

Sermon 65, Elders, Be on Guard!, Acts 20:28-31

Proposition: Because Jesus bought God’s flock, elders have to guard that flock by shepherding it.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, famously, we live in an era of distraction. Just one tiny example: in my 11 years reviewing books for WORLD magazine, the length of a typical book review has gone from 300 words to 125. Why? Because that is the attention span of the typical reader. This morning, Paul urges us to fight back against that trend toward the vanishing attention span. He tells us to pay attention, translated “take heed” or “watch yourselves,” or even “be on guard for yourselves.”

I preach this morning to the elders among us, including myself. Men, I believe that God is calling some of you to be elders. Women, pray for your man, whether he is presently an elder or not. Everyone here, including myself — listen to the great apostle’s charge to the elders. We have some major watching out to do. We need to pay attention. We need to pay attention to ourselves and to the flock because, Paul says, Jesus bought that flock for God by means of His own blood.

I. Whom to Guard, v. 28a

Let’s dig in. The first thing that Paul addresses is the question of what needs our watchful attention. The answer is not baseball scores. It’s not international politics. It’s not GDP or the Dow Jones Industrial Average. There is no command from God to pay careful attention to current events. Instead, there are two things that need your watchful attention if you’re an elder this morning.

A. Yourself

In keeping with Solomon’s admonition to watch over your heart with all diligence, Paul urges the elder and the would-be elder to watch themselves.

Now, when do you get told to watch yourself? The answer is when you're doing something wrong, or about to do something wrong. If you're traveling through the booby-trapped cave with Indiana Jones or Samuel L. Jackson and you reach out to touch the wrong thing, what does he do? He spins around, shoves his torch in your face, and hisses "Watch yourself!"

You have the potential to make everything go wrong. Elders, you and I are likely to touch the tripwire, to set off the booby trap, to unleash the spikes and the boulders and the trapdoors and whatever else is waiting to attack and destroy the flock. Put in terms of Paul's shepherding metaphor here, you and I are what stands between the flock and death. We need to be in good shape spiritually — not intellectually and morally fouled up, but having clear heads and clean hands. If you are on the take, getting money from shady sources, you can't watch yourself. You're already compromised. You've already given yourself permission to wrong the flock. If you're getting sexual favors from your position, you're not watching over yourself. If you pay attention to your job and your hobbies and your recreation but not to your own walk with God, you are not watching over yourself.

Put simply, to watch yourself is to pay attention to whether you are fit to shepherd the flock of God. Are you ready to stand against the wolves, or are you going to stand by while the wolves do their thing? Or, heaven forbid, are you so far gone in sin that you'll sell out the flock to the wolves?

B. God's Flock

The second thing you have to pay attention to is the flock. What kind of shape is the flock in? How is their walk with God? What's going on in the families under your care? If someone comes to you and says "We filed for divorce last week" are you going to be blindsided? If someone comes to you and says "I have decided that God isn't real and I'm leaving the church," will that be a total surprise to you?

Now, you can't know everything. We elders are not called to omniscience. But we are called to pay attention. You know the difference between something going wrong when you weren't watching it and something going bad while you were watching it. The difference is elementary. If you're driving down the road, staring at your phone as you try to type a text with one hand, don't be surprised if you find the nose of your car stuck through a guardrail. You weren't paying attention. But if you are standing at the griddle, pancake flipper in hand, ready to turn those tortillas the instant they get done, paying attention to what's going on with them, you will genuinely be surprised to find that one is burnt. How could it be burnt when you were watching it to prevent that very thing? The reality is that even when you're paying the closest attention you can, some things will still go wrong. But a whole lot fewer things will go wrong if you're watching than if you're not watching. If you're watching the tortillas, you'll burn one occasionally. If you put them on the griddle and then head out to mow the lawn, you're going to lose them all.

The same goes for the flock. Elders, if you don't talk to the sheep, don't gather with them, don't ask them questions and listen for the response, you won't know what's going on. You'll be missing in action, out mowing the lawn when you should be watching over the flock.

II. How to Guard: Shepherd the Flock, v. 28c

And that, in turn, brings up the question of what exactly you are supposed to do. Elders should not only pay attention and know themselves and their flocks. Elders are supposed to use that knowledge for a particular purpose — a purpose Paul describes as “shepherding the church of God.”

What does it mean to shepherd the church of God? The Latin word for “shepherd” is “pastor.” To shepherd or pastor the church is the task of all elders, not just the one called “the pastor.” All elders have a duty to shepherd. A shepherd feeds the sheep, watches the sheep, protects the sheep, and cares for the sheep. That is the task of the elder. To shepherd the church of God is to give spiritual food, consisting of the word of God, to every member of the church. It is to make sure that the people in the church are spiritually cared for. It is to make sure that everyone in the church has the resources they need for spiritual growth. Yes, we elders can't make the sheep eat or drink. But in the name of God, we are commanded to make sure that the food is out there. That's why we have two services every Sunday, an additional hour of instruction in God's word that we call Sunday School, and at least one prayer meeting every week. On a monthly basis we have men's and women's Bible studies as well, plus fellowship meals and other church events. All of these are occasions where spiritual food is put out for the sheep to come and feast on.

