

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Guarding the Flock: Paul's Charge to the Ephesian Elders

Acts 20:17–38

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson centers on Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, around A.D. 57, as he hurried toward Jerusalem and the chains he knew awaited him. The historical setting gives the speech great weight: it is the parting charge of an apostle who expects not to see these men again, spoken to the shepherds of a church he loved. It is also one of the New Testament's most important passages on the leadership and care of the local congregation, and on guarding the church against error. Note that Paul uses three terms for the same men, elders (presbyters), overseers (bishops), and shepherds (pastors), showing they describe one office, not three.

Several doctrinal themes deserve careful attention. The passage sets out the New Testament pattern for shepherding the church through a plurality of qualified elders, appointed under the Holy Spirit, who must watch over themselves and the flock. It teaches the immense value of the church, purchased 'with his own blood,' a phrase that also testifies to the deity of Christ. It commends the faithful proclamation of 'the whole counsel of God,' not a selective, comfortable message. And it warns soberly of false teachers from without and within. The heaviest doctrinal block (Question 9) handles Paul's warning that disciples could be 'drawn away,' which directly corrects the 'once saved, always saved' error and teaches how believers are kept safe through ongoing faith, vigilance, and the word of God's grace.

This lesson aims at the heart of every member, not only leaders. Press students to treasure the blood-bought church rather than treating it casually or as consumers; to embrace the whole counsel of God, including its hard truths; to grow watchful against error; and to take up their own responsibility for the spiritual good of those near them. Hold up Paul's servant heart, his integrity, his tears, and his determination to finish his course as a model of faithful ministry and life. Send students home loving the church more deeply, guarding the truth more carefully, and resolved to remain faithful and alert to the end.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul reminded the elders that "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God" (Acts 20:28). What does this verse, where the same men are called elders, overseers, and shepherds, teach about how Christ has arranged for the care and leadership of His church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the three terms Luke and Paul use interchangeably here. Paul called for the ‘elders’ (presbyteroi) of the church (20:17); he says the Holy Spirit made them ‘overseers’ (episkopoi); and he charges them to ‘care for’ or shepherd (the verb behind ‘pastor’) the flock (20:28). One group of men, three descriptions of the same office: elders (mature, seasoned leaders), overseers (those who watch over), and shepherds (those who feed and protect). This is the consistent New Testament pattern.

Note that they did not appoint themselves; ‘the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.’ Eldership is not a human invention or a mere management role; it is an office given by God for the care of His people. Elsewhere Scripture lays out the qualifications such men must meet, including being ‘the husband of one wife’ and able to teach (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9), so that the flock is shepherded by proven, godly men.

Observe the pattern of a plurality. Paul called ‘the elders,’ plural, of the one church at Ephesus. The New Testament consistently shows a group of qualified men shepherding each congregation together, sharing the burden and providing mutual accountability, rather than a single ruler over the church.

Apply it to the congregation. Christ cares for His church through shepherds He provides. This should shape how members regard their elders, with respect, prayer, and submission (Hebrews 13:17), and how the church seeks and supports qualified men to serve. The arrangement is God’s gift for the protection and feeding of the flock.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Elders, overseers, and shepherds as one office, not three (Acts 20:17, 28)
- Eldership as a God-given office for the care of the church, not a human invention
- A plurality of qualified men shepherding each congregation (Titus 1:5)
- Qualifications God requires of overseers (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9)

Discussion Prompts

- What do the three terms in this verse teach about the eldership?
- Why does it matter that the Holy Spirit, not the men themselves, appointed them?
- How should members regard and support their shepherds?

Question 2

Student Question:

Whether or not you are an elder, you likely have people in your care, a family, a class, a circle of friends. Are you actively watching over the spiritual good of those God has placed near you, or leaving it to chance? And how faithfully do you pray for, support, and submit to the shepherds of your congregation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question widens the lesson from elders to every believer. While only qualified men serve as elders, every Christian bears some responsibility for the spiritual good of others, parents for children, teachers for students, friends for friends, mature believers for younger ones. The shepherd's heart Paul models is, in measure, for all of us.

Help students take up that responsibility intentionally. It is easy to leave the souls of those near us to chance, assuming someone else will tend to them. Ask each student to consider who God has placed in their care and whether they are actively watching over those people's walk with God, in prayer, encouragement, and honest words.

