

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

A Charge To The Elders

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Acts 20:17-38

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 20.

Last week, we followed the Apostle Paul as he visited and encouraged the young churches in Macedonia and Asia. In our passage today, Paul is just about to set sail for Jerusalem, but he decides that there is one last thing that needs to be done before he can leave; he needs to make sure that the elders in Ephesus understand that he is passing on the baton of leadership and that they understand what it will look like to shepherd the church in the days to come.

Now, before we jump in, I want to alert you to the fact that our passage this morning is built upon two foundational premises that we instinctively resist. First, this whole passage is built upon the premise that you, Christian, are valuable to God. Some of you have a hard time believing that, but it's true. God LOVES His people. He LOVES His church! He showed His great love for us at the Cross where the Son of God bore our sin and died our death so that we could be REDEEMED from sin and death! O how He loves us!

And, because He loves us, He protects us. That leads to the second premise that we instinctively resist: Leaders are set in place by God to protect His people. We hate that idea. We've seen too many corrupt leaders – in the world AND in the church – to believe that anything good could come from this model. We don't want or need leaders protect us. We protect ourselves.

All of that is to say, some of us are going to have a hard time with this passage. In these verses, we are reminded that we ARE valuable to God. He cares about us. He has put a plan in place to protect us. And that plan involves leaders. Let's jump in now and invite the Word of God to challenge and correct our deepest convictions. Look with me to Acts 20:17-38. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:17-38 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is a large passage but at its center – in verses 25-31 – we find Paul’s charge to the Ephesian elders. He essentially gives them three commands:

Pay careful attention to yourselves

Pay careful attention to all the flock

Stay alert to dangers from without and dangers from within

Those are Paul’s basic instructions for elders. But what does that even look like? What does it mean to pay careful attention to the flock? How does a person even begin to live this out? Thankfully, in the same way that a tradesman invites his young apprentice to work alongside him and to learn by example, so too has Paul laid out an example for these elders – and for all subsequent elders to follow.

Paul unapologetically holds up his life as an illustration of what eldership looks like at a practical level. That in and of itself teaches us a lesson about leadership in the church. Elders should strive to live in such a way that they can say along with Paul:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV)

So, let’s draw upon the example that Paul set as we turn our attention to this charge to the elders.

A Charge To The Elders

For some context, look again at verse 17:

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. (Acts 20:17 ESV)

Miletus wasn’t right around the corner. It would have taken Paul’s messenger three days to get to Ephesus, and then it would have taken another three days of travel for the group to return. Remember, Paul was being driven by the Spirit to move on to Jerusalem. But here – just as he is about to sail out – he invites a week-long delay! Something came over Paul and he determined that he couldn’t leave until he looked these elders in the eyes and passed the baton of leadership to them.

If you're joining us for the first time, I want to clarify that the term "elder" here doesn't refer to elderly people – it refers to an *office* in the church. It is the same office that we refer to with the words *pastor* or *overseer*. The New Testament uses these terms interchangeably, but they are all referring to the same position.

As I look out, it is not lost on me that most of you are not elders. I suspect that some of you are wondering if a passage like this will have anything to say to you. Undoubtedly, there will be principles in this passage that will equip you to grow in your own leadership in the home and the workplace and I hope that you are able to lay hold of some of that. But I confess from the outset that I am unapologetically NOT going to preach generalized leadership principles today.

Because this passage isn't about generalized leadership. It's about elders. More specifically, this is a passage about how God has positioned these men to selflessly serve and protect the church that He so dearly loves.

So, if you spot some leadership lessons that you can apply, then that's a bonus. But my greater hope is that this passage will remind you of how much God loves you and that it will inspire you to pray for the elders here at Redeemer. Because, as we will see in this passage – and as we have seen in the wider culture – when the leaders go astray everyone suffers.

In light of that, Paul gave three instructions to these men who were called to protect the church. First, he charged them:

1. Pay careful attention to yourselves

I am drawing this verbatim from verse 28:

Pay careful attention to yourselves (Acts 20:28 ESV)

Similarly, when Paul wrote to Timothy – who himself was ministering to the church in Ephesus – he reminded him:

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:16 ESV)

Leaders, your life MATTERS. Your integrity MATTERS. You cannot lead others if you cannot lead yourself.

Leadership in the church is not simply about teaching right doctrine. Of course, the teaching is a massive part of it, but the teaching is rendered *useless* if you are not also *living* right doctrine!

If you stop paying attention to yourself – if you stop pursuing holiness and drift into a style of leadership that talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk, you will lead people into RUIN! In fact, if you don't watch yourself, not only will you fail to protect the church, but you might turn into the WOLF that destroys the church! That's what happened with the pharisees. Jesus said to them:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, **hypocrites!** For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. (Matthew 23:15 ESV)

Saying one thing but living another thing is the very definition of hypocrisy. It is *pretending*. It is *playing a part*. And when hypocrites lead, people get hurt. Which is why Paul's first instruction to these elders is to *pay careful attention to yourselves*.

