

## Measuring Our Ministry

### Acts 20:17-21

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 12-7-2008

## Introduction

So far in chapter 20 we have seen God's call to be steadfast in the face of misery and depression; second, we saw what a Sabbath in Troas looked like; and then third, we saw that God calls to make even the most mundane things of our lives (like traveling) orbit around Jesus Christ. But as we work our way through Paul's speech in verses 18-38, we are going to see a wonderful call to evaluate our ministries, whether those ministries are in the church or in the home. It represents the only speech that we have from Paul to believers. All of his other recorded speeches were evangelistic. And I have divided Paul's speech into five parts: 1) a Look Backward (vv. 18-21), a Look Forward (vv. 22-24) and 3) a Look Inward (vv. 25-31), A Look Upward (v. 32) and Another Look Backward (vv. 33-35). We will only have time to consider the look backward today. And I think this little section is a wonderful way to measure our ministry. Even though Paul was constantly pressing forward, and even though he was not controlled by his past, he certainly learned from the past and he wanted his fellow elders to learn from the past. And we too can learn from Paul's past ministry by looking at its character, its methods and the two words that can summarize the life that God instilled in that church.

### **I. A Look Backward (vv. 18-21) "from the first day" (v. 18) and "for three years" (v. 31)**

#### *A. The character of his ministry (vv. 18-19)*

##### **1. It involved personal presence (v. 18)**

The first characteristic of His ministry was that it involved personal presence. Why does he call them to meet with him in verse 17 rather than just writing a letter or sending an email? Because a shepherding relationship, when it is done well, is much more personal. And I will have to admit that we do not measure up as well as Paul did. We are striving for this, but look at the kind of relationship that Paul had developed with his fellow elders in verses 36-38. **"And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke,**

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**that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.** Paul had developed a very close relationship with these elders. Back in verse 18 Luke says, **And when they had come to him, he said to them: ‘You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you...’**” As Paul looks at what was done right in the past, the first thing he mentions was his personal presence with them – **“in what manner I always lived among you.”** This is the difference between shepherding and herding. Mega churches tend to herd people in large masses. You can herd thousands of cattle, but you can only shepherd a limited number of sheep. And as he talks with these elders about their responsibilities, he wants them to remember that shepherding ministry takes a personal touch. As the church grew, he had passed on shepherding responsibilities to the elders so that the ministry could retain a personal touch. It is impossible for one man to shepherd 5000 sheep. That’s obvious.

So there are three interesting facts that I want you to notice in this chapter. The first thing I want you to notice in this speech is that Paul is talking to the elders, not to the whole church. Verse 17 says, **From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the *elders* of the church. And when *they* had come to him, he said to *them*...** This is an elder’s conference. Most of Paul’s work of shepherding was among the elders.

The second thing I want you to notice is what he calls these elders in verse 28: **“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”** They are over a flock of sheep, and he calls them to shepherd the flock and oversee the flock. Those two words (overseer and shepherd) are interesting words. Elsewhere the word “overseer” has often been translated as bishop. According to Acts 20, a bishop is not a person with a dress and a pointy hat and a huge cross around his neck. Every elder is a bishop because every elder is an overseer. So if you want to fool around, you can call our elders Bishop Gary and Bishop Rodney. I don’t think they will take to it too well because the word bishop has acquired bad connotations. But the point is that there are only two offices in the church today: elder and deacon; or you can phrase it bishop and deacon, or shepherd and deacon. The second word that describes these elders is shepherds. The word shepherd is elsewhere translated as pastor. This means that I am not the only pastor in this congregation. Gary and Rodney are pastors too.

The third thing I want you to notice is that Paul breaks the church down into households. He speaks of teaching from household to household in verse 20. He sees households as significant units.

Those three facts (that Paul was talking to elders, that the elders were shepherds, and that the smallest unit in the church is a household), coupled with the rest of Scripture, inform us that you can't depend upon one person to do it all. Even if Paul worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week in doing nothing but visiting households, he would not be able to visit the estimated 15,000 Christians in Ephesus by himself in three years. It is statistically impossible. So how did he ensure that good shepherding care was going on? He did it by recognizing *all* the shepherds that God had set up. He divided the work of shepherding families among all the elders, and he recognized that God has given the father of each family the role of being a shepherd. And we need to exalt each of these shepherds in our congregation. There is a tendency in the twentieth century to think that the expert has to do everything. There is a tendency to see the teaching elder as the pastor of the flock. It doesn't work that way. That is to guarantee a defective shepherding.

