



35b | ACTS 20:28-38

A CHARGE TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

Follow Christ, and he will give the increase.

Outline

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Call to Worship

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy ¹³ before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness. —Psalm 96:11-13

Songs

Behold Our God

Love Ran Red (At the Cross)

It is Well with My Soul

I Surrender All

Announcements

WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

Introduction

Last week we talked about the story of a professor who stood before his class, and he had a wide-mouthed jar.

In that jar he'd put some **large stones**, and he filled it up to the brim with these large stones. And then, he asked his class, "Is the jar full?" And some of the students carelessly said, "Yes, the jar is full." It was up to the very top with those large stones. He said, "No, the jar is not full."

Then, he took some **scoops of gravel** and put them in the jar and shook it 'til the gravel filled all the crevices there. Then he asked the question: "Now is the jar full?" Of course, the students were a bit wary. They didn't want to answer. But, one or two said, "Yes, now it's full." He said, "No, it's not yet full."

Then, he took some **sand**, and poured the sand in over the gravel, and shook it, and compacted it, and smoothed the sand off up at the top. "Now," he said, "is the jar full?" No one wanted to lift their hand anymore, but maybe one said, "Well, it looks full." He said, as you can guess, "No, it's not full."

And then, he took some water and poured **the water in over the sand** 'til it came up to the brim. And then, he said, "Now is the jar full?" And, they had to admit it certainly looked full. Then he asked this question to this class: he said, "Now, what is the truth, the lesson, in what I have just done?" He said, "Here is the lesson: **if I had not put the big rocks in first**, there would have been no room for them later on." And so it is for us: if we don't put in the "big rocks"—the most important things—first in our lives, there won't be room for them later. Remember the words of Jesus.

Matthew 6:33 | Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

What are the big rocks? What are the things that really matter, things that you may be leaving out of your life—a lot of smaller things that have filled the capacity of your life, and you have left out the things that really matter, the big rocks? That's what we're going to be talking about—things that really, really matter.

In our text in Acts 20, the Apostle Paul is giving his farewell address to the elders at the church of Ephesus. They met him in **Miletus** because it was too dangerous for Paul to go back to Ephesus. He's had **taught them, disciplined them, and mentored them**. Now, he's **saying goodbye to them** for the last time. This is Paul's final farewell. They know that perhaps the next time **they meet it'll be on the shore of eternity**.¹ Paul

¹ Adrian Rogers, "Things That Really Matter," in *Adrian Rogers Sermon Archive* (Signal Hill, CA: Rogers Family Trust, 2017), Ac 20:17–38.

gives them the five “big rocks,” or the five foundations of a fruitful, supernatural ministry for the Lord.

Key thought: Lay the foundations of your life on Christ, and he will give the increase of supernatural influence and legacy, long after you are gone.

Last week, we talked about the importance of **counseling yourself**.

1. COUNSEL YOURSELF (20:25-28A)

The first thing he tells them to prepare for when he is gone is that they need to **care for their own spiritual walk**. They have to be in the habit of counseling themselves and living according to the word in faithfulness. Paul had done that for them.

When Paul says, “**Pay careful attention to yourselves**” in verse 28, he is preaching what he practices. Paul has faithfully cared for his own spiritual walk with God that he could “proclaim the kingdom” with power and conviction.

Acts 20:28a | Pay careful attention to yourselves...

Paul has faithfully preached the kingdom, and now he will never see them again. He has given **them an example of faithful ministry** to follow. He preached the kingdom to himself first, and then to others. I love the words of Martyn Lloyd Jones.

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?... Talk to yourself, and though the devil will suggest that because you do not feel, you are not a Christian, say: ... ‘Whether I feel or not, I believe the Scriptures. I believe God’s word is true and I will stay my soul on it, I will believe in it come what may.—Martyn Lloyd-Jones²

We must be constantly teaching the word of God to each other dear saints, but first we must counsel ourselves. That’s where faithful ministry comes from.

