

A Life Worth Living Pt 2 The Solemn Charge

A Life Worth Living

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Very good to see you back and very grateful to have a pastor who is committed to the word of God, who faithfully expounds the word of God in season and out of season and he's done it for over 25 years. So what an honor that is for anyone to stand up and to be able to do that for such a long time and also what an honor it is to serve alongside a brother who is committed to that. So thank you and I was just so blessed by what you said and your commitment to the word. I'm pumped up. I feel like that's enough, right? I feel like that's, I mean, because you get me revved up with what he said there and it's going to be hard to stop, right? I am so excited, I'm so excited that we belong to Christ. I'm so excited that we've been called into his kingdom and glory and that his mission is so much more valuable than any other thing that we could be committed to in this life, anything else you could give yourself to. There's nothing more valuable, not even close, and what an exciting thing and in this time when everything in the world seems like it's falling apart on every level, we belong to the one cause that will last for eternity, the cause of the Gospel of Christ, the cause of the kingdom of God. That's the one thing that will last and you and I have been called into that.

Man, what a privilege and I'm just ranting a little bit here and this needs to be said in light of the events that have been taking place. Obviously this virus thing has caused so much controversy and then the events that we hear in the news this week which is not necessarily new, it's not the first time that things like this have happened but it is tragic, tragic nonetheless; no matter what your judgment of the situation is, this is tragic. Anytime a soul enters eternity, it is tragic and anytime people respond sinfully to sin, it is tragic, isn't it? This is, these are horrible things. This illustrates the reason why Jesus came, was to put an end to sin. This is why he came. This is why we need him. This is why that no human ruler or king can possibly fix what ails the world except Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter who you elect into the White House or into Congress. You cannot change what ails mankind except through the grace of God.

So as we get started, I do believe that this is a somber time but it's also a time for us to focus on the mission that God has given us and so let's pray because we desperately need him, we need him to work in this situation, and one other thing is that we desperately need to stay together unified through these things that happen. I guarantee you there are perspectives within our body on these issues, varying perspectives, varying opinions but

we will not allow those differences of opinion to divide us on the issue of the Gospel and what matters and justice and righteousness matter. The Gospel matters. What we do and how we respond to injustice matters but we've got to hang together as we try to sort these things out, right? So let's pray because Christ's prayer for his church was that we would be one. So let's pray for that as we open the word, okay?

Father, we draw near to You in this very difficult time in our country. Father, there is, we live in a wicked and perverse generation. There is none who does good. There is none righteous. All of them have become corrupt from the least to the greatest. Each seeks his own. They use their tongues to destroy. Father, I pray for our country, the depravity of man that is fully on display would cause many thousands of people to call out for a Savior, not a Savior from economic hardship but a Savior from their own depravity; not a Savior from the challenges to our comfortable way of life but a Savior from our own covetousness. Lord Jesus, we do pray, we do pray that You would bring about a just judgment on the situations that have presented themselves to our country. We pray that judges and juries and everyone who is involved would seek to do what is right and that they would come to a righteous judgment on the situation. And I pray, Father, also for those that are causing destruction, that You would bring justice to them as well. But Father, I pray more than all of that that each person would recognize that they stand under the righteous judgment of God, that Your wrath has been revealed against all ungodliness and because man has rejected Your glory and replaced it with the glory of created things, that You have handed them over to do what is not right and ultimately Your wrath will come upon all workers of unrighteousness. And Lord, I pray that that conviction would come upon our country, that our churches would be convicted of their complacency towards You, of their lack of love for their fellow man, and that we would, Father, be led by Your Spirit to represent Your kingdom and Your cause and to do it in righteousness and holiness for Your sake. We pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