We started this point by saying that shepherding ministry requires a personal touch; it requires closeness and dwelling among the sheep. There is no way that a ruling elder can replace the function of a father, and fathers must not expect them to. He must protect, feed and nurture his flock. If there is no father in the home, yes, we can help. But we still can't replace. I think the book of 2 John makes that quite clear. The elder John seeks to shepherd a family with a single mom, but he doesn't replace the role of the missing dad.

There is no way that a teaching elder can replace the function of the ruling elders, and the congregation should not expect him to. You can only effectively shepherd a few. How many did Jesus shepherd? He preached to thousands, but he only shepherded twelve. And if you look at Exodus 18 and the structure of the synagogue system there you will see that God breaks things down into groupings of ten or less. This already means that we don't have enough elders.

Of course, Scripture indicates that shepherding ministry is not enough. God expects members to counsel each other and exhort each other and minister to each other. Ministry takes a personal touch, and a personal touch can't be done on a massive scale.

And in the same way, not only do I need the help of elders, I also need the help of each head of household. You as shepherds need to spend time

personally with the sheep of your household. And as we get better at this characteristic of personal presence for ministry, our church will be strengthened. Pray for us.

## 2. He served the Lord in humility (v. 19a)

The second characteristic of Paul was that he served the Lord in humility. Verse 19 says, **servicing the Lord with all humility...** Paul had lived his life as an open book, and was inviting these elders to examine his life. That's hard to do. He said that he had imitated the humility of Jesus. Philippians 2:5,8 says, "**Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who... humbled himself.**" It is too easy for pride to get in the way of service to our wives and children. If we leaders get too easily offended it can make us focus on the wrong thing – defending ourselves instead of serving. And Satan loves to do that. When we were watching the movie on John Adams (with ClearPlay), one of the things that struck me and grieved me (if it was indeed true) was the prideful inability to admit to his own failures. In that movie he lacked humility with his children.

But notice that this was not a selective humility. There are times when humility is easy, but Paul was serving the Lord in *all* humility. When he had success, he didn't glory in himself – he gloried in the Lord. I think of the woodpecker parable. (You've probably heard it.) A woodpecker is pecking at the bark of a tree when all of a sudden a lightning bolt hits the tree sending splinters flying everywhere. The woodpecker is a bit dazed on the ground, but otherwise unhurt. When he looked up at the tree and saw the huge hole that he had apparently pecked into the wood, he flew off and invited all his woodpecker friends to see his handiwork. And we can so easily do this when God displays His awesome power through our ministry. We can feel self-important and prideful. "Look at what I did." But that robs God of His glory and robs us of future grace. This is an integrity check that every leader must repeatedly pass if he is to grow in his leadership.

## 3. He served the Lord in tears (v. 19c)

Subpoint 3 – just because you are humble and not preoccupied with your own greatness does not mean that you won't be wounded and emotionally hurt. Paul was frequently wounded. Verse 19 goes on to say that he served with many tears. He wept over their sins. He wasn't stoically indifferent. When others suffered, he suffered. When people wouldn't repent of their sins, and stubbornly refused to grow, he felt great pain for them. A shepherd without pain is an anomaly. It should be a strange sight. And yet many shepherds are quitting because they don't like the pain and they don't

like the tears. There are fathers who are quitting their jobs as family shepherds and getting a divorce. Why? Because they are sick and tired of the pain and they are tired of their own weeping. There are pastors who are quitting their shepherding jobs at amazing rates in America. In fact, I recently heard a story of a man who had been a pastor for twenty years who was so discouraged that he gave it up and became a funeral director. And one time when he was asked why he had made the switch, he said, look

I spent 10 years trying to straighten out John and he's still an alcoholic. Then I spent three and one-half years trying to straighten out Harold and Susan's marriage problems and they ended up getting a divorce. Later I tried for two years to help Bob kick his drug habit and he is still an addict. Now, at the funeral home, when I straighten them out, they stay straight!

