

Shepherding God's Flock

by Roger Ellsworth

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual health and care for both the pastor and the congregation, highlighting the privilege and responsibility of shepherding God's flock.

Duration: 31:09

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 20:18-21, Acts 20:24-25, Acts 20:28, Acts 20:35, Ephesians 2:8-9

Topics: "Church"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the gospel of the grace of God and the preaching of the kingdom of God. He emphasizes that salvation comes solely through God's grace and cannot be earned or deserved. The preacher also highlights the importance of warning and teaching others with tears, as well as supporting the weak and following Jesus' command to give rather than receive. Lastly, the sermon concludes with Paul's review of his ministry in Ephesus and his announcement of the sufferings he will face in Jerusalem.

Transcript

Please find Acts chapter 20, Acts chapter 20, and tonight we're looking at Paul's farewell, Paul bidding adieu to the Ephesian elders. And we have a lengthy scripture reading this evening, and so I want to plunge right in. And our theme tonight is shepherding God's flock.

So look, please, at Acts chapter 20, beginning with verse 17 and reading through verse 38. From Miletus, he, that is Paul, sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, you know from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials, which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews, how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews and also to Greeks repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city saying that chains and tribulations await me, but none of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself so that I may finish my race with joy and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men, for I have not shunned to

declare to you the whole counsel of God.

Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves, men will rise up, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Therefore, watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he said, it is more blessed to give than to receive. And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

Then they all wept freely and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship. Well, this is one of the most touching portions of the book of Acts and certainly one of the most touching scenes in the life of the apostle Paul.

Here again, Paul is taking his leave of the Ephesian elders as he makes his way to Jerusalem. And there is so much here in this passage of scripture and certainly more than I have time to deal with in the scope of one sermon. As I read through this passage a while ago, I just saw phrase after phrase that kind of leaped off the page at me.

And I found myself saying, as I read these various phrases, why there's a whole sermon right there in that one phrase. I see there in verse 21, where Paul talks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, that's Christianity, isn't it? Repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And down there in verse 24, did you see that phrase? This ought to do your tired hearts some good tonight. There in verse 24, he talks about how that he had testified to the gospel of the grace of God. This is the gospel.

It's the good news of the grace of God. Surely you know that we are saved by grace. There's nothing that we can do to earn it.

There's nothing that we can do to deserve it. Everything comes to us from the good hand of our gracious God. And so, my, there's a whole sermon right there or several sermons in that phrase, the gospel of the grace of God.

And in verse 25, he refers to preaching the kingdom of God. And what is the kingdom of God? Why that's God ruling in the hearts of sinful men and women. It's God subduing sinful men and women to his kingly rule.

It's God taking the throne of our hearts and ruling there to the honor of his name. Well, I say that this particular farewell that Paul here spoke to the Ephesian elders could yield many, many sermons. And here I am tonight feeling that I'm on a fool's errand because I'm proposing to just very quickly glide over the

surface and to deal with all that we have read here in the space of one sermon.

We can break Paul's address here to these Ephesian elders down into three major parts. He first gives a review of his ministry, and that is in verses 18 through 21. And the key phrase there in those verses is the phrase, you know.

He says in verse 18, you know from the day that I came to Asia in what manner I have lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials. How I kept back nothing that was helpful to you, but proclaimed it and taught you publicly. Well, this is Paul reviewing his ministry in Ephesus.

And then after having reviewed his ministry, he goes on to announce the sufferings that await him in Jerusalem. And the key words here in this section, the key words are, I know, and look there beginning in verse 27, he says, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city saying that chains and tribulations await me. And in verse 25, he says, indeed now I know that you all among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God will see my face no more.

So here's Paul. He's taking his leave of these Ephesian elders. He's giving this very moving and affectionate address.

And the first thing he does is review his ministry there in Ephesus. And then he looks to the future and he announces to them that there are sufferings lying ahead of him in Jerusalem. And Paul has a profound sense that these sufferings will result in his ultimate death and that he will never see the Ephesian elders again.

And so then Paul, after having reviewed his ministry and after having announced what lies ahead of him in Jerusalem, he delivers a solemn charge to these Ephesian elders. And this charge begins there in verse 28 and goes through verse 35. And here is the key verse in this whole passage that I read is verse 28, where Paul says, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.

