

MBC – 8/23/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson  
**“Paul’s Charge to Church Leaders”**  
 Acts 20:25-31

A ministry with no regrets. – Paul is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem with the gift he has been collecting from Gentile churches for the saints there, who were in desperate need. He couldn’t afford stopping in Ephesus to see his dear friends there, but instead he sent for the church elders to meet him at Miletus. He had been with these dear men for 3 years and he believed he would never see them again, so this scene on the beach at Miletus with Paul and his men is Jesus in the upper room with His precious Disciples before He went to the cross. I want us to read it from v.17, and notice how Paul describes a ministry with no regrets—

- Acts 20:17–38 <sup>17</sup>Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup>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, <sup>19</sup>servicing the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup>how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup>testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup>And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup>except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup>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.

And our passage for this morning—

- <sup>25</sup>And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup>Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup>for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. <sup>28</sup>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. <sup>29</sup>I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup>and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup>Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.
- <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup>You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup>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.’ ” <sup>36</sup>And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup>And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup>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. (Pray)

## I. The charge to the Ephesian elders.

### ***A. His ministry was completed.***

- <sup>25</sup>And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.

Paul believed that. He thought he might be killed while in Jerusalem – and he almost was. He was arrested there, taken to Rome, put under house arrest for 2 years, and then he was released and went on a 4<sup>th</sup> missionary journey – We piece this together from what we read in 1&2 Timothy and Titus, Paul *did* see the Ephesians again. Imagine what a reunion that was!

But now he believes this is the last time he will ever see these men. He probably led them to Christ. He had personally trained them up in the Word, took them with him everywhere he went, just the way Jesus did with His men. This was a deep, personal friendship. But it was even more – these men had been in the trenches of ministry with him – and that creates an intensely personal bond. They were weeping at the thought that they would never see Paul again. So why does he say what he says next?—

- <sup>26</sup>Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all.

### ***B. He was innocent of the blood of all.***

Paul was reminding them of the words of Ezekiel, about the responsibility of the watchman on the wall. Listen – this is how seriously Paul saw his Gospel ministry—

- Ezekiel 33:7–9 <sup>7</sup>“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup>If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. <sup>9</sup>But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

Paul didn’t shrink back. He didn’t hold back. He warned Jew and d Gentile to repent of their sins and trust completely in Christ. He’s saying, “I have a clear conscience before God and man. If anyone ignored my warnings, it’s on them.” Paul saw Gospel ministry as a matter of life and death, heaven and hell – didn’t he? He wasn’t selling a more successful life: He was proclaiming the one way God has given mankind to escape eternal judgment – faith in Jesus Christ.

But I don’t think Paul was saying this for himself as much as for these men: he wanted them to have a *blood-earnestness* about the Gospel ministry. *God would hold accountable anyone who wouldn’t listen to them, but he would hold these men accountable if they didn’t tell them. Are you a faithful watchman to your family, your friends, your neighbors?*

### ***C. The key to a complete ministry – the whole counsel of God.***

But how could Paul so confidently say that he had discharged his duty among them? This is so powerful—

- <sup>27</sup>for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Counsel means “will” or “purpose” of God. Where is that found? Only in His Word. He said the same thing in—

- Acts 20:20 . . . I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,

Paul faithfully taught God's Word, and all of God's Word – that's what "*the whole counsel of God means.*" It doesn't mean that Paul taught through the entire OT during the 3 years he was in Ephesus, but it means he didn't sidestep any of it either. He didn't *shrink back* from the hard parts – the convicting stuff. And he didn't just teach the parts he was partial to. That is a real temptation for any pastor, to grind his own axes week after week.

How do you guard against this temptation? Simply preach what God has said – book by book, verse by verse, explaining and applying the passage. And make the main point of the passage the main point of the sermon. And that's the definition of "expository preaching." When you preach that way, you avoid getting sidetracked by your own pet doctrines and issues.

- You say, "Then why does Joel Osteen come up in every other sermon of yours?" What can I say – he's there in the text!

But seriously, if we believe that the Bible is God's revelation of Himself, then we need all of it: every book, chapter, verse, and word, don't we? The whole Bible makes whole Christians! But if I try to cherry-pick what I think you need to hear, then I'm saying I know better than God. I am censoring God.