Though he had a twinkle in his eye, he really wasn't kidding. Because of the tears that produced no fruit, because of the wasted efforts, because he saw no power of God in the transformation of his people, he gave up. He couldn't stand serving with tears one more year.

And you shepherds may be in that situation in your families. You are tired of being hurt. You are tired of crying, and you want out. Let me encourage you to think about it differently. Think about the possibility that God has called you to a ministry of tears for your own sanctification and growth. It is in the midst of tears that we should be most driven to the throne of grace, and those who shepherd with tears as Paul did, grow much like Paul did. Your ministry is not a waste simply because the people you have labored over with tears walk away from the Lord. Your ministry is a waste only if *you* walk away from those tears and *you* bail on the Lord. Let the tears drive you to God's grace. That's what Jesus did. He was a man of tears. That's what David did. He was a man of tears, and he cast his cares upon the Lord, knowing that the Lord cared for him. Sometimes it is the women who bail out because they are tired of the tears, and this passage has something to say to you too. Ministry that will be rewarded forever in heaven always has tears.

But whether you are thinking about shepherding in the church or shepherding in the family, realize that tears are an essential component of such ministry. They show that you still have heart. They show that you aren't calloused by abuse. They show that your love has not been killed because it is a God-given love. I have accountability partners who from time to time ask me if I am still ministering with the joy of the Lord, and they know how to rebuke me if I start feeling sorry for myself. This is a character check that leaders have to pass many times if they are to grow in their

leadership. Do you minister to your family with tears? That's not a bad thing. It may be an indication that there is real ministry going on – at least in your heart.

#### 4. He served the Lord in trials (v. 19d)

So Paul served with personal presence, with humility, with tears, and fourthly, with trials. Verse 19 again: “**serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews.**” Shepherds like Paul are attacked by Satan and by Satan's children because these shepherds are making a difference and are hurting Satan's kingdom. You can't attack Satan without getting some backlash. This means that he was being effective. Now, it is easy to say that, but it's quite another thing to actually live it.

In 1997, U.S. Senator Rick Santorum gave a speech to the graduating class of East Stroudsburg University. He didn't talk about any of the happy themes that people like to talk about at commencement ceremonies. Instead, he told the story of a Baptist preacher in South Carolina who had made it his life's ambition to head up the Bible College. All his life he had worked for that position and had finally attained it. But shortly after becoming president, his wife got Alzheimer's. Her health deteriorated rapidly to the point where he could not possibly take care of her and still work his full-time job. So he went to the board of the College and tendered his resignation as president. His peers couldn't believe that he was doing this. One man said, “What are you doing? Your wife doesn't even know who you are!” And the preacher answered, “She might not know who I am, but I know who she is. She's the woman I made a promise to until death do us part.”<sup>1</sup> Now I'm not saying that everyone must do exactly like this Pastor did, but what he did definitely showed his character and heart as a shepherd. He did not allow trials to make him give up shepherding.

Men, trials don't excuse us from our responsibilities as shepherds of our families. Trials test the character of our shepherding. Your trials may be financial, emotional, demonic, slander, persecution. But if you will lay hold of Christ in the way we looked at last week, these trials will be an opportunity to test God's promise in Romans 8 that in every trial we may receive we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Can you say that? Can you honestly say that you are more than a conqueror by God's grace whether there is tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Schlessinger, *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God's Laws in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 234

nakedness, or peril, or sword? God allows trials into our lives as integrity checks to test the character of our shepherding. As we pass those tests, He ushers us into more and more grace. Wives and children, pray that your shepherds would pass those tests.

Men, what is the character of your shepherding? When you are busy, will it stand the test of personal presence? Or are you going to say, “Ahhh, I’m too busy to shepherd”? When you have major success and everybody is bragging on you, will your character stand the humility test in this verse, or will it succumb to pride and arrogance? When people resist your ministry of the Word, will your character stand the tears-test, or will it crumble into feeling sorry for yourself? Will it cause pride and self-defense to choke out the effectiveness of your shepherding? When you undergo great trials, will your character stand the test of time? Evaluate the character of your shepherding this morning and go the cross of Christ where there is rich forgiveness, and rich grace to empower you by the indwelling of our Oversepherd, Jesus Christ. That was the character of Paul’s ministry.