Choosing to walk in the word on a personal level, counseling yourself on a daily basis, is going to result in a life of fruitful and faithful ministry like Paul. He was constantly proclaiming the message of the kingdom because it had changed his life so much.

What about you? Have you tapped into the word in such a way that it is personal and enriching to you so that others can follow your counsel? Are you able to read the Bible on a constant basis so that you are growing and changing into the image of Jesus Christ? This is one of those “**big rock**” **foundations in your life**. Daily walking with Christ, proclaiming the kingdom, will result in a faithful ministry.

Sound doctrine is vital, but alone it is not enough, because according to Scripture, the fundamental qualification for pastoral ministry is **godly character**. This is what Paul is getting at when he tells the pastors and elders at Ephesus to “pay careful attention” to their personal walk. The elders are to **keep a watch on their own lives** lest they **set a bad example** to those they shepherd. It is a fact that the saints of a particular congregation will hardly ever rise to greater expressions of holiness than that of their

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 20-21.

elders.³ Oh, that we as your elders would have a heart for Christ above all else. Neither skill, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, nor reputation, nor personality, nor apparent fruitfulness of public ministry is enough. Look carefully at the qualifications for the elder in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and you will encounter **a profile of personal holiness**. Listen to Paul's admonition later to Timothy.

1 Timothy 4:16 | 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.

Of course, **it's easier to examine our books** than to examine our hearts and lives. It's far easier to talk about a text we are learning than to walk in the truth of that Scripture. Oh, that we would walk in the word. Walk in the light! Listen to what Puritan Richard **Baxter** wrote.

It is a palpable error of some ministers... who study hard to preach exactly, yet study little or not at all to live exactly.⁴ —Richard Baxter

Oh that we would not just know the word, but **walk in the word!** Baxter goes on to speak of the damage done by inconstant elders and pastors.

Take heed to yourself, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling blocks from your own life before poor blind sinners, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your life, what you have proclaimed with your tongue.⁵ —Richard Baxter

Pray for your elders that **we may not unsay with our lives** what we say with our tongues! The saints need a consistent walk from their elders just as much as the sound teaching. They need to see that **sound teaching results in holiness of life**. We cannot be content with merely understanding robust theology if we don't worship Christ from our hearts and in our walk. Bad living almost always reveals bad theology on the heart level

There ought to be the fruit of the Spirit that emanates from our attitudes and life. Indeed, **no matter how extensive one's scriptural knowledge, how amazing one's memory, it is self-deception if that is all there is**. Sound doctrine is the foundation for godly living, and it is not mere proclamation, but obedience to the word that demonstrates genuine faith.⁶ Spurgeon said it well to his pastor's college.

Our characters must be more persuasive than our speech.⁷

Pray for your elders that each of us would persevere in the power of the Holy Spirit and live a life of holiness and joy as we endeavor to preach the word and live a humble example before the flock.

Application: (1) Remember your homework from last week? Did you start reading at least two chapters of the Scriptures this week and asking yourselves questions about it? Are you applying the word of God to your life? If I were to ask you, what were two or three truths that you learned this week from your quiet time with God, what would they be?

³ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 582.

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1974), 63-64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶ Peter H. Davids, *New International Biblical Commentary: James* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 41.

⁷ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1881), 13.

(2) Are you counseling yourself? The point of reading the word is to remember it and to adopt it into your life. Are you controlled by your emotions more than the word of God? Put away your deceitful desires and your fleshly emotions, and counsel your heart with God's word. Instead of **anger**, forgive. Instead of **pride**, be small and humble. Instead of **fear, despair, and depression**, put on faith in all God's promises. It takes work. And you can't do it alone. Think about a brother or sister that you can be accountable to in this congregation. Pray that God will give you a Barnabas, a brother or a sister of encouragement.

2. SHEPHERD THE FLOCK (20:28B)

Acts 20:28b | 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.