The food is also a way of protecting against words. The number of spiritual teachings out there is immense and always growing. It is the job of the elder to provide guidance to the flock so that they don't embrace wrong and evil spiritual teachings. That is what we are here for, fellow elders.

Basically, to shepherd the church is to help it grow in love for Jesus and obedience to Jesus. It is the same process elsewhere called “making disciples” and “teaching everything profitable.” That is the job of the elder. Paul did that job, as we saw last time. But here, on the beach at Miletus, he handed the job over to the elders.

It's a big job, and the bigger the flock, the bigger the job. There have certainly been times when I've longed for a larger church with more resources. But on the whole, I know God has put me in this church because it is of the size that I can faithfully shepherd. Brothers and sisters, when someone from the church calls, I want to be able to talk for two hours. I frequently do, in fact. That would not be possible if I were called to shepherd a larger congregation. In a church of this size, we elders are able to keep with most of the important events in the life of all our fellow worshippers — something that wouldn't be possible in a church of 120 people. So God knew what He was doing when He called the elders that He called in this place. He still knows what He's doing, and He will continue to raise up the elders we need to shepherd this flock.

III. Why to Guard, vv. 28-31

Paul doesn't just say to guard the flock by paying attention to it and discipling it with abundant food from the Bible. He also gives us a really good reason to guard the flock. In fact, he gives us four really good reasons. They are Trinitarian reasons, relating to the Father, Son, and Spirit. They are Christ-centered reasons, relating to the blood of God Himself. They are threat-aware reasons: wolves are coming. And they circle back again to the example that Paul set, as a man who didn't just tell others what to do but personally showed them how to do it.

A. Because You Are Spirit-Appointed Overseers, v. 28b

The first reason to shepherd God's flock is this: the Holy Spirit gave you the job. If you're hired for a high-level position, say a cabinet position in the administration of the President of the United States, the person who hired you is likely a fairly important individual, someone you don't want to let down. But Paul says that if you're an elder in this church or any church this morning, then you have been picked by someone far more important than the Leader of the Free World. You have been picked by the Holy Spirit of God to do this job. God the Spirit has set you the task of shepherding the flock in which He's placed you. And He has given you a job title: Bishop. That's right. The word in Greek is *episkopos*, and the traditional English equivalent is "Bishop." A bishop is a mighty ecclesiastical personage, called in the Catholic tradition a "prince of the church." In plainer English, a word not derived from Greek, the word *episkopos* means "overseer." You have been set by God the Holy Spirit to watch the church, and you are responsible for how it goes. The overseer is not an overlooker; he is the one, set by God in a ministry team as we see exemplified all through Acts and the NT more generally, who is supposed to watch and supervise what happens in the church. Ultimately, as our Book of Church Order phrases it, "The church Session is charged with maintaining the spiritual government of the church" (12-5).

So that's why you need to pay attention to yourself and the church. It's your job to oversee what happens in your church.

B. Because God Purchased the Church With His Own Blood, v. 28c

But Paul gives an even weightier reason. God made you an elder, but He can take away that job again. You may be released from the office of elder. But Paul adds something that is never going to change: God purchased the church with His own blood.

This passage is amazing because it ascribes blood to God, who has no body and no blood. But because Jesus is God, and He has blood, Paul does not hesitate to say that God purchased the church with His own blood, or perhaps the Greek means "with the blood of His Own." Either way, God gave the most precious thing in the world in exchange for the church. Who did He buy it from? He purchased us as a people for Himself from Himself — from His own wrath against our sin. He saved us from His own punishment. Yes, in one sense He bought us from the Devil. But in the most basic meaning of the phrase, He redeemed us from His own wrath. He bought us, bailing us out of Hell.

God can make anything. If Satan had demanded as ransom a universe the size of this one filled with solid gold, God could have handed it to him in a nanosecond. If Satan had asked for

an orgasm that would last for 100 billion years, God could have given it to him. And those ransoms would not have cost God anything.

But God was not ransoming us from Satan, who can be fobbed off with anything. Because God was the offended party, and He was ransoming us from His own wrath, He demanded something meaningful. He demanded something that He could not just create for Himself. He needed something that would cost even Him something in order for it to be something valuable to Him.

Imagine, as a human being, that you are an African warlord. You have kidnapped one of your enemies, a warlord from a neighboring district. His supporters negotiate with you and offer you ten million cubic feet of air for his return.

How would you respond? You would laugh! You would find it absurd. You already have ten million cubic feet of air. Indeed, all the air in the earth's atmosphere is yours for the taking, pressing in upon you from all directions, filling your lungs and tires even as we speak.

Well, in the same way, money, goods, services — God can make them all, effortlessly. He already has such things in unlimited quantities. He could make a quadrillion trillion more of anything that exists, and do it effortlessly. But there is one thing that would cost even Him and thus be of value even to Him. And that thing is the life of His Son.