### ***B. The methods of his ministry (v. 20)***

#### **1. Very well-rounded (“I kept back nothing that was helpful”)**

Next, let’s look at the methods of Paul’s ministry. Verse 20 says, “**...how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house.**” The first method that we see is that he was well rounded in his bringing of the Word of God. He didn’t just harp on his favorite verses, or his favorite topics. He covered every area of theology and worldview. That didn’t mean that there couldn’t be more that he could have taught on all those areas. But he sought to introduce them to the whole counsel of God. If all you discuss with your family is eschatology, they will be impoverished. If all you discuss with your family is grace, they will be impoverished. Do you have a well-rounded teaching ministry?

Some people have told me, “But I’m not capable of teaching.” Even if that were true (and I think many people underrate themselves – he said that everyone is Rome was competent to counsel each other), there are many great books that can be read. And if a shepherd couldn’t read, he could buy tapes. And if he didn’t have the money to buy tapes, he could have an assistant in the home do the reading. Your wife after all is called to help you with the shepherding. But you need to know what is happening with your children. You can’t abdicate your responsibilities. You can delegate some

things to your wife, but not abdicate. I've developed a booklet that helps to evaluate any weak spots in your children's exposure to the whole counsel of God. You can download it from the Biblical Blueprints website and use it as an evaluation tool. But even a voiceless, invalid father can give some direction to make sure that his family is getting a well-rounded diet.

## 2. It had public dimensions

The second thing we see about his methods is that it had both public and private dimensions. He said, "**I...taught you publicly and from house to house.**" That's obvious in its application to the elders of the church. There is preaching ministry, and there is the more personal ministry with the families. Elders should engage in both. In fact, recently we have decided that we need to at least occasionally actually meet in the homes with the family. Be gentle on your elders and let's try to make this shepherding a time that is joyful to both families and shepherds. But anyway, almost everyone talks in the books about how this applies to church shepherds. There's plenty of material on that.

## 3. It had private dimensions

But is there a way that we can apply this to our roles as family shepherds? And I would say, "Yes. All shepherds should have these methods of teaching." I would say that fathers should have corporate teaching and worship on a daily basis with the whole family. We call that family worship. That's equivalent to the public ministry. But it is good for a father to also take each child aside individually for occasional one-on-one instruction and discipleship and follow-up for his own personal growth and walk with God. And of course, you have a brilliant assistant in your wife. But the fathers should not shirk their duties to teach. If the father is indeed the shepherd of the home, he should engage in some family and some private (or individualized) teaching.

### *C. The message that he brought (v. 21) could be summarized as:*

#### 1. Repentance – letting go of sin and independence

So we have looked at the character of ministry, the methods of ministry, and now let's look lastly at the message of ministry. Look at verse 21, "**testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.**" I think that is a beautiful summary not only of the evangelistic message which brings people into the kingdom, but also of the whole Christian life: repentance and faith. We cannot taste of



the sweetness of God's provision if we do not turn from something and turn to God. When our hands hold onto idols, there can be no faith to receive provisions abundant or to drink from the rivers of God's delights. It's impossible.

One of the most grace filled ministries out there was Jack Miller's ministry in Philadelphia at New Life Church. It was an OPC church in Philadelphia. He started the Sonship Ministries. He helped people to find their security in their adoption as sons and daughters, and through that security to find great joy and power in their ministries. While I think Sonship program is somewhat reductionistic, it has been enormously helpful to many people bound in legalism. But what Miller points out in his book, *Repentance and Twentieth Century Man*, is that our whole life is a life of repentance and faith. It doesn't just start the Christian walk. Acts 2 says there is no Pentecostal power without repentance and faith. Miller says,

To be near God and to have God near us is the whole purpose of human life.

But *without sincere repentance* there can be no face-to-face fellowship with the Father of lights.

An unrepentant heart is self-satisfied, proud, and cold. God resists such a heart. Scripture says flatly: 'God opposes the proud' (Jas. 4:6).