Well, today is part 2 of our two-part series on what it means to live a life worth living. As mentioned last week just in summary, a life worth living is one where you count your present life as worthless, that all the desires that you would have for this world, the pleasure, comfort, pride, glory, all of that is vain and worthless and will pass away, and your life is worth less than the mission that God has called you to. Your life is worth less than the mission that God has called you to. And we talked about last week how the Apostle Paul was the faithful example of a life worth living because he lived in this way. His entire life was devoted to the mission and the ministry that God had called him to. What was it that Paul did? How did he live his life? What was his example? He served the Lord. He slaved for the Lord, submitting his own will to God. How did he do it? With consistency day in and day out, every day with humility, tears, showing that he really meant this, that this was real to him, he was sincere, he cared, he was earnest. He persevered through trials, specifically trials brought on by the plots of his own countrymen, and he did it with courage because he didn't shrink back or hesitate. He didn't hesitate to declare, to teach, to solemnly testify and to preach whatever was profitable. Everything that he determined to say was only what would build up the body of Christ, only what was for their good, what would benefit them, what was profitable, that being the message of the Gospel, repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus

Christ. Another way to put it, the Gospel of the grace of God. Or another way he puts it, preaching the kingdom of God. Or lastly in this passage in verse 27, he calls it declaring the whole purpose of God. This is what he did constantly no matter the cost, day in and day out.

Now why did he do this? Why was this his mission? Why was this his practice every single day? It's because he valued this ministry because it was given to him by the Lord Jesus. It wasn't just him fulfilling a dream of his. He didn't go on American Idol trying to win the show by being a preacher, right? He wasn't fulfilling a dream, he was fulfilling a mission given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ and he considered that mission to be more important than his own life. It was more important than his comfort, more important than ease and pleasure, freedom or pride. He was determined to fulfill this mission. It was more important to him than anything else.

Listen to his testimony in Acts 26, actually you could probably just flip over there. This is him standing before Agrippa and he gives this testimony as to why he is in prison before Agrippa. In verse 1 he says,

1 Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense:

Just a little background, Paul had gone on to Jerusalem after meeting with the Ephesians elders and others, he'd gone on to Jerusalem knowing that he would be taken into custody there, and he did. He was beaten by the Jews and he was put in prison for proclaiming the Gospel, and then he was sent up to Caesarea which is in northwest Israel on the coast on the Mediterranean Sea, and he was in prison there for a couple of years and he stands trial before Agrippa giving a defense before the Jews. And he says, verse 2,

2 "In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; 3 especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. 4 So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; 5 since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. 6 And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; 7 the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. [What is this hope?] 8 "Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?

Okay, what is the hope that they're looking for? It was the hope of the resurrection. That's what he was proclaiming. He's proclaiming that resurrection in Christ. Okay, verse 9,

9 "So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

Okay, so Paul is sharing his background. He's showing that he was a proponent or how would you put it? An intense opponent of Jesus Christ and the Gospel that he was currently preaching. Just as intense as he now proclaimed the Gospel, he just as intensely opposed it in the past and he did so with violence and rage. But then he says in verse 12,

12 "While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, 13 at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 And I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; 17 rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, 18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'

So there's his mission, given to him directly by the Lord Jesus Christ. He goes on in verse 19,

19 "So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. 21 For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. 22 So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; 23 that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

So you see Paul's mission here. This was given to him by the highest authority in the universe and so he went about and was faithful to this because it was directly commanded

to him by God to do this. You see, Paul didn't consider it himself as having a choice in the matter. He didn't, you know, when the Lord Jesus comes and says this to you, you don't say, "Yeah, you know what? Give me some time to think about this, Lord." Right? When the God of all creation appears to you and gives you a commission, you do it. In fact, this is what he says in 1 Corinthians 9:16, he says, "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; woe is me if I do not preach the gospel." Woe is me if I don't preach the Gospel. He says then in verse 19 of that same chapter, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more." So Paul, he was under compulsion to preach the Gospel and he embraced this, he embraced this heavy calling and he decided to go all out for the sake of the Gospel and to do everything for that. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 9:23 he says, "I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it."