Then turn to the congregation's shepherds. Members have real duties toward their elders: to pray for them, support them, and submit to their godly leadership (Hebrews 13:17), making their work a joy rather than a burden. Encourage students to examine whether they are a help or a hindrance to those who watch over their souls.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every believer's responsibility for the spiritual good of those near them
- A shepherd's heart expressed in prayer, encouragement, and honest care
- Members' duties toward their elders: prayer, support, submission (Hebrews 13:17)
- Intentional care rather than leaving souls to chance

Discussion Prompts

- Who has God placed in your care, and are you watching over them?
- Are you leaving the spiritual good of others to chance?
- How faithfully do you pray for and support your shepherds?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul described the church as "the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). What does it mean that the church was purchased with the blood of God's own Son, and what does this teach both about the value of the church and about the deity of the Christ who bought it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the price set the value. The church was not merely organized or gathered; it was 'obtained,' purchased, at the cost of blood. And not just any blood, but, as the verse puts it, God's own blood, the blood of His Son. There is no higher price in the universe. Whatever God paid that much for is beyond precious, and that is how God regards His church.

Draw out the staggering claim about Christ. Paul calls the blood by which the church was bought 'his own blood,' the blood of God. This is one of the New Testament's clear testimonies to the deity of Christ. The One who shed His blood on the cross was no mere man; He was God the Son, so that what God obtained, He obtained through the death of His incarnate Son. The cross is the measure both of the church's worth and of Christ's identity.

Correct low views of the church. Many today treat the church as optional, a human institution, or a service provider to be evaluated and discarded at will. Acts 20:28 will not allow it. The church is God's, blood-bought, infinitely valued by the One who died for her. To despise or neglect the church is to undervalue what cost Christ His life.

Apply it to love and commitment. If Christ loved the church enough to die for her (Ephesians 5:25), then His people should love her too, bearing with her faults, investing in her good, and refusing to treat lightly what He bought so dearly. The price tag of the cross reorders our whole attitude toward the body of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church purchased at the highest price, the blood of God's Son
- The immense value God places on His church (Ephesians 5:25)
- The deity of Christ testified in 'his own blood' (Acts 20:28)
- Correcting casual or consumer attitudes toward the church

Discussion Prompts

- What does the price of the church tell us about its value to God?
- How does 'his own blood' testify to the deity of Christ?
- How should the cross reorder our attitude toward the church?

Question 4

Student Question:

It is easy to treat the church casually, as one activity among many, or to be quick with criticism and slow with commitment. Do you treasure the church the way Christ does, the people for whom He shed His blood? Where do you need to move from a consumer's attitude toward a deeper love for and investment in the body?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the worth of the church onto the student's own attitudes. In a consumer culture, we are trained to evaluate everything by what it does for us, and the church can become just one more service we sample, critique, and abandon when it disappoints. Acts 20:28 calls us to a different posture entirely.

Help students diagnose a consumer mindset honestly. Its signs are quick criticism and slow commitment, attending without belonging, receiving without serving, leaving over preferences. The contrast is the covenant love Christ has for His people, who gave Himself for her faults and all.

Move toward deeper investment. Ask each student to name one way they will move from consuming to loving and serving the body this season, committing more fully, serving where there is need, bearing with others' weaknesses, or simply speaking of the church the way Christ regards her. Loving what Christ bled for is part of loving Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The consumer mindset versus covenant love for the church
- Moving from critiquing to committing, from receiving to serving
- Bearing with the church's faults as Christ bears with ours
- Loving what Christ purchased as part of loving Him

Discussion Prompts

- Do you treasure the church the way Christ does?
- What signs of a consumer attitude do you see in yourself?
- How could you move toward deeper love and investment this season?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul testified, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Why is it important that the church be taught the whole counsel of God, and not merely the parts that are popular, comfortable, or easy to hear?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice Paul's claim and its cost. He did not pick and choose; he declared 'the whole counsel of God,' including the parts that were unpopular, costly, or confrontational. He could therefore say he was 'innocent of the blood of all,' because he had withheld nothing they needed to hear. Faithful teaching is full teaching.

Explain why selectivity is dangerous. A church fed only the comfortable parts of Scripture grows lopsided and weak, well-versed in grace but ignorant of judgment, fluent in love but silent on holiness, eager for promises but deaf to commands. The whole counsel of God keeps the church balanced, mature, and protected from error, which often grows in the gaps left by neglected truths.

Connect this to the responsibility of teachers and leaders. Paul's example warns against trimming the message to please hearers or avoid conflict. The temptation to preach only what people want to hear is ancient and strong (2 Timothy 4:3–4), but love for souls requires telling them everything God has said, the hard with the sweet.