I can't live long enough to preach through the whole Bible, but I need to give you as much as I can for as long as I can (majoring on the New Covenant Scriptures) – because beloved, *that's* what you need to hear! The whole Bible makes whole Christians!

\*I want to say something about what to look for in a church – if, God forbid, you ever leave MBC, but if you do: Go to the church website, go to the links for their sermons. *First*, make sure the sermons are at least 45 minutes long. You want something at least long enough to put Eutychus to sleep!

- But then look to see if they preach through entire books of the Bible. If all you see are topical sermons, or one week it's this passage, next week it's another random passage – beloved, avoid that church! Really? Why is that such a big deal? Let me tell you: If every week it's a different topic or different book, I guarantee the pastor is picking out what he wants to tell you, or what he think *you* want to hear, right? He might be sincere, but that is censoring God's Word. And you will probably never hear a sermon from Malachi, or from some of the out-of-the-way passages we've looked at in Acts – and those can be the best ones, can't they?

Paul kept the faith and finished his course because he taught the whole counsel of God. And he charged these elders to follow his example and do the same. Just a few years later, Paul wrote to Timothy in Ephesus. Maybe he went to their website and saw a bunch of topical messages – I don't know – but he wrote these solemn words—

- 2 Timothy 4:1–4 <sup>1</sup>I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: <sup>2</sup>preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup>For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup>and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

There are plenty of churches who will give people what they want. But the faithful shepherd declares the whole counsel of God. And the flock shouldn't settle for anything less.

## II. The elders' charge.

Now Paul gives these men their marching orders, but this is the charge to all church leaders until our Lord returns. It's a serious charge because it's the stewardship of God's own church, purchased with His own blood.

- Acts 20:28 <sup>28</sup>Pay careful attention (Beware, take care, take heed) 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.

This stewardship of God's people begins with a surprising command—

### ***1.) Shepherd yourself first.***

*Oversee your own life and walk with God – first and foremost! Because you lead with your own life. And you lead from the overflow of your own walk and communion and daily fellowship with God. The sheep know the difference, don't they? They can spot the shepherd who's just putting on the religious show, and the shepherd who walks with Christ, and leans on Him, and loves Him. You can't fake that.*

\*Every one of you can click on sermons and podcasts, but you need models, not just mouthpieces. You need to be able to watch a shepherd who goes through suffering, and pandemics, and evacuations – all the stuff that you go through – and keeps walking with Christ – so that you can follow his example.

- This is why Robert Murray McCheyne said, "The greatest need of my people is *my* personal holiness."
- And Paul told Timothy in Ephesus: <sup>16</sup>Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:16)

Shepherds - elders, watch your own walk with God, first and foremost – don't let coldness creep in. Don't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Spend personal time in God's Word – read it deeply and read it daily. Richard Baxter wrote a book entitled, *The Reformed Pastor*. I tremble when I read it because it's so serious and so convicting. He says this—

Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God, and, when you have done, dishonour him as much as others? Will you proclaim Christ's governing power, and yet rebel yourselves? . . . Take heed to yourselves, lest you cry down sin, and yet do not overcome it; lest, while you seek to bring it down in others, you bow to it, and become its slaves yourselves: O brethren! it is easier to rebuke sin, than to overcome it. (*The Reformed Pastor* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979], 67–68)<sup>1</sup>

Shepherds, shepherd yourself first and foremost. And Paul throws in something we can't forget—

### ***\*The Holy Spirit makes elders.***

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<sup>1</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). [Acts](#) (Vol. 2, p. 223). Chicago: Moody Press.

- Acts 20:28 <sup>28</sup>Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, *in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,*

I've been asked this question many times, by believers and unbelievers; "So, uh, what is it exactly that makes a person a pastor? Is it a certain degree, or a license, or . . . what?" Good question! Here's the answer: The Holy Spirit makes a man a shepherd. You can go to seminary, be ordained, have letters after your name –you can be pastoring a mega-church, but if the Holy Spirit didn't make you an overseer, you are an imposter, not a pastor.

So does the Holy Spirit do that? Well he gives a man the training and education in God's Word – you can't shepherd the flock if you don't know your Bible and understand doctrine. He gives a man life experience. He takes him through the same fires and afflictions that the sheep go through. And then He tests him – "*let them first be tested,*" Paul said. He gives him the gifts and abilities to lead and oversee the flock. I've known godly men, who loved Jesus and His people, but they weren't leaders. And then, he gives that man a burning desire to lay down his life to shepherd the flock of God—

- 1 Timothy 3:1 <sup>1</sup>The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires (lusts after) a noble task.

