

Lesson 8 - 16 September 2012

Paul's Exhortation to the Ephesian Elders

Lesson Scope: Acts 20

Lesson Focus

Paul's initial visit to Ephesus was brief (Acts 18:19-21). On his third missionary journey, he ministered there more than two years, leaving after Demetrius stirred up the silversmiths, who set the whole city in an uproar (Acts 19).

Chapter 20 begins with Paul departing from Ephesus to visit other churches throughout Macedonia and Greece. His diligent and thorough exhortation reveals the heart of a true shepherd. Paul was willing to endure hardship and to sacrifice without reserve for the cause of Christ.

The "great shepherd of the sheep" calls men to be shepherds of His flock. This calling urges leaders to maintain a high view of their charge, a keen sense of the threats against the flock, and a solemn awareness of their grave accountability.

This lesson is shared in careful respect for the ministry and their work. It ought to build respect for their work, as well as carefulness in our conduct and diligence in our prayers for them.

Lesson Aim: To understand the solemn responsibilities vested in the ministry of the church.

Theme Verse: 1Timothy 4:16. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.

Lesson Text:

"I Kept Back Nothing"

Acts 20:17-27 ¹⁷ And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. ¹⁸ And when they were come to

him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, ¹⁹ Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: ²⁰ And how I kept back nothing that was profitable *unto you*, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, ²¹ Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: ²³ Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. ²⁴ But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. ²⁶ Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I *am* pure from the blood of all *men*. ²⁷ For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.

"Take Heed Therefore"

Acts 20:28-31 ²⁸ Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. ²⁹ For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

"I Commend You to God"

Acts 20:32-38 ³² And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. ³³ I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. ³⁴ Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my ne-

cessities, and to them that were with me. ³⁵ I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive. ³⁶ And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, ³⁸ Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship.

Questions for Study

"I Kept Back Nothing"

1. What qualities of a true shepherd did Paul demonstrate?
2. How can ordained brethren complement the efforts of each other?
3. What aspects of "all the counsel of God" might be difficult to communicate?

"Take Heed Therefore"

4. How did Paul emphasize the seriousness of these leaders' responsibility?
5. Why is vigilance essential in church leaders?

"I Commend You to God"

6. Can a leader's faithfulness guarantee against spiritual loss in his people? Explain.
7. Why should church leaders be unsalaried?
8. What is the value of older ministers working alongside younger ones?

Analyzing the Passage

Elders (Acts 20:17) and overseers (Acts 20:28) refer to the same group of people—church leaders. A number of expressions in this passage reveal Paul's compassion and commitment: "many tears" (Acts 20:19), "I kept back nothing" (Acts 20:20), "neither count I my life dear" (Acts 20:24), and others. To "feed the church" (Acts 20:28) is to care for the people as a shepherd tends his flock. The care that a shepherd gives his

sheep aptly illustrates the care of a pastor for his church members. He is responsible to provide proper nourishment, to watch for enemies, and to care for the sick and wounded.

That he was "pure from the blood of all men" (Acts 20:26) speaks of Paul's sincere effort to give the whole Gospel to all men. He knew that he had done so without reserve or partiality.

Principles and Applications

"I Kept Back Nothing"

1. Ministers will best fulfill their responsibilities when they support each other in their work (Acts 20:17-18). Fellow ministers should be the leader's most trusted confidants and advisers. Who could better understand his burdens and challenges than someone else with similar responsibilities? Leaders might differ with each other on some issues, but they may never allow those matters to disturb a basic unity of their message and influence. Unless they pull together as a team, their efforts cannot be effective.

2. The faithful minister serves the Lord in humility (Acts 20:19). No earthly leader is so gifted that he is indispensable. Even his greatest successes may be traced to the support and prayers of others. The godly leader is ever ready to serve in whatever way benefits others, seeking no personal honor for what was accomplished through his efforts. He views himself simply as an under-shepherd of the lowly Jesus, our Great Shepherd.

3. The minister is responsible to diligently teach the Word (Acts 20:20-21). The apostle Paul encouraged believers and warned sinners wherever and whenever he could—in synagogues and in people's homes, to crowds and to individuals, in prisons and before kings, on stormy seas and in written epistles. God calls today's leader to communicate the Word not only formally from the pulpit but also informally: while visiting and mingling with the brethren, while working on the job, when meeting his neighbors and while relating to his family at home. The faithful leader sees more opportunities than he is

able to utilize.

4. The minister is solemnly charged to declare all the counsel of God (Acts 20:20, 26-27). Paul had faithfully done this at great cost. John the Baptist and Stephen experienced martyrdom because they refused to compromise an unpopular message. In our day, the Bible's commands regarding moral purity, modest clothing, and marital fidelity are flagrantly disregarded. Declaring all the counsel of God is not easy when doing so brings misunderstanding, criticism, and hostility.

5. The faithful minister exemplifies stability and steadfastness in difficulty (Acts 20:22-24). Jesus forewarned His disciples that following Him would be difficult. This is especially true for church leaders, considering their responsibility not only for themselves but also for others. Despite threats and uncertainties, they can enjoy inner peace, knowing that God's grace is sufficient for their need.

