

LESSON 9

Equipped to Shepherd: Paul to the Ephesian Elders

Acts 20:17–38

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.

Acts 20:28

Class Overview: Acts 20 highlights one of the most personal and heartfelt moments in Paul’s ministry. On his way to Jerusalem, he stopped at Miletus and called for the elders of the church in Ephesus to meet him there. Knowing this might be his final time with them, Paul delivered a moving farewell filled with instruction, warning, and encouragement. His message offers one of the clearest pictures in Scripture of what it means to shepherd God’s people with integrity and courage. This lesson emphasizes how God equips leaders to care for His flock, guard against false teachings, and serve with humility, sacrifice, and love.

Class Objectives: By the end of this class, you should be able to—

1. Summarize the key themes of Paul’s farewell message to the Ephesian elders.
2. Understand the biblical role and responsibility of church leaders as shepherds of God’s flock.
3. Recognize the importance of humility, perseverance, and personal example in leadership.
4. Identify the dangers of false teaching and the need for spiritual vigilance.
5. Apply Paul’s example by serving others with sincerity and faithfulness, trusting that the Lord’s approval matters most.

Introduction

FEW PASSAGES IN ACTS REVEAL PAUL'S HEART like his farewell to the elders of Ephesus. For three years, he had lived among them, teaching, praying, and building a community in one of the most influential cities of the ancient world. The Ephesian church had become a model of faith and strength, but Paul knew challenges were ahead. As he traveled toward Jerusalem, where hardships awaited, he stopped at Miletus and asked the elders to meet him. What followed was not a formal speech but a shepherd's final plea to those who would carry on his work.

Paul's message was both heartfelt and practical. He reminded the elders of how he had served: with humility, tears, and perseverance through trials. He urged them to continue shepherding God's church, which was bought with Christ's blood, warning that false teachers would appear from both outside and inside the congregation. His love for them shone through in every word and in his final prayer as they wept together on the shore.

Here we see one of the clearest biblical depictions of spiritual leadership. A genuine shepherd doesn't lead for power or praise but for the benefit of the flock. He protects, nourishes, and guides God's people with compassion and conviction. Paul's example reminds us that ministry isn't about titles or authority—it's about service, character, and faithfulness to the truth. These days, when leadership often reflects worldly ambition, Acts 20 reminds us to focus on Christlike ministry. God equips shepherds not through comfort or prestige but through humility, endurance, and deep love for His people.

Historical Background

Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire: a thriving port on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Known for its commerce, culture, and the magnificent temple of Artemis (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World), Ephesus was both influential and deeply pagan. Paul spent more time there than anywhere else during his missionary work—about three years (Acts 20:31). His ministry transformed the city. The gospel spread throughout the region,

idol makers lost business, and the name of Jesus became known far beyond its borders.

By the time of Acts 20, Paul's third missionary journey was nearing its end. He was headed to Jerusalem to deliver a collection for the poor saints there, and he felt that imprisonment and suffering awaited him (Acts 20:22–23). Still, his concern for the Ephesian church led him to stop at Miletus, about thirty miles south of Ephesus, and call for the elders to meet him.

These elders, also known as overseers or shepherds, had been appointed to lead and care for the congregation Paul established. His farewell message to them is the only speech in Acts directly addressed to believers rather than unbelievers, offering a unique view of early church leadership priorities. Paul reminded them of his example: humble service, tireless teaching, and willingness to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel. He then urged them to continue that same work—guard the flock, protect it from false teachers, and rely entirely on God's grace.

Ephesus later faced the very challenges Paul predicted. False teachers emerged, causing division and spiritual decline. Decades afterward, Jesus Himself addressed the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1–7, praising its endurance but warning that it had lost its first love. Paul's words in Acts 20 thus remain both relevant and timeless—a reminder that the health of any congregation depends on shepherds who serve faithfully, guard truth diligently, and love deeply.

Equipped by Example (20:17–21)

Paul began his message to the Ephesian elders by pointing to his own example. *You know, from the first day I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility, with tears, and during the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews.* (vv. 18–19). His ministry was not built on pride, authority, or appearance; it was marked by humility, compassion, and endurance.

He didn't just tell others how to live; he showed them. His actions were the greatest lesson he could leave behind. He served during difficult

times, remained faithful despite persecution, and kept teaching even when it cost him dearly. Authentic leadership isn't about position or power; it's about consistency, integrity, and sincere love for God and His people.

Paul reminded them that he *did not hesitate to proclaim anything profitable to you or to teach you publicly and from house to house.* (v. 20). His ministry was open and personal. He preached at public gatherings and visited people in their homes, meeting them where they were. He held nothing back that would strengthen their faith.

His message was the same for everyone: *repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.* (v. 21). Whether Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, the gospel he preached focused on Christ and was rooted in grace. Paul's approach to ministry was simple yet powerful: truth conveyed with humility, love demonstrated through sacrifice, and perseverance shown through suffering.

For today's leaders, Paul's example sets the standard. Shepherds are called not only to teach sound doctrine but also to live it out. The church learns just as much from what its leaders do as from what they say. God equips His servants through experience, testing, and faithful endurance, so that their lives serve as visible testimonies of His grace. Paul's integrity gave more weight to his words. His life matched his message. That is what true leadership looks like: faithfulness over time, humility in service, and a heart that consistently cares for others' souls.