A man must have godly character, life experience, the knowledge of Scripture and doctrine, ability to lead and oversee, and a strong desire to shepherd. And all of this is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit doesn't send us an email to tell us who these men are! So do we know?

We know! The church *recognizes* those men who have these Holy Spirit produced qualities. We pray, we seek God, but it should be obvious who these men are. They will already be *loving* and shepherding the flock, because they can't help it. And the charge to these men is—"*care for the church of God.*"

## **2.) Shepherd the flock.**

"Care for" is the word "*shepherd.*" Didn't Jesus call us His sheep? So His under-shepherds are to shepherd His flock: feed them on God's Word; keep track of them! Know how they are doing. Comfort them when they are hurting – and can I say: Please let us know when you are hurting! So many times we hear, after the fact: "no one called me after my surgery, no one came to see me in the hospital" – but you never told us! Please let us know so we can be there for you.

And shepherding requires admonishing, correcting, reproof and rebuking the sheep when they stray. We just read what Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim 4:2—

- <sup>2</sup>preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort,

He told Titus that it's a required qualification to be an elder—

- Titus 1:9 . . . able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

A shepherd of the flock must be able to confront sin and error – that's hard and unpleasant. If a man can't do that, then he shouldn't be a shepherd. And please hear this: the flock needs to *accept* the correction and guidance of their shepherds—

- Hebrews 13:17 <sup>17</sup>Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

It's sad that *many* Christians have such a superficial attachment to the church that any rebuke, correction, or counsel that they don't care for, and they're gone. We've seen it happen. Beloved, accept the shepherding of your shepherds! They will give account for how they shepherd the flock, but the flock will give account for how they submit to their shepherds.

### **3.) Remember the infinite value of Jesus' flock.**

This last phrase of v.28 is the heart of all Paul says—

- Acts 20:28 <sup>28</sup>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.*

What an amazing passage! God purchased His people "*with His own blood.*" The best way to translate this is: "*which He obtained with the blood of His own,*" i.e., His Son, Jesus. We only appreciate the value of the church when we see the price with which He purchased it for Himself—

- 1 Peter 1:18–19 <sup>18</sup>knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, <sup>19</sup>but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Oh, shepherds, elders, remember – remember – the precious value of the stewardship God has entrusted to you – the price tag on your flock says "*Christ's own precious blood.*" That's what they are worth to Him. That's what they should be worth to you. And that's how you should love them and treat them.

- I remember as a young pastor, an older pastor told me the story of his son who was also a young pastor starting out at a church in Hawaii. It wasn't the dream gig he thought it would be. He was going on and on to his dad about how unteachable and ungrateful the people were. One problem after another. Finally, he said, "So dad, what do you think I should do?" He said, "I think you should resign from the pastorate." His son was shocked. His dad said, "If that's the way you see God's people, then you're not cut out to be a pastor!" His son got the message and changed his attitude.

"Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and laid down His life for her!" That's the way pastors, elders, overseers should love those whom God purchased for Himself with Son's own blood. Baxter said this—

Oh, what a charge is it that we have undertaken! And shall we be unfaithful to it? Have we the stewardship of God's own family, and shall we neglect it? . . . God forbid! . . . 'What! sirs, shall we despise the blood of Christ? Shall we think it was shed for them who are not worthy of our utmost care? You may see here, it is not a little fault that negligent pastors are guilty of. Oh, then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for these souls, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood, and are they not worth thy labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth, "to seek and to save that which was lost;" and wilt thou not go to the next door, or street, or village, to seek them? How small is thy condescension and labor compared to mine! . . . Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation . . . and wilt thou refuse to do that little which lieth upon thy hands?' Every

time we look upon our congregations, let us believingly remember that they are the purchase of Christ's blood, and therefore should be regarded by us with the deepest interest and the most tender affection.

And if we love them the way Jesus loves them, we will—

#### **4.) Protect the flock from wolves.**

- Acts 20:29–31 <sup>29</sup>I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup>and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup>Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

If you love Christ, and those bought by His blood, then you will be driven to protect them from spiritual harm. Which means that you can't shepherd with rose-colored glasses! You can't be naïve. We're in a spiritual war with Satan who wants to drag people into hell. And our enemy doesn't fight fair. He lies and deceives, and often his troops wear *our* side's uniforms. Paul warned and wept for three years and still, just a few years later, he wrote this to Timothy in Ephesus—

- 1 Timothy 1:3 <sup>3</sup>As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.