Is your heart right? Is your doctrine right? Are you loving your wife right? Are you leading your kids right? Is your private life right? Are your habits right?

Paul points to his own life as an example of how to live with integrity. In verses 18-19, he says:

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ **serving the Lord with all humility** (Acts 20:18b-19a ESV)

According to Paul, humility is essential for leadership in the church. In his letter to the Philippians, he gives us something of a working definition of humility. He writes:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but **in humility count others more significant than yourselves.** (Philippians 2:3 ESV)

Humility looks like counting others as more significant than yourself. It looks like putting their needs before your own. It looks like pouring yourself out so as to fill others up.

And this other-centredness carries over into every facet of life. Look, for example, at what Paul writes in verses 33-35:

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' (Acts 20:33-35 ESV)

Now, is Paul saying here that it is wrong to pay your pastors? That *can't* be what he's saying because when he later wrote to Timothy who was leading this same church in Ephesus, he quoted Jesus and explained:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "**The laborer deserves his wages.**" (1 Timothy 5:17-18 ESV)

So, Paul is not saying that you should never pay your pastor. What he IS saying, however, is that elders should be most fundamentally GIVERS not TAKERS. Elders who see pastoring as nothing more than a job are unfit for service. Elders who are more focused on how the *church* can serve *them* then they are about how *they* can serve the *church* are unfit for service.

The Ephesians couldn't support Paul, but he just got a second job and served them for free. Because his ministry wasn't fueled by a love of money. It was fueled by a love of GOD!

THAT is what leadership is supposed to look like in the church. THAT is what Jesus commended when he said to his disciples:

But **whoever would be great among you must be your servant,** ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:43b-45 ESV)

That's the template. Jesus taught it. Jesus lived it. Paul did his very best to resemble it, and here he is calling the elders who will follow after him to keep a close watch on themselves.

Before you would step into a place of leadership you need to look LONG and HARD and HONESTLY in the mirror. Elders are not called to be perfect, but they ARE called to set an example for the congregation that is worthy of imitation such that they can say with Paul:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV)

Pray for us, that we would be men like that. Pray that God would raise up faithful elders in this church for the years and decades to come. And, brother elders, let us pay careful attention to ourselves.

Second, Paul looks these elders in the eyes, and he charges them to:

2. Pay careful attention to all the flock

Again, I am drawing this directly from verse 28:

Pay careful attention to yourselves **and to all the flock**, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, **to care for the church of God** (Acts 20:28a ESV)

Having looked LONG and HARD and HONESTLY in the mirror – having led yourself well – the call is now to look LONG and HARD and HONESTLY at the congregation so that you can lead *them* well.

In order to do that, elders need to know their people. This is why one of the words that the New Testament uses interchangeably with *elder* is *pastor* or *shepherd*.

Like a shepherd that knows his flock, a good elder ought to know the strengths and the weaknesses of the people under his charge and he should be giving careful thought as to how to mobilize those strengths and how to bolster up those weaknesses. God placed elders in the church:

to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12a ESV)

That's the job, elders! That's the JOY! There is nothing else like it!

In Paul's letter to Timothy, he describes the office of the elder as a noble responsibility. In our text this morning, we find a sobering reminder of the weight of this responsibility. Look there again:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, **which he obtained with his own blood.** (Acts 20:28 ESV)

I find this to be one of the most sobering verses in all of the Bible. I have it posted on my desk as a constant reminder, and I return to it often.

I do not like to borrow expensive things from my friends. I don't like driving someone else's car. I get very nervous holding someone else's baby. Just the thought of damaging or mishandling something so valuable – so precious – *horrifies* me.

What, then, could be more frightening than what we see in this verse? Elders have been entrusted with the spiritual well-being of the church – the people who were purchased out of sin and death by the blood of God Himself – the ones that Jesus DIED to save! Therefore, Paul says, pay careful attention to all the flock.

But, again, what does that look like? As we consider Paul's example, one obvious conclusion is that it looks like opening the word of God and faithfully explaining it. Look, for example, at verses 20 where Paul explains:

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable (Acts 20:20 ESV)

By the time that Paul ministered in Ephesus, he had faced numerous beatings and imprisonments on account of the gospel message. He had even been stoned and left for dead. Paul wasn't a robot. He *felt* all of that. He reminds these elders that he served with "tears and with trials". Sometimes it HURTS to tell the truth, and no one knew that better than Paul.

Nevertheless, he did not shrink from declaring anything that was profitable.

In our own context, while none of our elders are in danger of being killed for the truth, we will all face the temptation to cower from saying what needs to be said. It is hard to speak to someone about the pride, or the anger, or the lust, or the greed, or the apathy that you see evidenced in their life. It's so much easier to turn a blind eye and to talk about the weather. But, if the charge of the elder is to pay careful attention to all the flock, then he needs to have those conversations even if he knows that they will come at a great cost.

