

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 9: Guarding the Flock: Paul's Charge to the Ephesian Elders -- Acts 20:17–38

It has the feel of a farewell, because it is one. Paul is hurrying toward Jerusalem, and he knows what is waiting for him there: chains and hardship, and very possibly death. So when his ship puts in near Ephesus, he cannot bear to sail past without one last word to the men who shepherd the church he loves. He sends to Ephesus and calls the elders to meet him on the shore at Miletus. Picture these weathered men hurrying down to the coast, and the apostle who led many of them to Christ waiting for them, knowing this is goodbye.

Paul begins by reminding them of how he lived among them. “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time . . . serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials.” He had held nothing back, teaching publicly and house to house, declaring to Jew and Greek alike repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus. He had not coveted anyone’s silver or gold; he had worked with his own hands. Now, he says, he is going to Jerusalem bound in spirit, not knowing what will happen, except that imprisonment and affliction await him in every city. And still he presses on: “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

Then the charge turns to them, and it is one of the most important passages in the New Testament about the care of the church. “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Watch yourselves first, then the flock. You did not appoint yourselves; the Holy Spirit set you over this flock. And never forget how precious it is, for this church was purchased at the highest price imaginable, the blood of God’s own Son.

And then the warning, sober and urgent. “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.” Danger would come from outside and, more painfully, from within. So Paul commends them to God and to the word of His grace, kneels down on the beach with them all, and prays. They wept, and embraced him, and grieved most of all that they would not see his face again, and then they accompanied him to the ship. This lesson stands on that beach and listens to a dying apostle teach the church how to guard what Christ bought with His blood.

Group Discussion: Paul told the elders the church was “obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28), purchased at the highest price imaginable. If we truly believed the church was that precious to God, how might it change the way we treat it, speak about it, and invest ourselves in it? Where do we tend to take the church for granted?

Personal Reflection: Paul could say he had not shrunk from declaring “the whole counsel of God” and was “innocent of the blood of all” (Acts 20:26–27). Whether as a parent, teacher, friend, or member, you have some responsibility for the spiritual good of others. Are there truths you have shrunk from, or people whose souls you have neglected? What would faithfulness look like?

Read Acts 20:17–38

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Peter 5:1–4, elders shepherding the flock under the Chief Shepherd; 1 Timothy 3:1–7, the qualifications of an overseer; Titus 1:5–9, appointing elders who hold firm to sound doctrine; Hebrews 13:17, obeying and submitting to those who keep watch over your souls; 2 Timothy 4:3–4, the danger of itching ears that turn from sound teaching