And on the basis of this verse, I want to talk with you tonight about shepherding God's flock. And I want you to think with me about two things in the moments that we have together. I want you to think with me first of all about the shepherd and secondly about the shepherd's flock.

And you may be saying at this time, well, I don't know that I'm all that interested in what you're proposing to do here, pastor, because it sounds like to me that you're going to be talking about something that pertains more to you than it does to me. I'm talking here about shepherding God's flock. And you may be saying this sounds like a passage for pastors.

It doesn't sound like a passage for church members. Well, it certainly is a passage for pastors. And I don't hesitate to say that every pastor ought to frequently read what Paul lays out here to these Ephesian elders.

Every pastor ought to frequently look at that 28th verse, if nothing else, and read what Paul says, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the flock of God or the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. Yes, pastors need to be frequently reminded of what God is charging them to do. But I want to say that you have a stake in this as well.

You should be interested in what God expects out of pastors. You need to know what Paul said here to these Ephesian elders. I say to you tonight, brothers and sisters in Christ, that, well, the ministry, wherever I look, seems to be in a very poor, empathetic condition.

It seems to be in disarray. I had the privilege of meeting yesterday morning with several young preachers who are aspiring to be pastors. And we were talking about the state of the ministry today.

And I was, at one hand, thrilled that God is still raising up young preachers to preach the gospel and that God is still calling young men to the pastoral ministry. And I looked at those young men yesterday and I thought, how wonderful this is. These young men are so interested and they're so eager.

And I rejoiced in that, but then I got to thinking about what lies ahead of them. And I said to these young men, do you know what you're doing? Do you know something of the nature of the work that you are undertaking? Ministry is very difficult today. I read an article just the other day from Tennessee Baptist Convention about death by ministry, death by ministry.

You know, you hear about death from heart disease and death from cancer and death from this and death from that. And this fellow was taking this approach. The ministry is killing preachers today.

And there are so many hardships. I often say to my son Marty, who's pastoring his first church, I'm glad that I'm on the back end of this thing instead of the end that you're on. You're on the front end of it and I'm on the back end of it and I think I prefer where I am more than I would prefer where you are.

It's difficult. And I would just enlist you to be praying for pastors today. And it's so vital that God's people know exactly what pastors are supposed to do.

Pastors need to know, but God's people need to know as well. I tell you, my friends, many false ministries would fail and would go down the tubes immediately if those false ministries were not being supported by ignorant people. How is it that so many false ministries are seemingly succeeding today? It's because people in our pews don't know what true pastoring is.

They don't know what it is. And so they embrace, they accept false ministries. And so you need to know, I need to know.

I'm not going to be your pastor forever and I trust that there'll be a Parkview church here whenever I'm done and that you'll need to find another pastor whenever I'm finished here. And you'll need to know what God wants in terms of a pastor. What kind of man does God want? Well, I'm just simply saying to you that I'm not wasting your time tonight by talking with you about shepherding God's flock.

I'm talking about something that you have a stake in, something that you should be interested in, something that you should be praying about, how we should be praying that God would raise up faithful ministers today. Well now, think with me about two things. First of all, about the shepherd himself and about the shepherd's flock.

This is our title, shepherding God's flock. And so there are two parts to this that need our attention. The shepherd himself and the shepherd's flock.

Now look again at your 28th verse and here's what Paul says to these Ephesian elders. Paul's not going to be there in Ephesus anymore. These elders have the leadership now.

The leadership of the church falls to them. And as you read the New Testament, you'll find that there were two kinds of elders. There were ruling elders and there were preaching elders.

And these men are going to have those responsibilities. Ruling elders were the men who were responsible for the practical day-to-day administration of the church. Preaching elders were those who were responsible for preaching the word of God, as the name implies.

Paul's not going to be there. These tasks now fall upon these men. What's necessary? First thing Paul does is say, take heed to yourselves.

Take heed to yourselves. And he's simply telling them that they must always pay attention to their spiritual condition. Now if a man gets physically ill, we don't have any trouble.

I think most of you know that I've been suffering from back miseries here the last few days. I want you to know I fault Sylvia for this mostly because she's had me doing things that old men should not be doing. Painting a house.