Paul gives us a further glimpse into how he cared for the church in verses 20-21 where Paul reminds the elders how he was:

teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks (Acts 20:20b-21a ESV)

Paul didn't simply clock in and clock out. The teaching time didn't end when he stepped out of the pulpit. Both publicly and privately, Paul gave of himself to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

And he didn't limit himself to a select group. He had time for the Jewish Christians who had been steeped in the Old Testament for a lifetime, and he had time for the Greek Christians who had come to faith with little to no knowledge of the Bible. Elders need to take the time to walk alongside mature, deeply rooted Christians, and they need to take the time to walk with brand new, reading-through-the-Bible-for-the-first-time Christians.

As Paul is preparing to leave for Jerusalem, he looks these elders in the eyes and he says, "This is your responsibility now. God loves His church. He paid the greatest price to redeem them. Now, pay careful attention to all the flock."

Third, Paul gives one final charge to the elders. He calls upon them to:

3. Stay alert to dangers from without and from within

We see this in verses 29-31:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert (Acts 20:29-31a ESV)

Most of us are a step removed from the imagery that Paul is using here, but he initially issued this charge to men who knew what it looked like when a wolf sunk its teeth into a sheep. The imagery is bloody and graphic, and Paul is using that imagery *for a reason*. When spiritual wolves sneak into the church, people die.

I'm speaking about spiritual death, of course, but that is MORE frightening, not less. When spiritual wolves are allowed to sneak into the church, they can *lead people to hell*.

Those wolves can come from within. Paul warned these men to keep a close watch on themselves because sometimes wolves make their way into leadership. This is why, as a church, we move slowly with the process of appointing elders and why we have congregational votes and nominating committees and term limits. We have built processes into this congregation because we take seriously what Paul warns about here. Wolves can come from within.

But wolves can also come from without, and we need processes to protect against that too. That's why a person needs to submit to the process of membership before they can lead with our children, or our youth, or on the worship team. That's why we practice church discipline and try to deal honestly with sin as it arises in the church.

One of the reasons why spiritual wolves are so dangerous is because they are so subtle. They don't wear nametags that say, "Hello! My name is Wolf"! In fact, most of the spiritual wolves in the church don't even *recognize* themselves as wolves! They are too spiritually deceived to see reality.

And so, they slip quietly into the congregation. They gather allies. They rarely wage an overt assault – that would be too obvious. No, like their father the devil, they slither around behind the scenes asking, "Did God *really* say?" They teach you how to read your bible such that it can mean the opposite of what it says. They refuse to be led. They lash out or hide as soon as someone tries

to hold them accountable. They sow distrust and division everywhere they go. And, if left unchecked, they lead people away from the gospel altogether.

I confess that I find this to be the hardest and the most emotionally taxing aspect of eldering. It is incredibly difficult to tell the difference between a believer who struggles with a legalistic heart and a wolf who would lead others into a false gospel of moralism. It is incredibly difficult to tell the difference between a believer who struggles with gossip and a wolf who is trying to divide and destroy the church. If you treat a sinful sheep like a wolf, they might never trust church elders again. If you excuse a wolf as a sinful sheep, he might just devour half of the flock. Who is sufficient for these things?

And yet, as seemingly impossible as the assignment is, this is what elders are called to do. For the sake of the church, elders are to stay alert to dangers from without and from within.

But, again, how do we live this out? It's not as if we can simply put a fence around the church to keep away false teachers. In fact, in the age of the internet, the church is more exposed than ever before to dangerous teaching. What are elders to do?

I think verses 26-27 point us toward an answer:

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ **for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.** (Acts 20:26-27 ESV)

That is striking language! The implication is that – if he HAD held something back – if he HAD pulled his punches and skipped over a potentially offensive passage – then he WOULD have been guilty of their blood. But since he DIDN'T hold back – since he preached the whole truth – he is innocent.

That's the primary way that elders protect the church. They open the Word – in public and in private, with young believers and mature believers – and they teach it comprehensively holding nothing back.

This is the tool that we've been given.

Not force. Not coercion. Not intimidation. Simply the Word.

Which is why the qualification for elders says nothing about business acumen or strength of personality, but simply requires that an elder be a faithful Christian man who can faithfully handle the Word.

Paul refused to leave for Jerusalem until he knew for certain that the elders that he was leaving behind understood this. As I wondered how to bring this sermon to a close, I was so thankful for how this story comes to a close. Look again at verse 36:

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. (Acts 20:36 ESV)

I am not a mind reader, but I suspect that every elder and would-be elder in this room is asking some form of the question: “Why me, Lord?” Any elder who truly loves the Lord and loves His people will in one shape or form be crushed by this passage. Who is sufficient for these things?

That didn't keep Paul from setting his high bar. It IS high – and it's high for a reason. But, having set the high bar, Paul didn't scowl at the elders and ridicule them for how far they fell short. He knelt down beside them, and he prayed that God would help them to increasingly become the men that they needed to be. As we conclude, I want to ask you to do the same for the men who are serving as elders here. Pray that we would pay careful attention to ourselves, and to all the flock, and that we would be alert to dangers from without and from within. God, help. Let's pray.