

The Important Ministry of Elders

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 20:13-38 / May 31, 2026

Introduction:

Our passage today holds the only recorded lengthy teaching by Paul to believers in Acts. Its importance is further heightened when considering the overarching narrative of Paul's missions. In Acts 14:21-23, Luke concludes Paul's first mission in the regions surrounding Galatia and Pisidian Antioch with a short summary of him strengthening disciples and establishing elders in every church. Similarly, in Acts 20, Luke concludes Paul's mission through the regions surrounding Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia with a focus on strengthening disciples and elders. Yet, this time, he gives a detailed account of Paul's encouragement to elders. Consider also how he structures this story. Look at verses 13-16, "But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. And sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day we touched at Samos; and the day after that we went to Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost." "But" links this with the previous story while distinguishing from it. And note the uniquely detailed description of Paul's travel from Troas to Miletus. Luke shares when and how Paul joined their travels, each stop along the way, and Paul's reason for sailing past Ephesus. All of this keeps us connected to his previous emphasis on encouragement while drawing us into the new story. Look at verse 17, "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him." Elders are distinguishable leaders established in the churches. Sailing past Ephesus and then calling the Ephesian elders to Miletus is curious. Though only thirty miles away, sending news to Ephesus and their arrival likely took three days. How was this more efficient than stopping there on the way? Most likely, it was because Paul's relationship with the Ephesian church would have prolonged his time there. Yet, because he loved this church, he calls their elders for one more encouragement. Now, move down to verses 36-38, "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship." Note the love shown for Paul after his speech. Following prayer together, they weep and affectionately embrace Paul because they would not see him again, and the term "accompanied" carries the idea of providing for his needs. So, bookending this exhortation, is a mutual love that highlights it. I am persuaded this and the repetition of how Paul concluded his missions in Acts 14 and 20 are designed to emphasize the important ministry of elders. And I see three ways Paul's exhortation communicates that. First, it shows us how,

The Ministry of Elders Extends Apostolic Ministry

This speech mirrors several farewell speeches in Scripture like Jacob's to his sons in Genesis 49, Joshua's to Israel's leaders in Joshua 23-24, Samuel's to Israel in 1 Samuel 12, and Jesus' upper room discourse in John 13-17. It also closely parallels Paul's final words to Timothy. Kent Hughes comments, "The image called to mind by Paul's meeting with the Ephesian elders is that of a group of soldiers still soiled by the dust and blood of war, drawing together with their revered general for some final wisdom" (Kent Hughes, Acts—The Church Afire, p. 276). Church, Paul recounts his ministry here, not to defend it, but, like a general's charge, to exhort them to continue that ministry. Look at how he begins in verses 18-21, "And when they came to him, he said to them. 'You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.'" Paul reminds them of his service in humility and love for God's people, while faithfully declaring the profitable gospel message despite trials.

He didn't preach easy-believism, avoid scrutiny by only teaching in private, or limit his proclamation to a select group of people. Paul testified publicly to Jews and Greeks of the necessity of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. This is the ministry elders should continue. Look at verses 22-24, "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But 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." Paul shares his destination and contrasts the weight of promised trials by the Spirit with a powerful view of self and longing to fully testify to the gospel of the grace of God. Consider how this speaks to our hearts. Jesus doesn't mince words when calling people to follow Him, saying, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Family, this view of self isn't only for those called to lead. Those who lead follow Paul's example to call the church to the same. Continue in verses 25-27, "And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Verse 26 is the pivotal transition moment, as the basis for his coming charge. After saying they wouldn't see him again, Paul uses language that alludes to a watchman called to warn God's people of danger in Ezekiel 33:1-6. Once that warning is given, their responsibility is fulfilled. How does Paul know he completed his? He declared the whole counsel of God. He faithfully declared God's written Word, Scripture, as it related to the living word, Jesus Christ. The summary of his ministry building to this final declaration prepares for his coming charge by calling the Ephesians elders to extend his apostolic ministry. This doesn't mean elders have apostolic authority, but they faithfully promote and continue the ministry of the apostles. Next, Paul's charge shows us how,

The Ministry of Elders Involves Shepherding Care

We need to carefully observe verse 28. Look there with me, "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." First, note what elders are called to do. Not to manage an organization, but to pay careful attention to both them and the church. Second, note the imagery of shepherding sheep. God's people are "the flock," and "care" is a Greek term for tending to sheep. Likewise, in 1 Peter 5:1-3, Peter says, "So I exhort the elders among you...: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." Finally, note how Paul emphasizes God's Trinitarian activity. The flock is the church of God the Father, obtained with "his own blood," which either implies Christ's divinity or may be translated "the blood of His own" referring to Christ. And it is the Holy Spirit who made them overseers. Elders are not elected officials to carry out church member's wishes, they are Spirit-appointed shepherds. Family, put all of this together. The role of elders is to carefully attend to and shepherd people, not to manage an organization. And elders are appointed through a spiritual act of affirming the Spirit's call and qualification of those who provide shepherding care of this flock, not an opinionated selection process. Why is this vital to understand? Look at verses 29-31, "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, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears." Paul knows dangers will come to the church. "Fierce wolves" is apocalyptic language for false teachers and prophets. Jesus warned of these in Matthew 7:15, saying, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." From the beginning, people have snuck into Christ's church looking like sheep, and maybe even talking like sheep. But, inside, they are really enemies seeking to devour and draw people away from God's grace. And Paul says some will even make their way into leadership before the true nature of their hearts is exposed.