Equipped to Guard the Flock (20:22–31)

After recalling his example, Paul turned to the serious charge that every shepherd must accept: to guard the flock. He told the elders that he was going to Jerusalem, driven by the *Spirit*, knowing that imprisonment and hardship awaited him (v. 22). Still, he declared, *I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God's grace.* (v. 24). That statement captures the heart of every faithful servant. Paul's priority was not safety or comfort but obedience. His life belonged to the One

who called him. That same devotion is what equips leaders to stand firm when the work becomes difficult or dangerous.

Then Paul issued a serious warning: *Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He bought with His own blood.* (v. 28). Leaders must first guard their own hearts before they can guard others. Spiritual vigilance begins with personal integrity—monitoring our attitudes, motives, and example.

The responsibility of shepherding is sacred. The church does not belong to any man; it belongs to God, bought with the blood of His Son. Because of that, leaders must be alert to threats from both outside and inside. Paul warned that *savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.* (v. 29). False teachers would arise, distorting truth to draw followers after themselves. The danger was not only doctrinal but also personal: selfish ambition masquerading as ministry.

Paul reminded them how he had served day and night with tears, warning and teaching everyone. His heart for the flock was caring and pastoral. He didn't just defend truth; he nurtured souls. A good shepherd observes, teaches patiently, and corrects with love.

Guarding the church is more than defending doctrine: it's about protecting people. The role of the shepherd is to keep the truth clear, love strong, and the flock safe from anything that could harm their faith. God equips leaders for this task through His Spirit, His Word, and the example of Christ, the Chief Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep.

Equipped to Give and Bless (20:32–38)

As Paul finished his farewell message, he entrusted the elders to the care and grace of God. *And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified.* (v. 32). Paul knew he could not stay to protect them personally, but he trusted in the power of God's word to strengthen and sustain them. A shepherd's ultimate confidence is not in himself, but in the grace of God.

Paul reminded them of his example of generosity and self-sacrifice. *I have not coveted anyone's silver, gold, or clothing. You know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those with me.* (vv. 33–34). He had not served for profit or recognition. His integrity contrasted with that of false teachers who used religion for personal gain. Instead, Paul labored hard, showing that true ministry gives more than it takes.

He summed up his life's principle in one powerful statement: *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* (v. 35). Although not recorded elsewhere in Scripture, these words reflect the heart of Jesus. Leadership in God's kingdom is about giving—giving time, energy, compassion, truth, and prayer for others. A mature shepherd is characterized by a generous heart that mirrors the character of Christ.

After these final words, Paul knelt and prayed with everyone. The scene is tender and emotional: *They all wept loudly, and, throwing their arms around Paul, they kissed him, grieving most of all over his statement that they would never see his face again.* (v. 37–38). Their tears showed the love and respect they had for him. Paul's ministry had not just built a church; it had built relationships grounded in Christlike love.

Here we see the essence of servant leadership. Paul gave everything he had: his strength, his tears, his time, his heart. God had equipped him not just to lead but to love, not just to teach but to bless. The church still needs shepherds like that—leaders who rely on God's grace, serve without greed, and measure success not by what they gain but by how much they give.

Lesson Summary and Reflection

Key Truths from Ephesus:

- God equips leaders through humility, endurance, and faithfulness to His word.
- Shepherds must guard both their own hearts and the flock entrusted to them.
- The church belongs to God, purchased with the blood of His Son, and must be protected with care.

- Ministry that reflects Christ is marked by generosity, not greed, by service, not status.
- True leadership gives more than it receives and measures success by love and faithfulness.

Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders stands as one of the most touching and instructive passages in the New Testament. It reveals the heart of a true shepherd; one who serves humbly, guards faithfully, and gives selflessly. His words remind us that leadership in the church is not about position or prestige, but about service and sacrifice.

Paul's life served as a lesson to others. He demonstrated endurance, a dedication to truth, and a deep compassion for God's people through his actions. He faced trials, tears, and persecution, yet he never stopped preaching the gospel of grace. His commitment to God's Word and his willingness to suffer for others set an example for all generations of church leaders.

He also urged the elders to protect the flock diligently, aware that false teachers would arise. The church needed leaders with courage and discernment—those who would defend sound doctrine and keep their hearts pure. But Paul didn't leave them to face this challenge alone. He committed them to God and the word of His grace, trusting that divine strength would sustain them when human effort falls short.

Finally, Paul reminded them that ministry is about giving, not gaining. The greatest joy in serving Christ comes from what we give, not what we receive. His farewell ended in tears, not from regret but from love. He had dedicated his life to the flock, and they had become his family. Every Christian, not just elders, must share the same spirit of faithfulness. God equips His people to serve with humility, perseverance, and love. Whether we lead a class, shepherd a family, or serve quietly, we are all called to mirror the heart of Christ, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep.

Memory Verse and Weekly Challenge

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.

Acts 20:28 (CSB)

Weekly Challenge: This week, pray for your church's shepherds and teachers. Offer them a note or word of encouragement. If you lead others, follow Paul's example and lead with greater humility.

For Discussion

1. What qualities in Paul's ministry stand out as examples for anyone serving in leadership or ministry today?

2. Why is humility such an essential part of spiritual leadership?

3. How can church leaders and members alike stay alert to the dangers Paul warned about in vv. 28–31?

4. What does Paul's statement, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," teach us about the heart of ministry?

5. How can you apply Paul's example this week in how you serve, encourage, or care for others?
