

Scripture Reading:

Acts 20:17 “From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. 18 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, 19 serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; 20 how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, 21 testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. 24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. 25 And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 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. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. 32 So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. 34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. 35 I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He 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 Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, 38 sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.”

"A Warning for All Ages"

My task this morning will be to finish our reflections on the message delivered by the Apostle Paul to the elders from the Church at Ephesus.

- Last week we considered Paul’s farewell to Asia and the review that he gave of his ministry there.
- This week we will consider his warnings and encouragements for the Saints at Ephesus, and by extension, the Saints in all of church history!

I will pick up at verse twenty-eight which could actually be used for an entire series of sermons all by itself!

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.”

First, we face one the most basic questions that we often ask in studying the Bible: What is that “therefore” there for? As we studied last week, Paul has reviewed his ministry and example and now says THEREFORE... These elders are to take heed of what Paul has done and compare it to how they are living their lives and how they are shepherding the flock that God has given them responsibility over!

- Next we must note that it is the Holy Spirit who has made them overseers of this flock.

The English terms Elder, Pastor and Bishop have been the source of much controversy down through the years.

The fact is that they are used interchangeably by Luke here in Chapter twenty and by Paul in his Epistles. All are leaders in Christ's Church who have been commissioned by the Holy Spirit and may at times take on different roles.

- This does not create some sort of religious hierarchy that you may sadly see in many quarters.

Church leaders are sinners saved by grace just like everyone else! Those who have taken covenant vows here at Church of the King, in committing to submit and obey the leadership of this church, are NOT saying that Theron or Dennis or myself are in a position to have better access to God.

- Everyone is simply recognizing that we have been called into service in God's Church.

When I was chosen to serve as the presiding minister of Calvin Presbytery, this did not make me more spiritual than the other ministers:

- It just means that I took on more responsibilities to serve the other ministers for that time.

This was the pattern that Jesus worked long and hard to get His disciples to understand. Unlike the Gentile world where the power of leadership was lorded over those under their control...

In the Church the leaders follow the example of Jesus and now Paul in being servants of all...

- Willing to lay down their very lives for the sheep!

These elders, as leaders called out by the Holy Spirit, and all those who have followed down through the ages are to "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

- The Church is very precious to God, something we take for granted far too much today!

Because we have lived for centuries with the blessing of having the great creeds of the faith which clearly teach the truth about God's Triune nature and the two natures of Christ, this verse may not have the powerful impact that it should as we read it. We know and accept that Jesus is fully God and fully man, being without confusion, the eternal second person of the Trinity in His Godhood and the incarnate Son of Man who came in human flesh in his manhood. And yet, we don't often ponder the wonder of that truth, which we can see in this short verse:

-- Why is the church important? Because God purchased the Church!

-- How did God purchase the Church?

- With His own blood!

Yes, Jesus died as a man shedding real blood, which we celebrate at this Table because without the shedding of blood there could be NO forgiveness of sins and we would all still be dead in our trespasses and sins. What we must not forget is that Jesus also died as God so that His blood would not provide the forgiveness of sins for just one man, something a perfect man could do...

- But rather Jesus died for ALL of God's chosen race!

This is why we need to remember the importance of the Church to God!

- Being a Christian is not just an individual experience!
- Our repentance and faith bring us into the Body of Christ: The Church of the living God.

Thinking that we have no use for the Body or that we can take or leave our relationship to other believers is like a pinky finger saying it wants to go off by itself whenever it feels like it!

- Not only will it not live very long, but it would be a smelly mess in pretty short order.
- It would certainly no longer be of any service to the body or to God!

So these Elders Paul called together from Ephesus were to remember that they had been called by the Holy Spirit to shepherd God's Church:

- A church He purchased with His own blood!

This brings Paul to the warning that has been important down through all the ages of the Church of God...

29 "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."

I mentioned the parable that Jesus told about the wheat and the tares a few weeks ago and perhaps this would be a good place to remember the details of His words, noting that Matthew gives us this parable in chapter thirteen right after the parable of the seeds:

"24 Another parable [Jesus] put forth to them, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. 26 But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. 27 So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.' ' "

- What Paul is warning these Elders, and all others called to serve in the Church, is that you must not think that all the weeds are out there and all the wheat in here.

Not only will wolves try to infiltrate the church bringing their false doctrines from the outside, but even from our own ranks there will at times be those who try to destroy the church from within.

In Romans chapter one after giving the long list of sins that result from suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, Paul concludes by saying, "who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them."

- Those who reject God are not willing to sit by quietly & go to hell, they work hard to take others with them!

How are we to handle these challenges?

- Just as we saw last week, Paul encourages these elders to follow his example!

31 "Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. 32 So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Sometime later Paul would write a precious letter to these same church leaders & we are blessed to have it in our Bibles as the Book of Ephesians. I will commend to your homework this week another review of the armor of God found in chapter six of that book, which Paul encourages them, and all of us, to dawn for this battle! Paul concludes with another appeal to these elders to serve as servants, not as those who would lord it over the sheep.

33 "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. 34 Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. 35 I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

We see the great example of such service when Jesus washed the Disciples feet as He prepared to go to the cross. We have often reflected on this event as we approach the Lord's Table and you could really summarize what Jesus is demonstrating and teaching there with the words of Jesus that Paul brings to their remembrance, "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

- I should note that you will find these quoted words of Jesus nowhere in the four Gospels accounts of His life and ministry.