Okay, think of his life, right? Everything he did was for the Gospel. That doesn't mean that he didn't do mundane things, right? He made tents. You know, can you think of a more mundane thing than that? Take the hides of animals and sew them together and sell them? And yet each thing that he did, every little act, every decision he made was for the progress of the Gospel. In fact, many times he even says that, "I laid down my own comfort, my own rights." He could have taken a wife. He could have asked for payment from the churches. He had the right to do that, but he determined that it would be more advantageous for the Gospel if he denied himself those rights.

He does all things for the sake of the Gospel. Not only was it the mission that he was given but he does this out of a personal loyalty to Christ. In Acts 21:13 he says to those who were warning him not to go to Jerusalem, he says, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Okay, he's not doing this out of some sense of personal glory. This isn't like Custer, you know, charging whatever 10,000 Native Americans in Montana, you know, in order to gain some kind of personal glory. This was for the sake of his Lord. It was a personal loyalty to Christ.

This reminds me of Peter and John in Acts 5:41 where they had been flogged for preaching the Gospel and after they had been flogged and warned it says, "they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name." Can you imagine that? You preach the Gospel to people who should have accepted it, right? They had the Old Testament. They had it memorized. They should have been ready for it. They were wrong to reject it but they persecuted them for the sake of Jesus Christ and they rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer on his behalf. I mean, Jesus says that on the Sermon on the Mount, "When you suffer for My name's sake, worthy are you, blessed are you." Not worthy are you, blessed are you.

Philippians 3:7-8. Again Paul's personal loyalty to Christ, he says, "whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I

may gain Christ." Through the things that Paul suffered, he gained a closer commitment, devotion, love and understanding of Jesus Christ and that was more valuable to him than anything.

So he was given this ministry by Christ, he has a personal loyalty to Christ, and he also has a personal accountability to Christ. Look at what he says in verse 26 of Acts 20, he says, "I am innocent of the blood of all men." This is such an interesting thing to say, right? "I'm innocent of the blood of all men." Why would he say that here? What does this mean? I mean, it would be implied from that that it's possible for him not to be innocent of the blood of all men, right? For him to be guilty of the blood of some. Well, this is not an uncommon concept in Scripture. Ezekiel 3:17 says this,

17 "Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me. 18 When I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 19 Yet if you have warned the wicked and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered yourself.

Somehow there's an accountability for those who have been given the message and yet, they're accountable by God to give the message of warning to those who it is directed to, right? You know what is right, God has given the message. You hold back that warning, you are accountability to the Lord for that. Now that man is responsible for his sin, he can't blame you, but God holds you accountable to some degree on that.

Paul in Acts 18:6 says this after he had preached in a synagogue and the Jews there had rejected him, he shook out his garments in 18:6 and he says, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." The word for "clean" is the same word for the word "innocent." "I am innocent of your blood. I declared faithfully to you." And that just shows, right, we're not responsible for the response of people, we're responsible for the message, to make sure that we declare it clearly and accurately and faithfully. We're not responsible to control other people's responses. We're not responsible to control the society but we are responsible to speak the truth and the warning from God and when we do, we are innocent of the blood of the people that we are responsible to speak to, primarily those who are closest to us which, by the way, are the ones that we tend to avoid. That's why social media is, you know, people say all kinds of crazy stuff on social media to people that they don't know. I mean, they're as bold, they're warriors, right? Talk to them in person and they can't even maintain eye contact. We must be faithful to speak the truth primarily, specifically to the people within our own home, within our own church, within our own neighborhood, within our own places of work, and out from there. Are you innocent of the blood of all people? Just keep that in the back of your mind.

So this is not an uncommon idea. So what does he mean that "I am innocent" here? In what sense is he, could he be guilty or held accountable? Is he going to be punished for this? Well, first we know from Scripture that those who believe in Christ, there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ. You're not going to be sent to hell because you didn't share the Gospel with the clerk at the grocery store. You're not going to be sent to purgatory to burn off some of that sin. No, your sin is completely paid for. There's no more hell or eternal judgment. There's no payment for sin. Christ took it all. Just read Romans 8 and you'll find this, that nothing can separate you from his love and everything is working for your good if you are a believer. So what does it mean, then, for us and for someone like Paul to be guilty of someone's blood? Well, if you did not speak the truth of the word of God to them in love, you failed in your duty to the Lord and to them and that will be revealed on the last day. That's what we see in Scripture, that you will have lost reward, the reward of a clean conscience before God.