If we are going to have lasting fruit as a congregation, the elders have to shepherd the flock. That means we have to teach you how to walk in God's word with each other. You can't do this alone. Elders are to shepherd the flock, and **then the flock needs to shepherd each other**. Shepherds are to **model what the entire church of God should be doing**. We are only as useful as we are devoted to Christ.⁸

A WORD ABOUT MEMBERSHIP

Acts 20:28b | And to all the flock.

Notice first, there is a word about **membership**. Notice that the church is compared to **a flock of sheep**. A flock is not a random collection of lambs. **Sheep belong to specific flocks**. Ultimately all Christians are part of Jesus's flock (universal church). Christ is the chief Shepherd. Elders are under-shepherds who care for Christ's church and give his lambs spiritual protection and direction. There are many metaphors for the church. We are called a **flock, a temple (Eph 2:21), a family (Eph 2:19), and a body (1 Cor 12:27)**. All share the characteristic of being joined together and led. The sheep are to be shepherded like a flock, cared for. Looked out for. Are you being shepherded? Are you committed to a local church?

A WORD ABOUT ELDERSHIP

Acts 20:28c | In which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Second there is a word about **eldership**. The Holy Spirit made the Ephesian elders, and all the rightly called men of the church to be overseers or literally guardians of the church. Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders as a father to his dear sons in the faith. The apostle is intimately acquainted with their frailties and the perils of pastoral ministry in a sinful world. Yet he knows the sufficient grace of God. they can do it. How can weak and frail elders shepherd the flock? **Shepherds lead the flock by the Holy Spirit who**

⁸ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 582.

made us overseers. We do not rely on man's wisdom or man's organization. We rely on the Holy Spirit's power that raised Jesus from the dead.

Our job as elders, according to Ephesians 4 is to "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood" (Eph 4:12-13).

A WORD ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

Acts 20:28d | To care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

There is a word about **discipleship**. A disciple is literally a "learner." Elders are to teach and help disciple God's flock. As God's shepherds, we are "to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." The price God paid was the blood of his own Son.

Elders are to care for the church in the same way Christ did: we are to give our life and our time and all that we are to the sheep. Elders will get their hearts broken many times over because we care. **We care and are willing to have thick skin and a big heart.** We are not to be jaded by the problems of the sheep in a broken, sinful world. We are to **keep a tender, caring heart.** And who is our example for that? Our Lord Jesus Christ is our model, who laid down his life for the sheep. He obtained his flock by giving **his own blood**. We keep going after the sheep, laying our lives down for them, as Christ did for his church.

Dear saints, **pray for your elders and pastors.** We are called to shepherd you. We ask that you think the best and realize the many obstacles we have against us. Just as with Christ, he had spiritual, evil enemies in the realm of darkness. Satan would have shepherds to be discouraged, but the Spirit of God is our comforter. Walk together with us as elders. If you feel you are being left behind or neglected, call us. Talk to us. Let us know.

If you really want the Lord to bless our congregation, we have to **see the elders training the saints for the work of ministry** (Eph 4:11-12). The shepherds equip the saints with the word, and also give them an example with their lives, but it is the saints who do the work of the ministry. Every saint is a minister. Let's lay down those big foundational rocks in our lives.

This is the chief way the elders care for the flock. The more this happens, the more the health of the church increases. The more people we can reach. This is the work of discipleship.

A WORD ABOUT HEADSHIP

Acts 20:28e | Which he obtained with his own blood.

Finally, there is a word about headship. **Jesus is the head of the church.** We as elders only ask you to follow us as we follow Christ. Jesus doesn't need Paul or any apostle, or any elder, but he chooses to use "jars of clay." He calls and uses the weak that "no flesh should glory in his presence." He purchased all believers with his own blood. Christ is the ultimate Shepherd of the church, not Paul, and not the elders. That is a relief in some ways. **Christ will build his church**, and the gates of hell will not prevail. Christ's headship is also an incredible motivation to make sure the saints are living under the

lordship of Jesus. We plead with you, be shepherded by Christ. Yes, he uses broken jars of clay like us elders and the saints here at Living Hope. Be engaged in this body. Don't just be a Sunday only Christian. Be an everyday Christian, connected with the body.