“Certain persons” – Timothy knew who they were, and he called them out by name –

- 1 Timothy 1:20 . . . <sup>20</sup>among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

He named two more in—

- 2 Timothy 2:17–18 . . . their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup>who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.

He named them because they were wolves and the flock's souls were in danger. Beloved, avoid any church where the shepherds won't warn the flock because they just want to be *nice*, and stick to what's *positive*. And from what I see when I survey churches today – that's the norm. But that wasn't Paul. And it wasn't Jesus either – read Matthew 7, Matthew 23.

- A couple weeks ago I sent articles about two groups that could put your soul in peril: one was Bethel church up in Redding with their blasphemous worship and their false teaching pastor, Bill Johnson. But hundreds of churches are trying to be just like Bethel Church. Beware.
- The other group that isn't a church, it's the right wing conspiracy group, QAnon. It presents itself as Christian, but it's not. And yet, even evangelical Christians are getting sucked into this dangerous nonsense because their thinking is more informed by news, politics, and the internet, than it is by the Word of God.

I just read an article that nails where the danger is for Christians, right here, right now, even at MBC, especially during this pandemic—

The digital age, and more broadly our secular age, has greatly expanded the horizon of ideas shaping Christians. The church is increasingly just one voice among many speaking into a Christian's life. A church's worship habits may occupy two hours of a Christian's week. But podcasts, radio shows, cable news, social media, streaming entertainment, and other forms of media account for upwards of 90 hours of their week.

Paul cautioned the Ephesian elders to "be alert" to the "fierce wolves" who would not spare the flock (Acts 20:29–31). For pastors, the "wolf" threat is not new. What's new is that, in the internet age, any given sheep is vulnerable to literally millions of wolves, whose overt or subtle dangers are only ever a few clicks away. It's impossible for any pastor to be aware of all the wolves. It's impossible for pastors to track the online activities of any one of their sheep, let alone hundreds of them. The search bar is the spiritual battleground of our day, and yet it's a largely hidden battleground where the fight for hearts and minds is waged in one-on-one combat.

Amen? And the only way to keep from being conformed to the world around you is to be transformed by the renewing of your mind by going deep and going daily in God's Word.

### III. Paul's farewell.

Paul passes the baton of his ministry on to these faithful men—

- Acts 20:32 <sup>32</sup>And now I commend you (he's saying, "I entrust 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.

"Men, I'm leaving these precious sheep in your hands. Follow my example; God is with you, His Word is with you, and it will feed and sanctify you as you teach it faithfully to the flock." I'm sure those men drank in these words of blessing from Paul. And then he says something that sounds strange at first—

- Acts 20:33<sup>33</sup>I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

He sounds defensive, but he's just reminding them again of his example: No one could accuse Paul of seeking anything for himself in his ministry. He lived to serve Christ and serve others—

- <sup>34</sup>You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup>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.'*"

Where did Jesus say that? Right here! It's not in the Gospels, but there's a lot that Jesus said and did that aren't in the Gospels, but our Lord must have said this often. Never forget the poor and the needy and the marginalized. Jesus didn't, and neither did Paul—

- Acts 20:36–38 <sup>36</sup>And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. (His ship was getting ready to sail, so he took these men to the throne of God.) <sup>37</sup>And there was much weeping on the part of all (the word means wailing); they embraced Paul and kissed him (the Gk. says they repeatedly kissed him on the neck), <sup>38</sup>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.

After 3 years with Paul, watching his life, and how he treated people – these men loved Paul this deeply. That says a lot, doesn't it? After all the struggles and spiritual battles and differences of opinion they had gone through, what was left when the dust settled and the smoke cleared? Love. You can have polished programs, doctrinal precision, and eloquent preaching, without love, what did Paul himself say? "I'm nothing but a noisy gong, and a clanging cymbal." But this is what faithful ministry of the Word along with godly example accomplished in Ephesus: deep love between the shepherd and the sheep. Let me close with Paul's words that he wrote while he was in Ephesus—

- 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 <sup>4</sup>Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup>Love never ends.