Paul spoke often about the necessity of a clean conscience. 2 Corinthians 1:12 says this, "our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world." In Acts 24:16 it says, "In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men." 1 Corinthians 8 makes a big deal with regard to Christian liberties and the sorts of things that might wound another person's conscience. You do not intentionally wound the conscience of another person because it's so important for you to live your life believing and trusting that your conscience is clean before the Lord. To have a guilty conscience is corrosive to your soul. In fact, various passages that talk about Christian liberty say that when you wound another brother's conscience and lead him into sin, you in some respect, you destroy that brother. 1 Timothy 1:5 says, "the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." 2 Corinthians 4:2, "we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." A clean conscience leads you to have confidence in ministry, and by the way, we are all called to ministry, ministry within our sphere of influence and according to our giftedness and according to the measure of the stewardship that God has given us. When you have a guilty conscience, you lose confidence and power. False teachers are the ones who sear their consciences through hypocrisy and lying. 1 Timothy 4:2 says that, and that those who fall away from the faith pay attention to false doctrine. They do it because they sear their own consciences.

A good conscience enables endurance through opposition. Think of this, how many people would be fearful of speaking the truth publicly because they have a conscience that condemns them and they don't want the thing that condemns them to be revealed, how many people are held back by a guilty conscience from declaring what they ought to? How about in your workplace when you know you've been dishonest, how then do you go back and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with those that you have been dishonest with or dishonest in front of? Or when you have berated your employees and mistreated them? A guilty conscience holds you back from doing what is faithful in the moment and it discourages you and it holds you down, it pins you down.

Paul called Timothy to live with a clean conscience because those who turn away from living according to a good conscience, they suffer shipwreck of their faith. 1 Timothy 1:18 says that. Fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience because those that have rejected it suffer shipwreck with regard to their faith. 2 Timothy 1:3, "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience." Isn't it amazing how much this comes up? How much does this come up in our conversations just on a daily basis? How much does this, how much do we think about this? I'm almost convinced in our culture that very few people have a clean conscience and, you know, it's almost not even valued anymore. Paul serves God with a clear conscience. 1 Peter 3:15 talks about how we are to keep a good conscience even when we are opposed and persecuted for our faith so that the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. So having a guilty conscience is punishment enough in itself, knowing that you have not fulfilled what God has called you to do, to be faithful to, right? That is pain enough, especially for one who genuinely loves Christ and they realize how they have not followed him, they have not done what they knew they should have done.

So there's the accountability of his own conscience, but then the accountability to God that we must stand before the judgment seat for our works to be evaluated. This is something not talked about a lot but is a huge theme in Paul and is a major aspect of his own mindset as to the way that he lived his life. Romans 14 says, "why do you judge your brother? Or again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'" Verse 12, "So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God." 1 Corinthians 4:5, "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God." 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Then James 3:1, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment."

Now we know that, we've already seen he's not going to punish you on that last day for the sins that are revealed but do you realize that when you stand before the judgment seat you are going to give an accounting of your life as to how you spent it, how you used the resources he gave you, how you used the knowledge, the understanding, the education, the money, the time. You will give an accounting before God. Think of how you would feel if you had to give an accounting just to little old me, right? Just the accountability to one another often is motivation enough for someone to try harder to do what is right and faithful, right, what we ought to do? That accountability to one another somehow drives that motivation. Imagine the Holy One of God, the one seated on the throne, the one who fills the earth with his glory and shakes things with his very voice, the one who has the authority to cast into hell, the one who gave his life for you and specifically gave you his word so that there would be no confusion as to what you are to do. He provided all those things, he worked all things for your good, and now you're going to stand before him and

the motives of your heart are going to be fully exposed, completely on display. The actions that you've taken, the things that you've done in private, in secret, the things you've said, it will all be exposed. You're not going to purgatory, you're not going to hell but when the one who loved you, gave himself up for you is there and you look at your life and you will see all the ways in which you disregarded him as he stands there with the scars in his hands, and you will see all the ways in which you did not love him, is that motivation for you and I? That if you love Christ and you will, I mean, this is in the Bible, guys, he's going to evaluate all of this. What does that do to you? Do you care about him?