3. PROTECT GOD'S PEOPLE (20:29-31)

We need the shepherding of the body, because we are under attack. The elders are called to protect, and we are all called to protect each other.

Paul calls the elders to guard and protect God's people. False doctrine brings wrong living, which will bring dishonor to God and misery to the saints. How vital it is to look out for the dangers that harass the sheep. Paul provides a threefold incentive for this watch-care ministry.

There is, as it were, a threefold attack against the church.

DANGERS AROUND US

First, Paul says there are dangers around us.

Acts 20:29 | I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

There are dangers *around us*, “**wolves**” that want to surround the flock and **ravage her** (20:29). Paul was referring to false teachers, the counterfeits who exploit the church for personal gain (Mt 7:15–23; 10:16; Lk 10:3; 2 Pet 2:1–3).⁹ How important it is that believers know the word of God and be able to live above the world, exposing false teaching, and living a life of holiness in the light of God's word.

Fierce wolves will attack the church, “which he obtained with his own blood” (20:28). There are some who will be drawn away by their **enticing words to believe lies shrouded in plausible ideas**. Lives will be compromised, marriages ruined, testimonies in disarray. The **church is in the midst of hostile territory**—wolves may appear charming from a distance, but they have teeth and intend to use them for wicked and evil purposes. **Elders need to surround the weak** and bruised and **protect them** from the pack of wolves that encircles, being ready to lay down their lives, if necessary, in order that the flock be spared.

The only way to resist the dangers around you is to resist the devil by knowing Christ and trusting his word. You have to be filled with the Spirit, with a heart filled with holiness, and the devil cannot harass you as he wants. Sure, we can be tested by the devil like Job, but being filled with the Spirit, we won't give in. We'll bow down and worship like Job when all is stripped from us. Stay close to the Shepherd because the wolves are coming! **Expect satanic attack!**

DANGERS AMONG US

Then, Paul says there are dangers among us. Some false teachers will arise from outside, but alarmingly, some will arise “from among your own selves.”

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 487.

Acts 20:30 | And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Savage wolves will arise from within **the ranks of the Ephesian eldership** itself. Some among them would become intoxicated with the power and control the office brings. This could happen to any of us!

Preaching Jesus, not ourselves. We want **followers of Jesus, not ourselves!** Instead of being **servant leaders**, they would become **religious popes**. Today, the devil has created a celebrity culture instead of servant leaders!¹⁰

Accountability. The key to protecting this church or any church is **accountability among the elders and among the men of this congregation**. It's your responsibility to make sure the elders continue in humility. Love and support them. Support that kind of elder ministry. Don't allow yourself to be a distraction from what God is doing. Stay filled with the Spirit and busy in the means of grace, or you may fall away.

Old Time Preaching and Teaching. **Make sure the elders are not teaching anything new.** We are not here to teach **psychology** or the latest in cultural trends. God forbid we do that! We are here to teach the word of God and lift up the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are teaching nothing new. If it's new, it's not true. There's nothing novel about the gospel. It was preached to Abraham. It's preached to us today, "we come to God by grace through faith." Christ alone! There's no other gospel. At our church, **we will not allow the word of God to be twisted!** We don't rest on psychology or self-help or self-promotion. Kick out those wolves who would ever do that!

DANGERS WITHIN US

Then, Paul says there are dangers within us.

Acts 20:31 | Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

Be alert. Paul didn't even trust himself, but admonished everyone from the **Scriptures day and night, with tears**. He applied the Scriptures to himself first. That's where the tears came from. It was personal with Paul. Are you personally moved by the Scriptures, or is it just an exercise for you?