But the Lord cannot resist the broken heart which has experienced true repentance. He will not, He cannot, stay away from repentant sinners. He says, 'Be zealous and repent.' Then as the door of repentance is opened by His almighty grace, He comes in and eats with the contrite ones and fills them with the joys of His friendship (Rev. 3:19-20).

It is not easy for us to understand this, otherwise the Lord would not repeat it so often in the Scriptures. His Word says: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted" (Ps. 34:18).

It's a great book. If you want to see the way of repentance and how it opens the floodgates of blessing in a believer's life, read his book. Jack Miller, *Repentance and Twentieth Century Man*. It is a message that is desperately needed in the Twenty-First Century as well. There is another excellent book that was at the heart of revival in Africa. It's *The Calvary Road*, by Roy Hession.

When people evangelize nowadays, they don't preach repentance, they only teach faith. But any message of faith that has no repentance is a counterfeit faith that will not be honored by God. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. The church no longer sees repentance as a key to anything. They either neglect the topic altogether or trivialize it with trite confessions that have no meaning, no heart, that do not crucify the flesh, and

are not genuine repentance. We need to rediscover this wonderful doctrine of repentance. If you have been praying, but the heavens are brass and you have had no answers, ask if this dimension of a shepherd's ministry is missing: repentance toward God. Do you just work for conformity in your children's lives or do you seek full-hearted repentance?

Repentance is not a social thing that is merely intended to mend fences. It is toward God. David said, "Against You, You only I have sinned" (Psa. 51:4). Genuine repentance doesn't just look to the expectations of men. It is so thoroughly overwhelmed with our own sinfulness and God's own holiness that it realizes that we are bankrupt and without hope apart from God's mercy. If, with Calvin, we see repentance and faith as a summary of the whole Christian life, then we will have no room for self-righteousness, judgmentalism, self-assurance or cockiness. But neither will we have any room for the modern attitude that is careless about the law, careless about holiness, and careless about sin. The Sermon on the Mount indicates that the moment a person is regenerate, God plants within his heart a sense of his spiritual poverty, a mourning over sin, a meekness of status, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Without those things you are not regenerate. But God also immediately rewards those elements of repentance with inheriting the kingdom of God, being comforted, inheriting the earth and being filled. In other words, Christ's call to repentance is also a call to blessing.

## **2. Faith – receiving every grace from Jesus**

And this is where the flip side of the coin appears: faith. When we truly repent, our faith won't be in ourselves, in others, in things or in creation. Our faith will be forced by our repentance to be in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; in whom we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing; in whom is the gift of the Spirit; and from whom flow those rivers of delight that the Psalmist spoke about. If the whole Christian life can be summarized as repentance from dead works and faith in Christ, it means that everything we do must flow from Christ's empowering or it is dead works. And that's exactly what Paul's epistles say. They say that whatever is not of faith is sin. Whatever is not of grace and not founded on Christ will be burned up as hay, wood and stubble. How can the Old Testament say that even the plowing of the wicked is sin? Because their plowing was not of Him and through Him and to Him. It's dead works. We must be shepherding our children with an eye to helping them to avoid dead works and to walk in the Spirit.

So Paul's message to both unbelievers and believers was a message to abandon a life that flowed from the Old Adam and to embrace a life that flows from the Second Adam, Jesus. Faithful shepherding is not satisfied with rule keeping, because even Pharisees can keep rules, but they don't have Christ. Faithful Shepherding is not satisfied with *appearing* humble, holy and gracious. It wants the reality. It's not satisfied with outward conformity, but wants to shepherd the heart. And I recommend the book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. And so good shepherding calls us to let go of sin and all independence, and by faith to receive all things from God the Father, through Jesus, by the power of the Spirit. That summarizes the entire message of shepherding. And these are the foundations that can produce joy in your shepherding (along with tears) and produce joy in your families.

If you achieve the things listed in these verses, you will be a success in God's eyes no matter what others might say about you. So embrace the character, methods and message of Paul's shepherding ministry for yourself, whether you are a shepherd or one who is being shepherded. And may God receive the glory. Amen.

[To be continued.]

**II. A Look Forward (vv. 22-25)**

**III. A Look Inward (vv. 25-31)**

**IV. A Look Upward (v. 32)**

**V. Another Look Backward at His Own Ministry (vv. 33-35)**

