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 Series: *The Cure Goes Viral*
 Title: *Paul's Bucket List*
 Text: Acts 20:1-38
 Preacher: Mark Adams

Have any of you seen the movie *The Bucket List*?

For those of you who haven't, it's the story of two men played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, each of whom have been diagnosed with terminal cancer. They meet and learn very quickly that they are very different kinds of men, but they share a common passion as to how they use the time they have left. Before they kick the bucket they have certain things they want to do, and so they make a list. Nicholson's character is a billionaire so he finances their adventures. They sky-dive, they see the pyramids, they drive race cars, etc.

I'm wondering if you have a "bucket list" --- things you want to do before your brief earthly life comes to an end. I mention all this because in our text for today Paul sees he is on the last lap of his life and he shares his "bucket list" in guidance he gives to the leaders of the churches he has founded.

Here's the setting. It's about 58A.D. Within seven years the apostle Peter will be crucified upside down for his faith, and Paul will be arrested for the final time, his earthly voice silenced by a Roman executioner's axe. But Paul is not slowing down. We never hear him say anything like what you sometimes hear people say later on in life:

- *"I taught Sunday school when I was younger."*
- *"I served on tons of committees."*
- *"I put in my time as a volunteer. But that time is past."*

You never hear the apostle Paul talk like it's even possible to retire from one's mission as a disciple of Jesus Christ--- because it's not. As long as we are here we have a job to do---share the CURE!

I can't help but think of our own Charlie Brinkman. Knowing he had a terminal lung disease, he still asked to serve as a deacon, coming to meetings almost until the time God called him home. Charlie continued to look for opportunities to share his faith even in his final days. And if anyone could feel justified for retiring from ministry, it would be Charlie, but no. The same thing can be said about the Apostle Paul. I mean, he had traveled nearly 7,000 miles for the sake of Jesus. And this was back before buses and airplanes and trains and anything that would have made travel easy. Paul walked and sailed and rode horseback all those thousands of miles to do the gospel work. He planted dozens of churches. He shared the gospel with thousands of people. He endured staggering hardships and persecution. So, I wouldn't blame him for saying, *"I have worked hard. I have given it all. Let me just put my feet up for these last seven years. Let me catch up on my hobbies. Let me work on my short game."*

Instead, as he neared the end of his life, Paul set off on yet another missionary journey. And, as we'll see in coming chapters, this one would be different. Paul's final years would include sharing the Gospel---the Cure---with kings and emperors. This is what God had told Ananias in Acts 9. Remember? He said, ***"Ananias, this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings..."*** (verse 15)

Our text is Acts 20, but I want to walk you through the first 16 verses which tells us stop by stop of the first part of Paul's journey. Open your Bibles and follow along. I'll use my handy laser pointer to show you Paul's movements on the map.

When we last left Paul where was he? RIGHT! He was in Ephesus.

Remember the uproar in the amphitheater started by Demetrius and the silversmiths? Well, when things calmed down, Paul left and set out for Macedonia, AKA: Greece. He traveled around visiting the churches he founded and ended up in Corinth. I have to stop and point out that the Apostle Paul was deeply committed to the people in the churches he had

started. I mean, he didn't just start them and move on never to be heard from again. No, he took the time to visit them as often as he could. He wrote them letters to encourage them and teach them.

This principle of cure-sharing is why when we do mission trips here at RBC it's not a one-time-thing. For us it's a long-term relationship.

- We were in New Hampshire helping with that church start for seven years.
- The same is true about the church we helped in Oriental, Mexico.
- And the church in the Dominican Republic.
- And the work in Nairobi with the women of *Amani ya Juu*.
- And Pastor Jorge in Puerto Rico

In going back again and again we are following Paul's mission techniques, encouraging the believers to keep on keeping on.

Well Paul ends up staying in Corinth for three months. While there he writes the book of Romans and commissions a deacon named Phoebe to take it to the believers in Rome. Many believe---me included---that Phoebe's job was to also explain Paul's letter, to teach it to them.