We are called to be alert to the move of the Spirit in our own hearts, that the Lord moves by the Scriptures, which Paul preached for three years, day and night. I can just hear Paul reading from Isaiah 53, "By his stripes we are healed," tears rolling down his face. "I'm healed. He healed me of my self-righteousness and all my sin." Let's believe it and live it to the point of tears and deep emotions. **If we are not gripped by the Scriptures, we are in danger from our own hearts!**

¹⁰ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 585-586.

4. STUDY THE WORD (20:32)

Paul was going away. He could not stay to chase away the wolves. The flock would not be left defenseless, however; they had God, and they had their elders, whom the Holy Spirit had appointed to that flock. The elders had to teach the flock, as Paul did, that the greatest defense they had was God's word. If they would cultivate a relationship with God through his word, they would be unstoppable.

Acts 20:32 | 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.

You can't grow without the constant application of the word to your life. **If you are not growing, you are backsliding.** Here we see another great foundation stone of the Christian life that elders are to lead in is **the study and application of the word of God.** It is therefore, vital that we read and study the Bible.

THE BIBLE SAVES US

Acts 20:32a | And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace.

It's the word that transforms us! It showed you Christ and saved your soul!

It is by the preaching of the word of grace, the gospel that we are saved. By the word we were drawn to God and **regenerated.** The word saves us and brings us into a vital relationship with God as adopted children of God.

There is a connection here between a personal walk with God ("I commend you to God") and the word of God ("the word of his grace"). **God reveals himself to us through his word. We cannot know him otherwise.** The word of God alone is able to open up the way to a relationship with the Lord, and the spiritual leader must spend time daily in the word of God and prayer, living out this relationship with God, in a vital, personal walk with him.¹¹

The elders are protected by God's word, and they protect the flock with it. You must also protect yourself with the word of God. You are a child of God! Put on the helmet of salvation and keep the sword of the Spirit ready and active, which is the word of God (Eph 6:17)!

THE BIBLE STRENGTHENS US

Acts 20:32b | The word of his grace... is able to build you up.

The Bible has **strengthening** power to build up our faith. We get **spiritual faith muscles as we obey and apply the word of God to our lives.** The word is the only standard for truth and faith. We must put away the lies of the wicked one through God's gracious word. There is no other way to grow. As we put away the lies and see God in his glory, we grow into the image of Christ. We also enjoy life a whole lot more. The joy of the Lord is our strength. We become God-dependent, not man-dependent. The only way to grow in this way is through the word of God.

¹¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 487.

THE BIBLE SECURES US

Acts 20:32c | I commend you to ... the word of his grace, which is able ... to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

The word of God stabilizes us. Our lives are no longer tossed to and fro, but we are stable and founded on our inheritance, who is God himself.

The Bible has **securing** power to guarantee our inheritance, which is **God himself**. Under the new covenant, **the ultimate “inheritance” of God’s people is not the land of Israel (that’s a picture)** but the final inheritance of the kingdom of God is God himself. This inheritance is certain, obtained and held by those God has sanctified; it is **possessed already through faith** and the Spirit, the guarantee of that inheritance (Eph 1:14).¹²

If you live life through your emotions for the fleeting things of this life, you will be unstable. But if you found your lives on your eternal inheritance, which is God himself, following the word instead of your emotions, you will be more stable than the strongest mountain.

THE BIBLE SANCTIFIES US

Acts 20:32d | Among all those who are sanctified.

The Bible has **sanctifying** power to conform us into the image of Jesus Christ.¹³ The evangelist Dwight L. Moody once said it well.

Sin will keep you from the Bible, or the Bible will keep you from sin. Here search, and great shall be your store. Here drink, and you shall thirst no more.¹⁴

God’s word has the power to protect us. Remember Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn 17:17). The whole purpose and goal of our lives is to enjoy God and to love him, being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:28-29).

5. SPURN THE WORLD (20:33-38)

Paul got rid of any desires for self or for this world that would distract from the kingdom. That’s what we need to do. We are dead to the world. Jesus told us that we are “in the world” but we are not “of the world” (Jn 17:16). We are actually living for another world. We exist, spiritually, in another age. We are united with Christ in the heavens, and our heart is to be there, with Christ, in his kingdom. And we pray and live that Christ’s “will would be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). Like Paul, we spurn the world. We are crucified to it. We live for a better world, one which will fully be revealed at Christ’s coming, but one that, nonetheless, exists now, in his people. We are his temple,

¹² James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, *John–Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 528.