The Apostle John told us near the end of his Gospel that "there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

- The Bible has not given us an exhaustive history of the words and deeds of Jesus nor of Paul.
- What the Bible has given us is what we need to know about the life and work of Jesus!

Earlier in his Gospel John said, "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

- Truly God HAS given us the Words of Life and all we need do is believe & embrace them by faith!

Paul worked long and hard to present the truth and to protect the truth and now this important task would fall to the Ephesian elders who had gathered.

- They would protect and proclaim the truth and leave it to the next generation of leaders that the Holy Spirit would call upon!

This is the proper view of what some call Apostolic succession, where the truth and authority of God's Word and Church is passed on from generation to generation under the control and guidance of the Holy Spirit. And down through the ages all of these Church leaders have needed to heed the warning about wolves coming in to destroy the sheep from without or to lead them astray from within. All the while remembering those precious words of Jesus...

- It is more blessed to give than to receive!

I struggled a bit this week with the title of my sermon. I try to have a title that reflects where the message is going and it is not unusual for me to change it as the message develops during the week. This week I knew that I needed to focus on the warnings that Paul gave these elders, but there are certainly blessings there as well in the text.

- So I almost changed the title to 'warnings and blessings for all ages,' but obviously I did not.
- I held back because I think it is important to remember that God's warnings are always blessings!
- All we have to do is take them seriously!

IF these elders listened to Paul and protected the Church there at Ephesus it would bring blessing to the sheep and to them as they rejoiced.

- While it is important that our doctrines be protected & cherished: Our relationships must be maintained as well: We are God's sheep!

We know from the letter that Jesus sent to this church in the Book of Revelation that these elders did go on to fight the good fight against these false teachers, but sadly they soon forgot why they fought the battles...

Revelation 2:1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 2 I know your works,

your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

- **The Elders fought to keep the right doctrines there at Ephesus, but that was not their only job as shepherds in the Church which God purchased with His own blood...**

Jesus continues in verse 4: “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly & remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent. 6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

- **So again we see that warnings keep us on the right path and even when we stray we learn that repentance brings us back to the midst of the paradise of God.**

Sometimes it is easy to see how some of the basic warnings in life lead to blessings: We tell children not to play in the street and they do not get run over.

We tell adults not to drink & drive and we avoid the kind of accidents that took the life of Courtney and her daughter just a few weeks ago.

What we need to learn, what we need to practice, and what we need to communicate to our covenant children is how this applies to all of the warnings that God gives us!

We see here in the text the warning to elders so that their church can be a faithful church, full of joy and service.

The Fifth Commandment tells children to obey their parents: At times they don't understand why certain commands are given, like don't go outside the backyard. Children who don't obey such a command put themselves in great danger and cause a lot of tension in the home. Those who obey have complete freedom to enjoy the yard and all it has to offer and experience a sweet relationship with mom or dad.

When children are very young we as parents are given the rod and God's Word to instruct and encourage those who cannot yet choose what is right for themselves, to walk in the right path. If we fail to heed God's warning about ignoring this responsibility, we cause them and ourselves a great deal of trouble in the later years when they need to understand obedience.

When the children are older we warn them to not marry outside of the faith and against having sexual experiences outside of marriage.

- **Those who stray outside of these fences face consequences that will often haunt them for the rest of their lives.**

Those who desire to rebel will argue, “What is wrong with a little stolen kiss or even more as you search for the person to marry?” Isn't that what love is all about? For those who think they are wise beyond their years and may think such things, perhaps they should consider this:

- **What would my reaction be if someone told me that Linda had stolen a little kiss from Mark back in the kitchen last week!**

If you rightly think that such an occurrence would be wrong and disgusting, please ponder this:

- **Why it would be OK for any young person to do such a thing to some else's future wife or husband.**

On the flip side, if we trust the one who created the sexual union and stay within the fences He has built, then we are able to look forward to a lifetime of bless with the one person who God intended us to share the marriage bed with!

- Obviously I could go on and on with many examples, but one area where it is very important for us to heed God's various warning today is with the area of money.

Sadly many individuals, many families, certainly our state and national governments and most of the world have decided that God's financial rules or fences do not apply to them.

- We have exchanged the simple "Thou Shalt Not Steal" for a host of government regulations that try to establish what is "fair" in some man's eyes.
- We have exchanged sound money for the kind we use in a Monopoly game, property rights for permits and the right to life for convenience.
- We have as a result exchanged the prosperity we have seen in most Western nations who obeyed God for a time for the chaos we see today.

Again, when it comes to money and finances, a simple return to the area within the fences or warnings that God has given will bring much blessing.

- And lest we want to hear the kind of letter that Jesus sent to Ephesus, we must remember that well-behaved children, strong marriages and a vibrant economy mean nothing if we forget our first love!
- As the Holy Spirit fills the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus, He will continue to put in place faithful elders who will shepherd God's people.

May we never take our eyes off the great shepherd who said in John 10:9 "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out & find pasture. 10 The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep."

Communion Meditation: Psalm 74:2:

" O God, why have You cast us off forever?

Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?

2 Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old, The tribe of Your inheritance, which You have redeemed—

This Mount Zion where You have dwelt. "