Paul's plan was to leave Corinth and sail for Jerusalem---taking with him the offering he had collected from the various churches in Asia and Europe for the suffering believers in Jerusalem. He hoped to get there in time to celebrate Passover. But some evil people in Corinth forced him to change his plans. Remember, the last time Paul was in Corinth he had left the Synagogue after they refused to listen to the Gospel. Several Synagogue leaders went with him---Crispus, and his successor Sosthenes and many members of the synagogue. All these Jewish leaders put their faith in Jesus. This led the remaining Jews to nurse a big grudge against Paul, so they made a plan to kill him. They knew he was headed out on a particular ship---as were many Jews who wanted to get to Jerusalem for Passover. So, their plan was to board that ship and when they were out at sea kill Paul and throw him overboard.

Now, Paul was accompanied by a sizable entourage: Timothy, Gaius from Derbe, Tychicus and Trophimus, Aristarchus, Secundus, and Sopater. By the way, Secundus was a slave---because slaves were not given names, they were just given numbers---and his name means "second" ---kind of like that character on Star Trek Voyager---"seven of nine." In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul says a man named Tertius served as his secretary. That is also a slave name meaning, "third." Some think Tertius was Secundus' brother.

I don't know, but the point is these men who accompanied Paul not only represented different churches---but different classes. Phoebe's assignment and this diverse group of men---they are a reminder that in Christ there is no male or female, slave or free, but all are one---equal in Jesus. The men in Paul's entourage were also representatives of the churches who had given these funds for the Christians in Jerusalem. Their job was to make sure the funds arrived safely---but also to learn from Paul on the journey. Think of them as interns---in a traveling seminary where Paul is the professor.

And these guys didn't leave Paul once the funds were delivered. Paul's later writings tell us that Aristarchus went with him to Rome and remained with him there as a fellow prisoner. Sopater also helped Paul in Rome. Tychicus became an oft-used envoy of Paul and relieved Titus after his organization of the churches on Crete. Trophimus traveled with Paul after his first release from Rome but fell ill and remained in Miletus to recover. But I digress---When Paul learned of the plan to dump him overboard---he sent his entourage on the ship---pretending to have Paul with them. Perhaps one of them put on some of Paul's clothes. As they were departing Paul snuck away and set out on foot. The plan was for his interns to meet up with him in Troas.

On his foot journey Paul went through Berea, Thessalonica, Apollonia, Amphipolis and then through Philippi and just happened to bump into Luke while there---planning to catch a ship bound for Troas. This is why at this point in his history book, Luke says "**WE**" did such and such.

Let me just stop and point out that it's pretty cool that Paul met Luke in Philippi. I mean it's obvious it was God's plan that they bump into each other because if they hadn't---Luke would not have traveled with Paul to Jerusalem and then had the opportunity to interview Peter, John, Mary, and other eyewitnesses of Jesus' life. Maybe Luke would not have even written the Gospel that bears his name---if it weren't for this "chance" encounter in Philippi. In any case the evil intended by Paul's enemies merely advanced the Lord's agenda. God does indeed work in all things for our good and His glory!

Well, Paul and Timothy set sail from Philippi and met the interns in Troas as planned. There was of course a joyful reunion, and they stayed there seven days. Luke tells us that on the first day of the week---SUNDAY---the last day of their visit---with Paul and his entourage planning to leave the next morning---on that Sunday the Christians in Troas all gathered in a room on the third floor of a house for worship.

By the way we know exactly WHICH house because a few years later in his final letter from prison Paul told Timothy to bring him the robe he had left in the home of Carpus and he includes the detail saying it was where they met in Troas. (2nd Timothy 4:13)

I want you to note that by now the Church is worshipping on Sunday---not Saturday---because that is the day Jesus rose from the dead---that is the Lord's Day. In any case, this is why we are here today instead of yesterday. But in Paul's day, Sunday was still a workday for the culture so this means they gathered at night, after work. They enjoyed a potluck dinner and shared communion and then Paul began to teach.

Get the setting in mind.

Everyone is tired from a long workday. Their bellies are full. This upper room is packed. Several torches are burning to provide light---while at the same time sucking a lot of oxygen out of the room. Paul has a lot to share---so he preaches until midnight.