¹³ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Ac 20:32.

¹⁴ Dwight Lyman Moody, *Notes from My Bible: From Genesis to Revelation* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1895), 8.

and we live according to the new world that Christ will bring with him. That's how Paul lived. He expressed this to the Ephesians elders.

OUR CHRIST-CENTERED HOPE

Paul was not looking for this world's goods. Paul's hope was in Christ alone. Though he was biblically allowed to have support from the church at Ephesus and other churches (1 Thess 2:6), since "the laborer is worthy of his hire" (1 Tim 5:18), he chose not to take support to exemplify a heavenly hope.

Acts 20:33 | I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

Paul said, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." **His hope was Christ alone.** He was content in any circumstance. What more can any of us want than the Redeemer who loved us and died for us?

When Paul wrote to Timothy about the qualifications for an elder, he is expressly stated that he must not be guilty of the sin of covetousness (1 Tim 3:3), and Paul lived this out.¹⁵ The Lord Jesus Christ put it simply and directly when he warned us of the danger of trying to have two masters.

Matthew 6:24 | No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and mammon.

Those who care for the flock of God **must not do so for material gain**, but for Christ alone. Paul has just talked about his "inheritance" that he had in Christ. Anything compared to knowing Christ, to Paul, was refuse.

Philippians 3:8 | Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.

You cannot be an effective Christian if your hope is in the security of this world. If we are to grow and change in Christ, our relationship with money needs to be one of stewardship, not mastery. For any servant of God, money must never be a motivation.

Have you ever gone to take a drink of milk, and it was sour? That's what idolatry does to our relationship with Christ. If money and earthly security is your motivation in life, or if you are afraid to lose your earthly security, your growth will be stifled by your covetousness. You are going to be at a standstill. **Put your all on the altar, seek first the kingdom of Jesus, and be sure everything else will be added unto you (Mt 6:33).**

OUR CHRIST-CENTERED HANDS

Paul was not worldly in what he worked for. Everything he did was for the kingdom. Paul's hands were holding onto heavenly treasure. He invested in the kingdom not in his own earthly security.

Acts 20:34-35 | 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

¹⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 488.

words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Paul was a man of great sacrifice, like his Lord. He was up early and, most probably, late to bed, with his settled hours of prayer and devotion to God. Then he had his long stretches of physical work with Aquila and Priscilla in the shop, snatching hours here and there to go and teach in the lecture-room, hurrying round to someone's house where there was suffering or sorrow. He loved to disciple the saints, and the best times were not merely in the lecture hall, but in their times of greatest need.¹⁶

That a great apostle, filled with the Holy Spirit, uniquely gifted, gloriously blessed in the ministry, should find it necessary at times to labor with his hands in order to support himself in the ministry speaks volumes. **His example is so different from the false teachers** today who preach a prosperity gospel. They don't know the people they shepherd, because as wolves they don't care about shepherding, but fleecing the sheep.

Paul was never a burden on the saints but provided for himself when necessary. Paul is not issuing a command for pastors to be bi-vocational, but to underscore that he displayed his genuine concern for them the whole time he was with them by taking care of his own needs rather than asking for support.¹⁷

OUR CHRIST-CENTERED HEART

Paul did not love this world. He loved the true and living God. He loved and sacrificed for God's people. He **demonstrated his relationship with God not merely through teaching, but through walking with the Ephesians themselves in prayer and in life-on-life discipleship.** At his final goodbye, he broke down weeping and fell down on his knees, asking God to sustain him and the flock of dear sheep at Ephesus.

Acts 20:36-37 | And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him.