Don't take this up by the way. If you feel like you just need to paint something, see Sylvia. She'll put you to work.

But I've been suffering from back misery and it got so bad last night that I said to Sylvia, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to answer the bell in the morning. I'm not sure I'll be able to even get out of bed in the morning. Well now if I hadn't been able to be here this morning, it would have been a small matter.

If I had been physically incapacitated, it would have been a small matter to call somebody and say, I need for you to take the services tomorrow. Tucker has been put on notice, I've told him. You always have two or three sermons ready that you can preach just like that because pastors get sick and usually we get sick on Saturday night and we need somebody on a moment's notice.

Well, if I'd been unable to be here today, Tucker could have stepped in this morning, could have preached for us. Someone could have come tonight and preached for us. But what if a pastor is spiritually ill? What if a pastor is spiritually ill? What then? And the truth of the matter is, brothers and sisters in Christ, there are many pastors today who are spiritually ill and they are spiritually ill because they have not taken home to their hearts the words of the apostle Paul here, take heed to yourselves.

Paul seems to be saying to these Ephesian elders, you are never going to be able to lead people spiritually beyond where you are spiritually. And you may not want to hear this and I don't want to depress you, but I believe that I can make the case for saying that there are a lot of spiritually ill pastors in churches today. And what are some of the things that are making pastors spiritually ill? I think one of the main things today is what I would call professionalism.

And you know what professionalism is? Professionalism is mastering the craft of pastoring and it's mastering the craft of preaching so that you can do those things pretty well but not having your heart involved in any of it. I sometimes refer to the curse of professionalism as trafficking in unfelt truth. And Sylvan and I have heard a lot of sermons the last few years from various pastors.

And I'd go so far as to say this is one of the biggest curses on the church of Jesus Christ today is men standing up and mouthing things that they don't really seem to feel in their own hearts. That's professionalism and it's a curse upon the church of Jesus Christ today. I tell you it's so sad when pastors

stand up and read verses about redemption but they don't feel any of the glory of redemption themselves.

And that's just one thing that I could talk with you about. The young pastors to whom I was speaking yesterday, the young pastors and I were talking a lot about prayerlessness. I don't know anything that is more common among pastors today than prayerlessness.

I told these young men that there are six tasks of the pastor and the first three are prayer. I was trying to drive home the importance of prayer for the pastor. But there are so many pastors today who are spiritually ill and one disease that they have is prayerlessness.

I could talk with you about infatuation with the thinking and the doing of the world. I don't know how this got started but it seems in my ministry back a few years ago the pastors began to think that the job of the preacher is to accommodate the thinking of the world. And there are preachers in pulpits today who would not dare stand against what is popular.

They're promoting feel-good religion. They're down with the disease of infatuation with the world. I may be too blunt for some of you tonight.

One of the things that has affected many pastors is what we might refer to as untamed sexual desire. This is a disease among many pastors today. I could talk about the disease of materialism that has affected so many pastors today.

And so Paul's words here are much needed and I just impress upon you the importance of the pastor taking heed to himself and tending to himself as the matter of first priority. The shepherd cannot take care of the sheep if the shepherd himself is ill. And we're not just talking as I said a while ago about physical illness.

We're talking also and primarily about spiritual illness. And there's so many spiritual illnesses that are affecting pastors today. How we need to be praying for revival among pastors.

Pastors need it more desperately these days I think than at any time that I have been familiar with. But having said to these Ephesian elders, take heed to yourselves. Paul goes on to say there in verse 28 again, take heed to the flock.

Do you see that? Therefore take heed to yourselves. That's part of it. And secondly, and to all the flock.

And so the pastor must tend to himself. And this thing of taking heed means that he must give careful consideration to himself and his spiritual condition. That's always the pastor's first priority.

To give special and particular consideration to his own spiritual condition. And so many of us fail here. But the pastor must also give heed to the flock.

And I just want to point out a couple of things about this matter of taking heed to the flock. One thing I want to show you from this passage of scripture is what a blessed thing it is to shepherd the flock of God. What a privilege it is.

Now I have to remind myself of that frequently. Because the truth of the matter is there's a lot of drudgery in pastoring today. And the thing that so frequently happens is pastors begin to focus on the drudgery to the point that they lose sight of the privilege.

