

“PAUL’S EXHORTATION IN EPHESUS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

October 3, 2021, 10:30 AM

Text for the Sermon: Acts 20:28-38

Prayer: Holy Spirit, this is your inspired Word. Jesus, this is your precious church. Holy Father, I am your servant according to your will. Make me worthy of your calling for the sake of the glory of Jesus and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Do your transforming work in all of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Amen.

Introduction.

Luke has done us a great service by recording Paul’s last words to the elders of the church in Ephesus. Last week we considered the first half of Paul’s sermon in which he used himself as an example to them in how to serve the church faithfully. He gave three particular examples, tears, truth and trials.

Serve like I did with humility marked by tears.

Don’t shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God’s truth as I did with you.

When led by the Holy Spirit don’t fear whatever trials He leads you into, don’t be surprised.

Acts 20:24 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.

Acts 20:28-31, two-fold charge to the elders and a three-fold reason for the charge.

This morning’s text takes up the second half of Paul’s last words and they turn from being example to being exhortation or admonition. On the basis of his example having lived among them for three years Paul has authority to charge them or urge them to do certain things.

He gives a two-fold charge followed by a three-fold reason for the charge. We will through the first two reasons this morning.

Let me begin with a word about who we are talking about and to. Clearly Paul is addressing elders and by elders we don’t mean senior citizens, but spiritual leaders, shepherds of the sheep, fathers of the flock.

In the NT the terms pastor, elder, shepherd, overseer, bishop are all used interchangeably. We see this in verse 28 where Paul is talking to elders, whom we call overseers and tells

them to shepherd/pastor the flock, the word “care for” is the same word for shepherd or pastor.

All these terms describe different aspects of the same office, of shepherding or pastoring the flock of God with oversight and authority. Their task is to love, feed, guide, provide and protect the flock. The presence of elders in a church is a sign of God’s grace raising up spiritual fathers.

So pastor and elder are not two different offices, but two different words for the same office. The Dutch distinction of a domine, has created a two-tier understanding of spiritual leadership and a separation of the office of shepherding. In the NT a pastor is an elder and an elder is a pastor, both offices fulfill the same pastoral or shepherding function, the care and feeding and leading of the flock.

Now having said that, let me broaden the application of this passage to include all of us. There are admonitions in Paul’s words that apply primarily and specifically to elders, but also to all who are in any position of leadership and to all Christians. We see this in the very first charge.

First charge, pay careful attention to yourself.

This is one of the greatest pieces of wisdom in all Scripture. This is advice for pastors, elders, deacons, spiritual leaders, husbands and fathers, parents, Christians in all places in life where you have influence, where you are salt and light, where you are a witness for Jesus Christ.

Pay attention, take heed, be on your guard for yourself. A fancy word for this is to be circumspect, or to act circumspectly. If you are circumspect, you think carefully before doing or saying anything. It’s good quality for anyone entrusted with responsibility. Don’t unsay with your actions what you say with your words.

I have been in ministry in churches 40 years. There is one person who has given me more trouble, more grief, more stress than anyone else. That person is here today and I am going to call him out. His name is Robert Woodyard. And the worst part of it is he has followed me from each church I have served. I can’t seem to shake him.

Over these many years I have had some challenges from a few elders and some church members, but none of them have come even close to the trouble I have given myself.

Would you say the same thing, that your biggest enemy is yourself? Like that famous Pogo cartoon from 1970. “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

All Christians and elders especially must watch over themselves, over everything they say and everything they do. They must give particular attention to how they act in God's house and among God's people. They must shepherd their own soul first and then the souls of their family and then the souls of the flock.

Later on Paul will write a letter to Timothy in Ephesus and remind him of what he said here.

I Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

A person who neglects his own soul and his own salvation will not be able to lead others in a godly manner. Pay careful attention to yourselves. Watch your life and doctrine closely.

Second charge, pay careful attention to all the flock.

Flock is a favorite term in the Bible for the people of God, the people of Israel and the people of the Church of Jesus Christ.

God calls Himself a shepherd, and Jesus calls Himself a good shepherd and the chief shepherd. Scripture calls pastors/elders to be under-shepherds.

I Peter 5:2-3 Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, ... being examples to the flock.

In verse 28 we read that elders are to oversee the flock and to care for the flock. ESV has care. KJV has feed. NIV and NASB have shepherd.

To translate this care for or feed is too limited, too small. Feeding is just one aspect of shepherding. The word here is shepherd or pastor and it implies all the duties of a shepherd, caring, feeding, leading, guiding, protecting, guarding. Care for all the needs of the flock.

Elders are called to know the flock, to know when they are in need of spiritual help and assistance, to help them grow in grace. As a doctor cares for his patients and a teacher cares for his students, so are elders to know and care for the flock.

Acts 20:28-31, Paul's three-fold reason for his two-fold charge.

To strengthen the urgency and importance of this two-fold charge, Paul list three reasons why it is of utmost importance to watch your own life and doctrine closing as you watch the life and doctrine of the flock closely.

First reason, the Holy Spirit has called you and made you an elder.

Elders/deacons have been call by God through the Holy Spirit to their office. These elders were not elders by the appointment of Paul, or votes or lots or laying on of hands. This is not a human or an earthly call. This has not come about by chance, and to think that way is to rob God of His glory. You are an elder or deacon by the providential and sovereign call of God Himself. Yours is a divine call, He has done it, He is the one who directed the votes and the drawing of lots. The spiritual care of this flock has been placed in your hands by no other than God.