What's amazing is he's not going to punish you for the deeds that you and the ways in which you failed, but he will reward you for the ways in which you were faithful. That's incredible and he wants to reward you. In fact, and this is a whole other sermon series, what are heavenly rewards? And I know I've mentioned this before but, you know, there's a parable of the talents where what you do with what he gives you, he rewards you generously for, and one of the rewards, at least the way it's told in this parable is, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You took care of this money or these things. Now you will rule over five cities." You know, there is indication, it's going to be a physical place, a new heavens and a new earth where we will reign with Christ and there's going to be millions of believers there and there's indication that there will be culture there, there will be cities there, there will be nations there. We're not all just gonna be piled into one huge pot and stir around for eternity, right? We're going to have stuff to do and somehow your faithfulness here leads to some type of reward and service there. So if you are in a lowly place here, don't worry about that. Be faithful where you are. Are you in a place of suffering? Don't worry about that. Be faithful where you are because your reward is coming and God wants to reward you. But remember this, you will be accountable to him. You will wish that you'd been faithful when you stand before him.

So Paul with an eye to that judgment seat of Christ, with a clear ministry handed to him, with a personal loyalty and love to this Savior who will evaluate his works, he says that he is innocent of the blood of all men because he had a clear conscience, he had faithfully executed what Christ had called him to do. So this clear conscience, again it provides you confidence before believers, unbelievers, before your opponents and before the Lord himself. And just a side note, if you're doubting your salvation or if you're doubting the truth of God, could it be that you have a guilty conscience? Could it be that you are harboring sin? If you are depressed or feel trapped and are not making the progress, could it be that you have a guilty conscience that you have not dealt with? What do you do with that? What if you do have a guilty conscience today? Is that it for you?

Listen to Hebrews 10:19, "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." If you have a guilty conscience today, you must confess your sin to him because he has promised to cleanse your conscience and to set you free.

Draw near to Christ. He is your righteousness. Let him cleanse it. Go, then, and sin no more.

So Paul had been faithful and he could say that he was innocent because he did not shrink back from fulfilling the ministry God had given him. But again, why does he mention this here? Why does he mention this here in Acts 20? Well, again, remember the context. He has called the elders of the church of Ephesus to himself and now by him stating this, it puts the onus on the elders. For Paul to say he had been faithful, that his conscience is clean, that he will have confidence before the Lord, it gives him a certain authority to call them to the same kind of faithfulness and the men standing there would immediately be forced to ask themselves, "Have I been faithful? Am I innocent of the blood of all men? Have I spoken the truth of the Gospel to my friends and neighbors? How do I make sure that I am innocent of the blood of all men?" It motivates them to strive for the same sort of clear conscience and, again, these men were elders. They would have been appointed because they were already considered to have been above reproach, but seeing Paul's example should cause any man or woman to evaluate their faithfulness and the move to greater to devotion.

So Paul has held up his life as an example for them to follow, again, with consistency, constancy, humility, earnest tears, perseverance and toughness through trials and persistent courage, and he is calling the elders to live by that same standard, by that same example, declaring, teaching, testifying and preaching the Gospel of God, repentance and faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ, to not shrink back from doing so just as Paul did not shrink back, and to have a clear conscience before all. Okay, so again he's telling them this and that's great but why now? Why is he saying this? Well, look at verse 25, "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face." The reason he's called them there is to tell them that he is no longer going to be available to them. He's no longer available to solve their problems and to protect them from false teachers, to discipline divisive people. When they're in the church and there's something that needs to be addressed, they can no longer be like, "Hey, Paul, let's go. What are we supposed to do?" It is now on them. The elders must now take up the mantle and fully wear their responsibility before God and Paul has given them the faithful example and now he gives them the solemn charge, and this life worth living just as a side note, well, this is the main point, really, a life worth living is one that is spent in faithful service to the ministry that Christ has called you to. A life worth living is one that is spent in faithful service to the ministry that Christ has called you to.