Apply it to the whole congregation. Members share responsibility by desiring and supporting full teaching, rather than rewarding only the comfortable and bristling at the convicting. A church that wants the whole counsel of God will be a church that grows strong and stays faithful.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithful teaching declares the whole counsel of God, not a selective message
- The dangers of a lopsided diet of only comfortable truths
- The temptation to trim the message to please hearers (2 Timothy 4:3–4)
- The responsibility of teachers to withhold nothing profitable

Discussion Prompts

- Why is the whole counsel of God necessary for a healthy church?
- What happens when only comfortable truths are taught?
- How can members encourage faithful, full teaching?

Question 6

Student Question:

It is tempting to want only the encouraging parts of Scripture and to avoid the parts that confront or correct us. Do you genuinely want the whole counsel of God for your own life, including the hard truths? Where have you been selective, embracing some teachings while quietly ignoring others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the whole counsel of God into personal self-examination. We do to Scripture in private what we sometimes want preachers to do in public: keep the comforting parts and skip the convicting ones. We underline the promises and skim the commands, embrace grace and avoid the call to holiness.

Help students notice their own selective reading. Often there is a particular area, money, sexual purity, speech, forgiveness, submission, where we quietly set aside what Scripture clearly teaches because it is costly. The whole counsel of God means letting all of it speak, including the parts that confront our preferred sins.

Move toward submission to the full word. Encourage each student to identify one teaching they have been avoiding or downplaying, and to bring it back under the authority of Scripture this

week. A heart that wants the whole counsel of God is a heart ready to be corrected as well as comforted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Selective reading that keeps comfort and avoids conviction
- Submitting every area of life to the full authority of Scripture
- Identifying the costly teachings we tend to set aside
- A heart ready to be corrected, not only comforted (2 Timothy 3:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Do you want the whole counsel of God for your own life?
- Which teachings have you embraced, and which have you avoided?
- What costly truth do you need to bring back under Scripture's authority?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul warned that “fierce wolves” would come from outside, and that “from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples” (Acts 20:29–30). Why must the church always be watchful against false teaching, and why is the warning that danger would arise even from within especially sobering?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's warning is urgent and specific. 'Fierce wolves' would come in among the flock, not sparing it, predators disguised as part of the fold. The imagery is deliberate: false teachers are not harmless eccentrics but dangerous to the very life of the sheep. The church must therefore always be watchful; spiritual danger is real and ongoing.

Sit with the more sobering half of the warning: 'from among your own selves.' The threat would arise not only from outsiders but from within the church's own ranks, even from among its leaders, men who would twist the truth 'to draw away the disciples after them.' Error often wears a familiar face and speaks from a trusted place, which makes it harder to detect and more devastating.

Note the motive Paul exposes: 'to draw away the disciples after them.' False teachers seek a following for themselves, dividing the flock and pulling people away from Christ and His truth. This is why doctrine matters; it is not academic, but a matter of protecting souls from those who would devour or mislead them.

Apply it to vigilance without paranoia. The answer is not suspicion of everyone, but alertness grounded in knowing the truth. A church and a believer well-grounded in Scripture can

recognize the twist when it comes. Paul's own remedy follows: he commends them 'to God and to the word of his grace,' the sure foundation that keeps the flock safe.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ongoing reality of false teaching threatening the church (Matthew 7:15)
- Danger arising even from within the church's own ranks
- False teachers seeking followers, drawing disciples away from Christ
- Vigilance grounded in knowing the truth, not in paranoia

Discussion Prompts

- Why must the church always be watchful against false teaching?
- Why is the warning about danger from within especially sobering?
- How does knowing the truth well help us recognize error?

Question 8

Student Question:

Guarding against error requires knowing the truth well enough to recognize a counterfeit. How alert are you to teaching that twists the gospel, and how are you equipping yourself and those you love to discern it? Where might you be spiritually careless rather than watchful?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the call to watchfulness into the student's own habits. Many believers are spiritually careless, absorbing teaching from books, media, and voices without testing it against Scripture. Paul's warning calls for active discernment, not passive consumption.

Help students see that the best defense against error is deep familiarity with the truth. Those who handle genuine currency learn to spot the counterfeit. Regular, careful intake of Scripture trains the senses 'to distinguish good from evil' (Hebrews 5:14) and to recognize when the gospel is being twisted.