I remember many years ago my dad was asked to preach the annual sermon at the annual meeting of the Baptist Convention of Maryland and Delaware. This is a high honor and dad worked hard on his message. Dad's sermon was long---it had twelve points! I remember when he said "*And NINETHLY*" he said, "*Hang in there. I only get to preach this sermon once!*" It was kind of like that for Paul. He knew this was probably the last time he would see these people, so he had a lot to say.

Well, the next part of our text is encouraging to me because it shows that even Paul had someone fall asleep in the middle of his sermon. A young man named Eutychus, probably in his mid-teens, had decided to sit in the window. I'm thinking he knew he was tired and thought the fresh air would help him pay attention. But it didn't work, his full tummy combined with those oxygen-eating torches and his weary body all combined such that he dozed off and fell out of the window head-first---hitting the ground three floors down and dying on impact.

Paul ran down the stairs and threw himself over the body of the teen and God raised him back to life---as He had done through Elijah and Elisha in similar circumstances. Then they all went back upstairs, had a bite to eat, and Paul continued his 43-point sermon, teaching until the sun came up. You can bet Eutychus stayed awake from then on! I have to say, I feel bad for Eutychus because he will forever be known as the guy who fell asleep in Paul's sermon. I can imagine him introducing himself to people in Heaven and them saying, "*Oh yeah---I read about you! You fell asleep on the Apostle Paul!*"

Well, after breakfast that Monday morning, Paul's entourage set sail without him again. Paul needed some time alone to pray. So, he walked the 20 miles to Assos where he got on board, and they continued their journey. They sail on---stopping at Mitylene, Kios, Samos---and then finally Miletus.

Okay, that's the first 16 verses. Take your Bibles now and follow along as I read verses 17-38. And if able, stand in respect for God's Word as it is read.

Acts 17-38

17 - From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

18 - When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.

19 - I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.

20 - You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

21 - I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

22 - "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

23 - I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

24 - However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me---the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

25 - Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.

26 - Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you.

27 - For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

28 - Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

29 - I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

30 - Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

31 - So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

32 - Now I commit you to God and to the Word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

33 - I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.

34 - You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.

35 - In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

36 - When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

37 - They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.

38 - What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

Note that Paul did not stop at Ephesus---because he didn't have time to visit with ALL the members of that growing church. Instead, he stopped nearby at Miletus where Paul invited the leaders of the church in Ephesus---the men and women who led the house churches of Ephesus to meet him. Remember, they didn't have a sanctuary to gather in---so this huge Ephesian church met in homes and these Christians served as the pastors of these homes. So, think of this meeting as a one-day pastor's conference and in it Paul shared his guidance on bucket-lists---these are the things---if you do nothing else---you need to do before you go to Heaven.

Here's his first.

(1) GIVE PRIORITY TO THE GOSPEL.

Look at verses 19 and following. Paul says: **"I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."**

Paul knows by experience that---as God had told Ananias way back when Paul put his faith in Jesus after the Damascus Road experience---Paul knows that sharing the Gospel has meant and will mean suffering for him but in verse 24 he says that doesn't matter---only sharing the GOSPEL matters.

He says, ***“I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me---the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”*** Paul is saying, *“Listen, when the day comes for you to die---all that will matter is that you shared the Gospel---no matter what the cost.”* He’s saying, *“The only way to live an abundant life---is to die—die to self---put self second and the Gospel first.”*

Listen friends, when your life ends---you will care deeply about how many faith conversations you had---how many marbles you moved. It won’t matter how much you were embarrassed to share your faith or how many friends you lost because you shared the Cure. All that will matter is the Gospel.

This week I read a devotional by Sky Jethani, one of the co-hosts of *The Holy Post* podcast. In it, Sky points out that most people are familiar with Van Gogh the painter, but fewer know that in 1878 he served as a missionary to the poor coal miners of Belgium. He was assigned there by a church for a six-month trial. Based on his performance, the church’s leadership would then determine whether or not to ordain Vincent as a minister. There was just one problem, in the view of many respectable church leaders, Van Gogh took the example of Jesus a bit too seriously. Vincent put too much importance on dying to self and letting Jesus live in and through him.