Okay now, what is the ministry that the elders are called to? Look at this, verse 28, "Be on guard for yourselves and for 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." This is a high calling. It's a high calling. You already know when you're made an elder of a church, you already know it's a high calling and some of you have avoided pursuing that because you know it's a high calling. But look at this, I mean, when you examine this, it is a much heavier higher call than what you would typically even realize and we have to be reminded of this.

He says in verse 28 at the beginning, "Be on guard." Be on guard. I wonder how many leaders in our churches today enter their post with these words in mind? He doesn't say, he doesn't start off saying, "Hey, work hard. Be nice. Make everyone happy. Have fun." He says, "Be on guard." Verse 31, similarly he says, "be on the alert." In fact, the title "overseer" that is used of these elders can be translated "guardians." That an elder is a guardian of the flock, and what is it that they're guarding? The church of God. Yes, the church of God. We already know that but, again, another overlooked phrase is they must be guarding themselves first.

Look at what he says in 1 Timothy 4:16. Well, just listen to this, he says, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear." So the leaders of the church must first be faithful guardians of themselves. This is demonstrated in the qualifications of an elder that are laid out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and in Titus 1:5-9. The elder is to be above reproach, this is from Titus, "the husband of one wife, having children who believe," or who are faithful, "not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer," or the guardian, "must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious," or not a violent fighter, "not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." You see, the qualification and the purpose of his post, right, his qualifications, he needs to be above reproach, he needs to be a man who guards himself, a man who lives righteously in his own heart and home, in his own business, and he needs to be able to teach the word of God, not stand up and talk coherently, that's not what it means to teach, he needs to be able to instruct the word of God and so refute those who contradict sound doctrine. A man who does not guard himself cannot shepherd the church. A man who is given to worldliness, lusts, outbursts of anger, easily swayed by the winds of false doctrine, he is not qualified to guard the flock of God.

But our passage in Acts is written to men who are already appointed. They've already been tested and shown to be above reproach, at least so far, and even those men who have been appointed are still to continually guard themselves. There's two aspects to this. He is to be on guard for himself personally and for the elders collectively. You understand what I'm saying? He's to guard himself and he's to look out for the other elders. This is one of the main ways that leaders should guard the flock is to ensure that ungodly men are never appointed to the office of overseer. They're to guard this. No man is above temptation. No man is above wrong motives or being deceived by false teaching. That's why you must pay attention. This is not a complacent thing.

He's to be on guard for himself and for the church which happens to be God's most treasured possession and there are four things that Paul mentions here that underscore the importance of this role. Notice who made them overseers. Do you see that? Who was it that made them overseers? It was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit made them overseers of the church. Elder, you are accountable to the Holy Spirit who commissioned you, the

one who sees all things, knows all things, who dwells in your very heart. You are accountable to him.

Secondly, who does the church belong to? It's called the church of God. The church belongs to God. It does not belong to you or me. This is not your church, this is the church of God. It is not a place to express your preferences and creativity, you are God's steward.

Thirdly, the value. Think of this, what is the value of this church, of this church of God? Well, he purchased it with his own blood. Literally the church of God which he purchased with the blood of his own. So God purchased the church with the blood of his own, Jesus Christ, his own Son. That is how he obtained this treasured possession and this was the whole purpose of God. Think of this, all of history has been designed to form the church of God. Sinners who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, who God is working all things to accomplish their good, who are being transformed into his likeness, and who will dwell with him forever, giving glory to their Redeemer and serving him throughout eternity. That was his purpose, to call a people to himself who will worship Jesus Christ, their Redeemer, who can boast in nothing but in Jesus Christ. So while your life personally should not be what you value, the church of God and the service to that church should be greatly treasured, right? We diminish the value of our own pursuits for the sake of the church of God. That doesn't mean specifically Providence Church, that means all people who are called by the name of Christ. The church.