"Take Heed Therefore"

6. The minister is a steward of God's possession (Acts 20:28). What could be a higher calling or a greater responsibility? The church is God's purchased and most treasured possession. What careful account He will require of those He has assigned to feed and care for her!

7. The minister is responsible to protect the flock from false teaching (Acts 20:29-31). The threat of deception is probably greater today than it has ever been. In the history of the world, information has never been so easily accessible in recordings, on the airwaves, and in our mailboxes. Outright error is usually easy to identify, but what about all the subtle shades of error mixed with truth that are promoted under the guise of Christianity? Many false teachers are talented, winsome, and aggressive. Godly leaders must warn against specific errors, but they must also teach their people how to "try the spirits" and how to guard the gateways into their homes and into their thinking.

"I Commend You to God"

8. Faithful ministers understand that the church is God's work, and they commend the believers to Him (Acts 20:32). Leaders

cannot make their people's personal choices. Eventually the leader's voice will be silenced in death, and others will take up his work. When that happens, God will still be the same, working in the best interests of His people until Jesus comes.

9. The minister must guard against allowing material advantage to influence his message (Acts 20:33-35). Paul set a good example by providing for his own needs through tent making. Even a supported but unsalaried minister can be intimidated by the views of an influential or well-to-do church member. As the leader carefully guards his priorities, his influence and his preaching will be "without partiality, and without hypocrisy."

10. Fellowship and prayer are essential elements of ministerial faithfulness (Acts 20:36-38). Those church leaders who were present at the seaside in Miletus no doubt long remembered their emotion-filled parting from Paul. Likely Paul's parting words and his concerns expressed in prayer lingered with them throughout life. Every faithful leader feels keenly his need of the strength and inspiration that come from serving shoulder-to-shoulder with other godly leaders.

Important Teachings

1. Ministers will best fulfill their responsibilities when they support each other in their work (Acts 20:17-18).

2. The faithful minister serves the Lord in humility (Acts 20:19).

3. The minister is responsible to diligently teach the Word (Acts 20:20-21).

4. The minister is solemnly charged to declare all the counsel of God (Acts 20:20, 26-27).

5. The faithful minister exemplifies stability and steadfastness in difficulty (Acts 20:22-24).

6. The minister is a steward of God's possession (Acts 20:28).

7. The minister is responsible to protect the flock from false teaching (Acts 20:29-31).

8. Faithful ministers understand that the church is God's work, and they commend the believers to Him (Acts 20:32).

9. The minister must guard against allowing material advantage to influence his message (Acts 20:33-35).
10. Fellowship and prayer are essential elements of ministerial faithfulness (Acts 20:36-38).

Answers to Questions

1. What qualities of a true shepherd did Paul demonstrate?

Paul was a consistent example of what he taught (Acts 20:18). He served in humility, as to the Lord, making great personal sacrifices for the sake of others (Acts 20:19, 24). His teaching was thorough and diligent (Acts 20:20-21, 26-27). Paul did what he could to help the church continue in truth after he was gone.

2. How can ordained brethren complement the efforts of each other?

The ministry must work together as a team, humbly encouraging each other's strengths and compensating for each other's weaknesses. They must communicate regularly and candidly so that they can speak and act in harmony. Sensitive information must be kept confidential. Faithful prayer for each other is important.

3. What aspects of "all the counsel of God" might be difficult to communicate?

Giving rebuke and taking corrective measures are never easy, especially if they are needed by influential members or are needed repeatedly. It may be difficult to communicate the practical aspects of bearing the cross (applications of separation, for example).

4. How did Paul emphasize the seriousness of these leaders' responsibility?

Paul reminded these leaders that the Holy Spirit had given them their responsibility. Their people were "the church of God," which He had purchased with the blood of Christ. Paul had been an example in taking responsibility seriously.

5. Why is vigilance essential in church leaders?

Vigilance is essential because leaders themselves are capable

of failing (Acts 20:28). Their lack of vigilance will allow "grievous wolves" to enter and destroy through false teaching.

6. Can a leader's faithfulness guarantee against spiritual loss in his people? Explain.

No. While a leader's faithfulness is absolutely necessary, his people must make their individual choices. Judas had a perfect Leader (Jesus), and yet he was lost.

7. Why should church leaders be unsalaried?

As with Paul, providing for his own needs makes the leader's example and teaching more effective. Having an occupation helps him understand the everyday challenges of his people. A salary can tend to influence the leader's message in subtle ways. An unsalaried leader can preach the truth without fear that doing so may endanger a pay raise or promotion.

8. What is the value of older ministers working alongside younger ones?

The energies of the younger man can be directed more efficiently. The younger leader can learn much from the older leader's experience. Life is too short and the potential losses too great for every generation to learn by personal experience alone.

Summarizing the Lesson

The Apostle Paul's parting words should impress every ordained brother with the solemnity of his calling and accountability. All who are not ordained ought to be moved to prayer and intercession for their leaders, giving support in this important work.

Research Guide

1. Study Paul's reflections on his calling (Acts 26:16-18; 2 Corinthians 4:1-5; 6:3-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:4-12).
2. Read Paul's letters to other ministers (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).
3. Read the chapter titled "The Ministry" in *Doctrines of the Bible*.