In 19th century Holland, pastors were held in high regard. They were the leaders not just of the church but of the whole community and often the most educated men in society. So, they carried themselves with a dignity appropriate for their exalted status. Not Vincent. He chose not to put his confidence in his credentials, education, or the fact that he came from a celebrated family of ministers. Instead, he humbled himself and lived among the poor coal miners as one of them. Knowing that, as Jesus said, ***“It is more blessed to give than to receive,”*** Vincent gave away most of his clothing and possessions and rather than ministering from the clean confines of the church building, he worked alongside the miners in the tunnels. He also shunned the comfortable housing provided to him by his church and lived in a filthy hut like those he came to serve.

After an explosion in the mines, he committed himself day and night to caring for the wounded. In fact, after the doctors had given up hope for one injured miner, Vincent continued to nurse him back to health even though it took another six weeks.

It’s no surprise that many miners put their faith in Jesus during Van Gogh’s ministry. I mean, seeing Vincent’s example of dying to self as he both shared and showed the Gospel message bore eternal fruit. They saw the priority he put on THE CURE---saw that he suffered to share it.

But when his six-month trial period was over, the church rejected his application for ordination. They gave two reasons. First, Vincent’s appearance. By living among and dressing like the poor miners, they said he lacked the dignity expected of a minister. Second, his preaching. In their view he simply didn’t speak eloquently enough for the pulpit.

I have to say, it doesn’t matter how eloquent you are in the pulpit if you don’t practice what you preach when you’re out of it. In any case the board rejected Vincent because he was too humble in their minds. Plus, he made them look bad. Allowing a ragamuffin like Van Gough to join their ranks would bring shame and embarrassment---unless they of course were willing to follow his example, which they weren’t. In their minds---THEY came first---the Gospel came last.

As you probably know, Vincent went on to live a tragic life. After being rejected by these pastors, he turned to art. But he didn’t become known for his art until after his death. He took his own life at the age of 37 and I have to wonder how different his life could have been---not just longer---but more joyful---meaningful---abundant---if it weren’t for these hypocritical clergymen who told him it was foolish to suffer to share the Good News of God’s great love.

Van Gough would say with the Apostle Paul, put this on your bucket list: ***THE GOSPEL MUST HAVE PRIORITY.*** That leads to the second thing on Paul’s bucket list.

(2) GIVE PRIORITY TO VIGILANCE.

Paul knew people would come who would distort the gospel---like these wicked clergymen. Look at verses 28-31 where Paul says:

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”

When he said this the church in Ephesus was healthy---Biblically solid---its members were mature and maturing. But God knew that would not always be true. So, He inspired Paul to warn them and they should have heeded his warning---because 35 years later, our Risen Lord said to John on the Isle of Patmos:

“Ephesus, I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” (Rev 2:4-5)

Paul said there were three ways they needed to be on guard against falsehood.

a. First, they must ***“keep watch over themselves.”***

They must constantly be evaluating their own thoughts and attitudes. As C. S. Lewis put it, *“The true Christian’s nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool.”* We must never suppose that we have risen above some particular sin or have attained immunity to false teaching.

b. Second, they must---we must---be on guard for ***“perils from without.”***

We must watch out for the ***“savage wolves”*** of heresy---teaching outside the church that distorts the gospel and weakens it.

c. Finally, we must be on guard for ***“perils within the flock.”***

Satan loves to take a weak Christian and use him or her to destroy unity so we have to be on guard against that kind of person.

The “bucket-list” point here is that we need to give priority to vigilance---because false teaching in us and around us---and even from within the church---can push lost people away from Jesus---and as Paul has said, the Gospel must come first.