Thirdly, the danger. Look at verse 29. I'm sorry, fourthly, the danger, verse 29, he says, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." Savage wolves. Fierce wolves. Grievous wolves. Wolves are hunters and they're sneaky and it says here that they will come in among you. Wolves rarely do this openly, they come in sheep's clothing. Satan comes dressed as an angel of light. Matthew 7:15 says,

15 "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will know them by their fruits. 21 Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

Do you see that? They did all kinds of acts, all these external spiritual actions but they neglected the very thing that God commanded them to do. Just like he said of Saul, "Does God love sacrifice more than obedience?" He says disobedience is just like witchcraft. False teachers sneak in purporting to know the Lord, possibly being very very persuasive, and yet having their own agenda and if you watch them over time, their fruit will become obvious.

How do you spot a wolf? Well, look at verse 30 of Acts 20 again, he says, "from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." What is it that they do? They speak things that are not true. They speak things that are antithetical to the Gospel and sound doctrine, but they also, and this is the thing, they often teach what they teach in order to appeal to your lusts and to serve their own. They are covetous. They are sensual. They are proud. And they seek to draw others after themselves. They love to have a following. They just want people to listen to them. They love the attention. They love to feel powerful. They love to feel influential. Galatians 1:6-7 says that they were teaching a different Gospel that places confidence in your self-righteous works rather than in the finished work of Christ. In 1 John the false teachers would say that they weren't really sinners deserving of hell, that Jesus wasn't really God or that Jesus didn't really come in the flesh, and that you can love the world and still be right with God. That's what the false teachers taught in 1 John.

A book that provides a very vivid portrait of these wolves is the book of Jude. In verse 3 he says, "Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." What does it mean to turn the grace of God into licentiousness? That means that, "Oh, God is gracious, that means I can live however I want. I can have all the money I want. I can have all the lusts I want. I can have all the pleasure I want and Jesus just sanctions all of it and gives me a clean slate." They sneak in and seek to use the grace of God for their own licentiousness.

Down in verse 11 of the same book he says, "Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam." So they would preach, Balaam is an Old Testament prophet who, he called on the Lord to give him a prophecy but he only did it for pay. He would require money and then he would prophesy and these are what these men do, they're not motivated out of love for the flock, they won't minister to people unless they're paid for it. Watch out for people like that. Okay, on the other hand, listen, it is right to pay the minister by the Gospel that they should make their living, but for a man to demand pay and to seek riches and to take advantage of people is wrong. It is evil and watch out for people like that. Woe to them it says, "and they perished in the rebellion of Korah," verse 12, "These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted." They love the social gatherings. That's where they lurk. They seek in those

situations to turn people's opinions. It's like Absalom standing in the city gates just kind of hanging around and just poisoning the water drop by drop to divide the nation against David.

They care for themselves. They want to exalt themselves. They're clouds without water. They're big and puffy but they don't produce anything of value. They're carried along by wind. Okay, they follow the popular trends. Autumn trees without fruit. This is vivid stuff, right? They're wild waves of the sea casting up their own shame like foam. They're wandering stars. They're unsteady, unstable and they're driven by their lusts. Verse 16, "These are grumblers, finding fault." Okay, if you want to turn, this is like what Absalom did, pointing out the faults of people and turning the hearts of the people against each other in order to gain a following and to gain power. They cause, they find fault. Following their own lusts, they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage. They say nice things to make people feel good about themselves so that that person will be loyal to them and they can turn their heart. This is very manipulative stuff and these type of people are not uncommon. I know personally in my dad's ministry some incredibly, they fit this description to a T. Unbelievable. It's hard to believe the evil sometimes and the manipulative, licentious, self-willed people that there are that love to use gatherings like this in order to puff up their own self-image and gain an advantage for themselves. Verse 19, "These are the ones who cause divisions, they're worldly-minded, and they're devoid of the Spirit."

