need to see. You may be it. Work it out. Let it get worked into you. Let your salvation get worked into you in the very simple ways.

So, our goal today was to use the words nepsis, watchfulness to encourage you and me to watch over myself so that I will grow into God's intended destiny for me – which is Christ likeness.

Let us pray.

*You've heard what I have to say. I just invited you to sit in the silence and let the Spirit say what it needs to say. To seal in your heart something for this day and this week. We thank you Lord for loving us and holding us as we grow. Thank you that you know who we can become, from the beginning of time you know and that you love us so. Teach us what we need to know. We pray this with great gratitude. Through Christ our Lord I pray. Amen.*