Therefore, Paul commands elders to be alert and points back to his faithful teaching of God's Word. When we read Paul's letters to Timothy, and Jesus' words in Revelation 2, we see this warning came true. And the eventual demise of the church in Ephesus gives a greater warning to us of the importance of elders fulfilling their ministry of shepherding care. Family, God's design is for Spirit-appointed elders to extend apostolic ministry through shepherding care. This brings me to the final thing Paul's charge shows us, how,

The Ministry of Elders Must Align with the Word of Grace

Paul ends with a benediction committing the elders to live under and teach God's Word, followed by an exhortation for a specific danger leaders face. Look at verses 32, "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." Paul may move on, but they are not left alone. They have God and His Word to guide them, which will build them up and sanctify them, leading to their reward. "Word of grace" connects with verse 24, grounding God's Word in the gospel of God's grace. Let us separate God's Word from His grace in the gospel. Elders' lives and ministry must align with God's Word of grace for the battles ahead. Continue in verses 33-35, "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Sharing how he did not seek financial gain, worked to support himself to care for the weak, serves to call them to follow his example. This doesn't mean elders can't receive compensation because Paul calls for those who proclaim the gospel to earn their living by the gospel in 1 Corinthians 9 and says elders who rule well, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching, should receive honor or provision in 1 Timothy 5. This calls elders not to treat church leadership like the world treats leadership. Worldly leadership seeks a higher social status and financial wellbeing, but Christian leadership seeks to go lower in service and become more free with one's time and resources. His concluding words of Jesus closely resemble Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:35-38 to show the reward of this. Hughes sums Paul's point up well, saying, "In a nutshell, their ministry was to be one of giving. Paul gave himself to God and his people. He gave himself to the ministry of the Word. He gave himself with such intensity that he forgot himself. 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Family, the ministry of elders, extending apostolic shepherding care, must align with the word of grace, denying oneself and fully giving one's life to God and His people. As we have seen, this is an important passage for understanding the ministry of elders. So, the primary application is for elders, and anyone led to become an elder to reflect on these things. But, what about the whole church? How might the whole church respond to these truths? Outside of elders serving as an example for the church to follow, meaning these things apply in some way to everyone, let me suggest two ways. First,

1) Trust in the Ministry of Elders

Paul's focus on establishing and encouraging elders in Acts, his letters to Timothy and Titus, and Peter's comments in 1 Peter 5, communicate the important ministry of elders. Scripture consistently speaks to the design and purpose of elders. Character qualifications are priority, as examples to follow. They must be able to teach sound doctrine and refute false doctrine. Seeing how elders extend apostolic ministry reveals how Acts 6 informs the priorities of elders should be devotion to prayer and the Word. Do our ideas about elders reflect a trust in the ministry we see in Scripture? Do the tasks we ask of them, what we turn to them for, and what we expect of them serve this ministry? Let me be a little more pointed. Do the parameters we've established around eldership communicate trust in this ministry? What influences decisions like elder appointment, term limits, and restrictions of staff serving as elders? Does the Spirit's calling and qualifications of elders really end after a set term? Is His calling really only limited a set number of staff pastors? Family let's be honest, these are man-made requirements that lack trust in the Spirit to supply qualified elders and appropriately hold them accountable. And I believe we need to reflect on whether we trust in God's design for the ministry of elders. Second,

2) Support the Ministry of Elders

Support starts with encouragement, prayer, and accountability. Paul called the Ephesian elders to encourage them. Specific encouragements for elders are found in 1-2 Timothy, Titus, and 1 Peter. Do you encourage elders to fulfill their calling? Prayer is also vital. Do you pray for elders go deeper in their walk with God and be filled with wisdom, grace, mercy, love, and sound doctrine? Yet, supporting the ministry of elders also requires accountability. Faithful accountability is what keeps wolves from rising within leadership. Paul sets guidelines for this accountability in 1 Timothy 5:19-20 to, “not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses” and rebuke those who persist in sin. This avoids false charges, while also taking charges seriously that come from verifiable witnesses. If elders wander from the truth or godliness, they should be held accountable. Encouragement, prayer, and accountability all support the ministry of elders.

Conclusion:

And, as the worship team comes for our time of response, I want to suggest one way we can support the ministry elders at GracePoint. Our elders are consistently distracted from shepherding care because of demands that fall on us outside of prayer and the Word. We function more like the board of a corporation, having to constantly work through organizational matters, than shepherds caring for the flock. I see this stemming from two things. First, because of California law, churches must function in certain organizational ways. And we have established requirements in the documents that govern us as a non-profit that inhibit the ministry of elders and place unnecessary organizational decisions on their shoulder. We should work towards correcting those things. Second, we lack a fully thriving deacon ministry. In the New Testament, deacons are another group of distinguishable leaders in the church. Now, don't misunderstand me, we have some deacons serving in member care who beautifully fill their Spirit-given role. However, that is only one aspect of deacon leadership. We are missing deacon leadership to remove administrative burdens from the elders. It's not that we lack help, but we are missing Spirit-called, gifted, and qualified deacons to lead in these areas. And this work is often expected of staff members who are in shepherding roles. Family, we need leaders like we saw in Acts 6 to step up and allow the elders and staff to focus on the ministry of prayer and the Word. We have been studying and praying about restructuring our church governance for the Spirit to raise up these leaders and hope to enter a process as a church soon of study, discussion, and deliberate change to better align with Scripture. When this happens, it will not be a quick process and will require trust in God's Spirit to guide us. But here's a question I believe we should ask today to prepare for that. If our elders cannot fulfill the design and purpose of their ministry shown in Scripture, will that eventually cause spiritual damage to the church? As you respond this morning, I would encourage you not only to reflect on your own heart's response to this question and the truths of our passage but begin seeking God's wisdom and grace for our path forward as a church. Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?