And there's obviously much more to be said but I think that illustrates the reason that elders must be biblically qualified to be a guardian so that they can continually keep watch on themselves, their doctrine and watch out for the body of Christ, watch out for the flock, and they must guard this flock from these sneaky savage wolves and this knowledge is what propelled Paul in verse 31 he says, "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears." Contrary to those false teachers in verse 33, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me." And this is important, we will close here in a minute. He says in verse 35, "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

So Paul laying down his life as an example, worked hard, he worked in order to earn a living to provide for his own needs, in order to not be a burden to the people that were there, and instead of just providing for his own needs, he provided for the men who came with him and, and he provided enough extra in order to help those who were weak. He worked not for his own personal gain but to benefit others, even financially. He says, "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak." The weak would be those who are not capable of providing for themselves. We often want to pawn them off on the government or some government program. We as a church should be caring for the needs in our body of those who are weak, not for freeloaders, not for people who are capable of providing for themselves and refuse to work, but for those who have a character and a disposition to serve and honor Christ and yet are unable to

help themselves. Our hearts should be, "I'm going to work so that the excess that I have, I will use to help others, to help the weak. It is more blessed to give than to receive." You see the full, you see, Paul was not just focused on these lofty spiritual things, he genuinely cared for the people that were under his charge.

What about you? Are you living a life worth living? What has God called you to? What is the ministry that he has given to you? What is your mission, church? What is your mission, wives? Husbands? Laborers? Leaders? Elders? Deacons? What is your mission? Are you willing to sacrifice that the cause of Christ might go forth in your own heart, in your own family, in the church? Think of this. We have how many kids here? They need to hear the Gospel. They need teachers who will teach and love and exemplify the grace of God in their life. Our youth, they need parents who will do that and they need other people in the body to look out and care for them. Our single people, are you laying down your life for this or are you blowing it on all kinds of worthless useless things? Paul was single. Look to him as an example of how to use your singleness. Are you married? Look at how Paul cared for the men who were in his company. Take care of that family of yours. They should know the Gospel. They should see Christ in you. That is your mission. Are you a worker, are you a laborer? How are you exemplifying Christ in your workplace? Do your neighbors know the Gospel? If you want to live a life worth living, you must consider your life, this present life as worthless. Worth less than your mission to carry forth the Gospel of the grace of God in your context. It cannot be accomplished if you're going to live for yourself.

History is full of those who loved their own life and thus abandoned the mission because they did not love Christ. They loved this present world and so abandoned the mission. They loved pleasure and so abandoned the mission. They loved power and so abandoned the mission. They loved money and so abandoned the mission. They loved comfort and ease and so abandoned the mission. They loved fame and they compromised the mission. 1 John 2:15, "If you love the world the love of the Father is not in you."

So this mission that we are called to is a solemn one but it's a glorious one. It is one that we will be richly rewarded for and it is worth losing everything out of love for Christ, out of loyalty for Christ, out of accountability to Christ. Will you lay down your life with me to accomplish this together? When we draw together as a church, this is what we ought to be provoking one another to do, to love and good deeds and the proclamation of the Gospel.

I purposely skipped this verse, verse 32, he says, "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." This is not an easy task but it is one that God is with us in, and he is behind us, and he is working through us, and he has given us the resources that we need to fulfill this call.

Let's pray that he would strengthen us for that.

Lord Jesus, You are holy and righteous, You are awesome and majestic, and Your love for us is tremendous and the call that You have called us to is so worthy. I pray, Lord, that You would take care of the issues in our heart, the sinful desires in our heart, the defiled consciences, the things that hold us back. Lord, I pray that we would lose our life for Your sake that we may find it in You for it is Your love that controls us because You died that we would no longer live for ourselves but for You. Lord, I pray that each one here would consider their own life, what holds them back from obedience to You, from loving their family as they should, from using their spare time to serve You and to care for others, and that we would find great joy in fulfilling the mission that You've called us to. May we stand before You, Lord, with being blameless with great joy. For Your sake we pray. Amen.