Oh, the tears! And today, it seems there is **little connection in churches** between believers. The elders had a deep and loving relationship with Paul. The warmth of hearts on fire for God and filled with love for one another begins with the elders. The ministry of prayer must have reflected hundreds of prayer times the elders had together.

This is how I feel about the elders at our church. Continually we are praying together, fellowshiping together, even at times with sweet tears of joy for what God is doing in our congregation. We can spurn the world by keeping our hearts warm for God and for each other.

OUR CHRIST-CENTERED HARVEST

When Paul said goodbye, it was incredibly emotional for the Ephesian elders.

Acts 20:37-38 | And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸being sorrowful most of all because of the word he

¹⁶ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 136.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *John-Acts*, 528.

had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

The Ephesian church led by these dear elders was **God's harvest**. Paul said that some plant and some water, but "**God gives the increase.**" They may not see each other again, but it is not Paul that builds the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). Yet there are still strong and **deep emotions**. There is loss when we say goodbye on earth. There will be a time when God calls you or me somewhere else. That's not my desire. My goal is to spend a lifetime at one church. I don't know if that is possible, but it is my deep desire and hope. But there will be a day when we say goodbye either through God calling us to heaven or calling us to another ministry. If that day comes, I will weep. I love you all more than any treasure you could dream of on this earth. You are eternal treasures to me. You are God's letters written with the Spirit's own words on your heart. You are unspeakably precious to me. And this deep love I have for the congregation begins with the elders. I love you all. It is my highest honor in life to serve God with you. I have always been unworthy to serve with such distinguished me. I will never deserve it, but it is my deepest joy to walk side by side together with you and the Holy Spirit. Isn't God good?

Paul knew that death was coming. This is why his goodbye is accompanied by much *weeping* since they will never see him again (20:37–38, cf 20:25). They show their **deep affection for him by hugging and kissing** (20:36), a practice in harmony with the apostle's own teaching on holding others deep in the heart and showing mutual affection (Phil 1:7–8; Rom 12:10). **In deep sorrow and love, the Ephesian elders reluctantly escort Paul to the ship** and see him on board for his long journey to Jerusalem (20:38b).¹⁸

The address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus marks the **end of Paul's missionary work** according to the account in Acts. From there he journeyed to Jerusalem where he was to be arrested and imprisoned, subjected to various trials, and finally sent off to Rome to appear before the Emperor.¹⁹ This is how it should be. We plant, we water, but God must give the increase. We leave the ultimate results up to God.

Conclusion

Do these things and you will have a fruitful ministry. We are all leaving behind a legacy. What will your legacy be?

As elders and shepherds we want to set the example for the flock. **They do what all Christians should be doing.** They lay the foundation for an abundant Christian life as they counsel themselves in the word, as they shepherd the flock, as they protect God's people, study the word, and spurn the world. This is what we all should be doing.

For my first job after college, I was an **iron worker and National Bullet Proof** in Hickory Hills, Illinois. I'm completely shocked to this day that I got the job! I had never worked in iron working, so why would they hire me? The application basically tested my math and fractions skills. Could I read instructions! I could follow directions. I could divide and subdivide fractions. After that, I feel that I became a success at National Bullet Proof. I certainly wasn't their most valuable worker—but I knew how to follow the blueprints, how to read the tape measure, and to how follow the boss.

¹⁸ Chalmer Ernest Faw, *Acts*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 235.

¹⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 356.

The boss, whose name was Fred, was the owner, and he was beloved by all, even though he was a pretty inflexible person. We were not union, so he had trained every work on the floor how to do what they were doing. He taught the welders. He taught the shearers. He taught the polishers. He taught those who formed the steel and punched the steel. He might have even taught the painters and shippers. He could train anyone to do anything. That was Fred's reputation. If you didn't want to do the job right, he would only half-jokingly threaten to hire the next guy walking in front of the plant to do your job.

In following Christ, you will counsel yourself, shepherd the flock, protect God's people, study the word, and spurn the world. And **you will bear fruit**. He can use anyone, but he chooses to use you!