Brothers and sisters, the blood of God did not come cheap, even for the infinitely wealthy Almighty. It cost Him more than we can possibly know to hand His Son over to death. Fathers, what would motivate you to shed your own blood for something? How about the blood of your son?

Now multiply that cost by the infinite love that God has for His Son, a love infinitely greater than your love for your son. That's how much it cost Him.

Why would God do that? The only answer is that He wanted to save you from death. Rather than carry out His wrath on you, He chose to carry it out on His own Son, thus paying a ransom to Himself, and simultaneously extracting the price of sin from Himself.

Now, that sounds perilously close to nonsense. How can God pay Himself and simultaneously cost Himself? The answer, brothers and sisters, is that God is not like us. We come into a world in which almost everything we see around us belongs to someone else. We can truly gain and lose in net worth. God is not like that. Everything He sees around Him belongs to Him. Of Him, through Him, and to Him are all things. And thus, ultimately anything He would pay He would have to pay to Himself, because both sides of the ledger belong to Him. All He can do is transfer things from one account to another. If Disney owns the ABC television network, then it can transfer the rights to *Star Wars* to ABC. But Disney still owns the rights, because it owns ABC.

God paid a ransom from Himself to Himself. The ransom price was His own blood. And the party ransomed was the universal church, here conceived as one single body persisting through time and space and into eternity future. Jesus did not just purchase individuals from God's wrath; He bought the whole church. That's why you need to shepherd the flock, elders. God was willing to pay the heaviest price ever paid to acquire anything. If you look at the record

books, you'll see that a 1999 deal in which Vodafone acquired another mobile operator called Mannesmann for an inflation-adjusted \$287 billion stands as the most expensive corporate purchase in recorded history. If you were the account exec who made that offer and shelled out the \$287 billion, you would probably be a little bit eager to make sure that the deal worked out. That's a lot of money. But God spent far more than that on the church. The value of the church to God is the fundamental reason that you need to pay attention, elder. I'm talking to myself here. If God cared enough to spend His Son's priceless blood to buy this church, and then has made me an overseer in it, I'd better oversee for all I'm worth.

C. Because Wolves Will Flock In, vv. 29-30

Aside from the purchase price, of course, another really good reason to shepherd the flock is that wolves will come flocking in. These wolves have two origination points, but one general goal. No matter where they're from, these wolves will want to eat the sheep instead of feeding them.

1. From Outside, v. 28

The first kind of wolf comes in from outside. One can think of the assault of the world and the devil in this category. There are lots of princes and politicians who have attempted to co-opt the church for their own purposes, and this of course continues to this day. Plenty of politicians on both sides of the aisle position themselves today as "the only choice" for the American voter who cares about fearing God. That's not because these politicians fear God, but because they want the Evangelical and Catholic vote, which is a huge vote bloc in our country. Other politicians in other places sometimes find the church useful as a whipping boy, and love to persecute Christians in order to enhance their own support.

2. From Among the Elders, v. 30

But Paul warns about another insidious threat. Many wolves will come not just from outside, but from within the church. There are a lot of wolves in preacher's robes. Think of the clergy sexual abuse scandals in both the SBC and the Roman Catholic Church. But by far the biggest hazard in our day is liberal theology that spouts from seminaries and the pastors trained there — elders in the church one and all, but also those who have done the most damage to the church in our day. The German university theologians who started teaching that the Bible was made up, not true, in the early 1800s are one fountainhead of this, but its effects can be seen all over the ecclesiastical landscape in the form of giant church buildings with practically nobody worshipping in them. The way that elders turn into wolves who eat the flock instead of feeding it is this: They say twisted things. They have "a travesty of the truth on their lips to induce the disciples to follow them" (Acts 20:30 NJB).

Brothers and sisters, all too quickly the faithful are paying a preacher who is giving them poison instead of food. He's in it for the money, not because the Holy Spirit has made him an overseer.

Elders, beware lest this happen to you! You don't have to be a liberal theologian to eat the sheep. You can love your fiefdom, your power, your ministry, your platform, your status more than you love Christ. And when that happens, you are a wolf, not a shepherd.

How do you know you're doing that? When you use your power to confront the victims instead of the evildoers. When you go after those who can't do anything to you rather than confronting those who actually have power to hurt you. That's how you know, elder, whether you are a wolf. Look out. Watch yourself.

D. Because Paul Ministered Truly, v. 31

Finally, watch yourself because Paul ministered truly. He warned people for three years. He was doing ministry night and day, telling about repentance and faith, warning against sin and proclaiming Jesus.

Elders, that is our mission. Paul has handed the baton to us. We need to pick it up and keep it moving forward. We do that by overseeing the church, shepherding the flock, and warning people when they need those warnings. Our culture is very safety-conscious and requires all kinds of warning labels. That applies in the church too. Elders, it's our job to warn people. The most formal kind of warning is excommunication, but there are many lesser kinds of warning, both one-on-one and in formal meetings like this worship service.

Brothers, fellow elders, shepherd the flock. Feed it. Care for it. Supervise it. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Do it because God paid the ultimate price, death itself, to buy this church. And then He put you in a supervisor position over her. Don't mess her up. Amen.