Move toward equipping. Ask each student how they are growing in discernment and helping those they love, children, friends, fellow members, to do the same. Encourage one concrete step: a more disciplined intake of the word, a willingness to test teaching, a conversation that equips a younger believer to think biblically.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Active discernment versus passive consumption of teaching (1 Thessalonians 5:21)
- Deep familiarity with the truth as the defense against counterfeits (Hebrews 5:14)
- Equipping those we love to discern error
- Watchfulness as a habit, not an occasional alarm

Discussion Prompts

- How alert are you to teaching that twists the gospel?
- How are you equipping yourself and others to discern error?
- Where are you spiritually careless rather than watchful?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul warned that false teachers would arise “to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30), and he urged the elders to “be alert,” commending them to God and to the word of His grace. What does this warning, that real disciples could be drawn away, teach about the danger of falling from the faith, and how does it correct the idea that a saved person can never be lost? How is the believer kept safe?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it must be handled clearly and pastorally. Notice precisely whom the false teachers would target: ‘the disciples.’ Paul does not warn that pretenders might be exposed, but that genuine disciples could be ‘drawn away.’ The danger he names is real, or the warning would be empty. The whole urgency of ‘be alert’ assumes that those truly in the faith can be lured out of it.

This corrects the popular teaching of ‘once saved, always saved,’ the idea that a truly saved person can never finally be lost. Scripture, including Paul, teaches otherwise. He warns that some would ‘depart from the faith’ (1 Timothy 4:1), that one can be ‘severed from Christ’ and ‘fallen away from grace’ (Galatians 5:4), and he disciplined his own body lest, after preaching to others, he himself ‘should be disqualified’ (1 Corinthians 9:27). Hebrews repeatedly warns believers against an ‘unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God’ (Hebrews 3:12–14). The warnings throughout the New Testament are addressed to Christians, and they are serious, not hypothetical.

Be careful and balanced. This is not a message of anxiety or a teaching that we are saved by our own white-knuckled effort. Salvation is by grace from first to last. But grace is received and continued in through ongoing faith and faithfulness, not through a one-time decision that guarantees the outcome regardless of how we then live. The believer who continues in faith is secure; the one who turns away and persists in turning away can be lost. Both the promises and the warnings are true, and they are not in conflict.

Show how the believer is kept safe, because Paul does not leave the elders, or us, in fear. He commends them ‘to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up.’ We are kept by God’s power, through faith (1 Peter 1:5), as we abide in Christ, feed on His word, watch against error, and persevere. God is faithful and will keep those who keep trusting and obeying

Him. Our security rests not in a slogan but in a living relationship with a faithful God, maintained by His grace and our continued faith.

Land it pastorally. The right response to this warning is not panic but watchfulness, the very thing Paul commands. Help students hold assurance and seriousness together: deep confidence in God's keeping power, and a sober resolve to remain faithful and alert, neither presuming nor despairing. This is how a disciple finishes the course, as Paul was about to do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine disciples can be drawn away; the warning is real, not hypothetical
- Correction of the 'once saved, always saved' doctrine (Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 3:12–14)
- New Testament warnings against falling away are addressed to believers (1 Timothy 4:1; 1 Corinthians 9:27)
- Salvation by grace, received and continued through ongoing faith and faithfulness
- The believer kept by God's power through persevering faith (1 Peter 1:5)
- Holding assurance and seriousness together: watchfulness, not panic

Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul's warning assume about whether disciples can be lost?
- How do the New Testament warnings correct 'once saved, always saved'?
- How is the believer kept safe, and how does that produce watchfulness rather than fear?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Paul's charge on the beach, his servant's heart, his finished course, the precious blood-bought flock, and the call to watchfulness. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this passage to form you, whether to love and guard the church, to embrace the whole counsel of God, or to remain faithful and alert to the end.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson's threads: shepherding and supporting the church, treasuring the blood-bought flock, embracing the whole counsel of God, watching against error, and persevering to the end. Ask students to name one concrete way the Lord has met them rather than offering a general reflection.

Offer the doors the passage opens. Some need to love and guard the church more deeply, moving from consuming to investing. Some need to embrace the whole counsel of God, including its hard truths. Some need to take up the call to watchfulness and faithful perseverance, neither careless nor presumptuous.

Close with Paul's own example. He served with humility and tears, kept back nothing profitable, and pressed toward finishing his course to 'testify to the gospel of the grace of God,' even with chains ahead. Hold him up as a model, and send students home loving the church, guarding the truth, and resolved to remain faithful and alert to the end.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Loving and guarding the blood-bought church
- Embracing the whole counsel of God
- Faithful watchfulness and perseverance to the end
- A servant's heart that aims to finish the course (Acts 20:24)

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of Paul's charge speaks most to you?
- What one step toward loving or guarding the church will you take?
- How will you stay faithful and alert in the season ahead?