This week I read about a lighthouse in Australia that stood on a large peninsula jutting into the Tasman Sea for over 40 years. It stood at a place where it shouldn’t have, luring ignorant ships, into the very rocks they were trying to avoid. The cliffs around Cape St George just south of Jervis Bay were notorious for shipwrecks. So, it was decided that a lighthouse was needed for the safe navigation of coastal shipping. In 1857, the Colonial Architect Alexander Dawson began looking for a site suitable for a lighthouse on Cape St George. Unfortunately, Dawson was more interested in the ease of construction rather than providing an efficient navigation aid. When the Pilots Board went to verify the location Dawson chose, they found that the site was not visible from the required approaches. They also found Dawson’s map suffered from *“discrepancies so grave that it is impossible to decide whether position(s) marked on the map really exist.”* The board also suspected that Dawson chose the site solely because it was situated closer to a quarry he planned to obtain stones from. Despite the glaring deficiencies and disagreement by a majority of the board, for reasons not known, the chairman of board authorized the construction of the lighthouse. For the next four decades the ill-sited lighthouse was responsible for some two dozen shipwrecks. Eventually in 1899, the lighthouse was replaced by the Point Perpendicular Lighthouse in a much more suitable location on this part of the coast. Even after decommissioning, the lighthouse continued to cause navigational problems especially on moonlit nights when the golden sandstone tower glowed in the dark.

So, near the turn of the century, the tower was reduced to rubble to prevent any further disaster.

In His Word, God warns us that in the last days false teachers will mislead many people. While we are here---we must be on guard against that kind of thing.

So, Give priority to the Gospel---give priority to Vigilance and finally

(3) GIVE PRIORITY TO THE WORD

We see this in verse 20 where Paul says, ***“I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”***

And verse 27: ***“For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.”***

Paul knew the importance of God’s inspired Word---He knew we need an unchanging source of truth to help us live our lives---to help us recognize the falsehoods in those teachers who would distort God’s truth. Later he wrote Timothy and reminded him of this bucket list principle:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

We need God’s Word even more today, too many people end their lives wishing they had given God’s Word more attention---they realize that because they didn’t---they never matured beyond spiritual infancy and as a result were, ***“tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.”*** (Ephesians 4:14)

People often ask me, *“Which news network do you trust? They say different things.”* I don’t know that I fully trust any of them---but I know a book I CAN trust---the Bible---and any news network that leads me to do things that contradict God’s clear teaching---I ignore.

This week it was Bill Archer’s turn to lead our staff meeting devotional and he shared a report from an organization called, *MINISTRY WATCH*. The report shared the sad fact that 19 of the 20 Christian Facebook pages operating in October of 2019---sites with names like, *“Jesus is Lord,”*

“Blessing and Blessed,” “Light of the World,” etc.; sites that promoted generic content, inspirational stories and encouraging lessons, 19 of these 20 pages were---are---fakes.

Quoting the article,

“They were created by Eastern European troll farms that stole content from legitimate pages and reposted it on their own pages. It was all part of an elaborate effort that used engaging content to attract large and unsuspecting audiences to pages that were also used to distribute partisan political stories---designed to influence voters, and divisive stories about hot-button issues like race and sexuality designed to pit American against American.”

These fake Facebook sites reached half of the people in the U.S. with statements that were just not true. Chris Martin, an editor for Moody Publishing who at one time was in charge of social media for Lifeway Christian Resources says, *“A lot of Christians are not using discernment when engaging on social media. Christ cared about the truth. It reflects poorly on Christians and Christian thinking when we believe this [nonsense]. It’s depressing.”*

Why did so many people fall for these fake sites? Because they didn’t know their Bible---they didn’t live by its teachings. To get the discernment necessary to make good decisions---Godly decisions---decisions we will look back on and be proud of---we need the Bible. In fact, let me challenge you---if you find yourself on social media an hour a day---spend an hour in Bible study. Spend as much time in God’s infallible Word as you do in social media.

What are you focusing on in life? Your life could last another seven months, another seven years, or maybe seventy years---but what are you focusing on? One day we are all going to kick the bucket. This life---your life---will end. Nobody gets a pass. So, what do we want to complete before your journey here is done? Voices surround us supplying answers

to this question. They say that our focus ought to be on amassing more experiences in our bucket, on acquiring more assets in our bucket. But that is not what the Bible tells us lasts in eternity. God's Word teaches that in the end, life is not about what gets poured into the bucket. Life is about what gets poured out. It's about the water of life we pour out to other people.

LET'S PRAY