Tremble when you consider your call to this office is not your own doing, or the doing of this congregation, but God's doing. Think about that, meditate on that, take it seriously, let it drive you to your knees. Resolve to be His servant to do His will, to die to yourself and your ways and will. Let the call of God and the nature of this high calling stir your zeal for prayer and faithfulness.

It is proof of God's love and care for us that He has raised up men to be your pastors, elders and deacons. He cares so much for the needs of your soul that He has given to you men as spiritual leaders so that you are not lacking in spiritual food and care, in leading and guiding, in protecting and guarding.

God has set these men in your midst and over you for your good. God has not called you to murmur, complain or grumble against them. Resist every urge or temptation or opportunity to gossip or slander or criticize your leaders. Don't speak to one against another, don't sow division or strife.

Second reason, the church of Jesus Christ is bought His precious blood.

The body you have been called and set apart to serve is no less than the church of God which has been bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ.

When God looks down on the earth, the most valuable thing He sees in all the earth is the Church of Jesus Christ. Nothing is more precious to Him than the blood bought people of Jesus. Jesus came to earth, took on our flesh, suffered and died a most terrible death, shedding His blood, to purchase for Himself a people, rescued, redeemed, reconciled to the Father.

There is nothing else on earth like the Church of Jesus Christ. There is no institution or organization or business more worthy of your love, your interest, your commitment, your labor and sacrifice and support. Nothing more worthy. This is the only eternal association/assembly on earth, the only thing that will survive the coming fire.

To you has been entrusted Christ's most prized possession. That alone should spur you on to greater prayer and zeal and effort on behalf of the flock. Be careful not to profane the most sacred blood of Christ by missing the immeasurable worth of His church or missing the great honor it is to shepherd His church.

It is your honor to serve God and to love what He loves.
Because of the price paid, what is dear to Him should be dear to us.
Should we not lay down our life for what He laid down His life?
If the flock is worthy of the blood of Jesus, then it is worthy of your best labor.
This is a high calling, a great honor and a most worthy and noble work. There is no higher.

There is no greater proof of Christ's love for us, than that He laid down His life for His church, that He bled and died for His bride.

Anyone who shows contempt for the church, shows contempt for Christ. To disrespect or dishonor or slander or speak against or walk away from the Church of Jesus Christ is to bring great judgment down on yourself. Do nothing to profane the precious and sacred blood of the Son of God.

If anyone opposes the church of Jesus Christ, they not only make the death of Jesus worthless, but they attack and destroy the fruit of His death, what He purchased by His death.

Understanding who and what the Church is, serves to heighten the sense of holy responsibility leaders in the church have. What is this we are called to do, what is this service we are equipped by the Holy Spirit to do? Who is it for?

Paul wants the elders to know the magnitude of the cost and price paid, to stir in them a deeper love for the church. Jesus loves the church this much, and we should no less.

I want all of us to know the magnitude of what Jesus has done. Think about it. Jesus Christ the Son of the living God, God Himself, in our flesh, whipped, beaten, a crown of huge thorns shoved into His skull, bleeding wounds, ripped and torn flesh, nails driven through His hands and feet, a sword stabbed into His side.

Bleeding to obtain His church, bleeding to purchase your life and mine, bleeding for you and me. We are not our own. We think we are our own, we get up every day thinking we are our own, doing our own thing for ourselves. But no, we have been purchase, bought, ransomed, redeemed, at a very great price.

Why did He do what He did?

Ephesians 5:25–27 Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and *gave himself up* for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Jesus shed His own blood to obtain a people and make us holy, cleansed from sin, that He might make His bride, the Church, beautiful.

Do you care about that, does your heart desire what He desires? As you take the bread and the cup, do you want to be what He suffered and died to make you?

Titus 2:14 *He gave himself* for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

He didn't die just to cleanse us from our sin, but also to make us zealous to do good. Jesus saved your life, what are you willing to do with the life He purchased and redeemed? Are you willing to be used by Him for Him?

Are you seeking what Jesus shed His blood to obtain? Do you desire to belong body and soul in life and in death to your faithful Savior and Shepherd Jesus Christ?

Let's take some time in silent prayer to get our hearts right with Jesus, with who He is and what He had done for us, and just how precious His blood is and what our lives mean in the light of His sacrifice.

Prayer: Jesus, make me yours, make me into what you died to make me, Jesus, cleanse me from all my unrighteousness, all my selfish and sinful ways, all my self-serving ways, make me your servant, the servant of your will for your glory, make me to live and move and have my being in you, make me a vessel of your good purposes, your good works that you created me for, make me an instrument in your hands to be a testimony to others that you might draw them to yourself, make me the reward of your suffering, the reward of your sacrifice.

Jesus, forgive our indifference to the price you paid, forgive our indifference to what you suffered and did for us, forgive our neglect of so great a truth, forgive our selfish ways. Forgive our interest in the Seahawks and Mariners and Sounders and Netflix and Hulu and the things of the flesh and this world, that cause us to forget what is true and real and lasting and eternal. Open our eyes to see you at this table, and to see how precious your church is to you and why it should be to us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.