But it is a privilege to take heed to the flock of God. You may be saying where is the privilege? Well look there again at verse 28. And I wonder if you've ever spotted the Trinity here.

Here Paul is speaking to these Ephesian elders. He says take heed to yourselves and to all the flock. Watch it now.

Among whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood. I sometimes have people say to me I don't know where you guys get this Trinity business. I've been through the whole Bible and I never find the word Trinity there.

Well you can go through the whole Bible and you can't find the word rapture either. But I believe in the rapture don't you? I believe the Lord. By the way that word rapture is built there on what I was talking about this morning.

First Thessalonians chapter 4 where Paul says that we who are alive and remain shall be caught up. And that's what the word rapture means. It means a catching away, a snatching away.

No you can't find the word Trinity in the Bible. But you can find several verses like we have right here in verse 28 where the Trinity each person of the Trinity is mentioned. And we have the Holy Spirit there in verse 28.

We have God the Father there. And we have Christ the Son there because you see the phrase he purchased with his own blood. God the Father is here because the flock is the church of God.

You see that? To shepherd the church of God. God the Son is here because he purchased this flock with his own blood. It was the Son who shed his blood on Calvary's cross.

And God the Holy Spirit is here because he's the one who has who made these men shepherds of the flock. They were appointed by the Holy Spirit of God. Now my how pastors need to see the privilege of shepherding the flock of God.

Because there is a flock of God because of the work of the triune God. And when a man is called to be a pastor he's called to enter into company as it were with God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And this applies to you as well.

When we're involved in the church we're involved in something that involves the triune God. What a privilege it is. And so Paul after saying take heed to yourselves says take heed to the flock.

And you may be saying well why should we take heed to the flock? Because the flock has tremendous value. It's got so much value that each person of the Holy Trinity has invested something in the flock. You and I are part of something big tonight being part of Parkview Baptist Church.

You may be saying well I never thought I'd hear anybody refer to Parkview as being big. Well this is pretty big. Parkview Church is here because she was loved by God the Father purchased by God the Son and called by God the Spirit.

And you and I in working in this church are working in conjunction with the three persons of the Trinity. But having said that I want you to go on now I want to go on and say to you that shepherding the flock of God involves feeding the flock. He says take heed to yourselves and to all the flock which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

And you may say well where do you get this feeding business? Well we're shepherds. Pastors are shepherds. And what's the primary responsibility of the shepherd? It's to feed the flock because if you don't feed the flock you don't have a flock very long.

They die. And what is the food for the flock? The food for the flock is the Word of God. And the primary responsibility of the pastor is to put before his people the Word of God.

And he may fail in other areas but he must not fail in this area. I say again it's the primary responsibility of the pastor. And Paul goes on to say there in verse 29, I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock.

And here's another part of the pastor, the work of the pastor, he has got to guard the flock against predators. And my there were plenty of predators in Paul's day. We might think of the Judaizers.

The Judaizers followed Paul around and Paul makes reference there in verse 24 to the grace the gospel of the grace of God. And Paul preached that gospel of the grace of God wherever he went. And then after he left town the Judaizers would come in and they'd say well Paul's been here hasn't he? Yeah.

What did Well now listen. You can't believe Paul. You've got to do some works in order to be saved.

And the Judaizers would come in and they would begin teaching that the grace of God in Christ Jesus was not enough for salvation. There had to be some good works involved. And these were predators.

And Paul says take heed to the flock. And then there were the Gnostics. And the Gnostics were these people who claimed to have a direct pipeline to God.

God speaks directly to us and you all had better fall in line and do what we tell you to do because we've got the direct pipeline to God. And these Gnostics were leading people astray. And these were some of the predators in Paul's time.

By the way we've still got those same predators today. There are still people who teach salvation by works. There are still people who claim to have a direct line to God and who will set aside the clear teachings of the Bible on the basis of what they have experienced.

Some subjective experience that they claim to have. There are other predators as well. And here is pastoring.

It's taking heed to yourself. And it's taking heed to the flock. Remembering the privilege.

The pastor's involved. He's in alliance with something that has received the attention of the triune God. Here's the work of the pastor.

Take heed to yourself. Take heed to the flock. And it's a privilege but it's also a solemn responsibility.

You've got to feed the flock and you've got to guard the flock. Will you join me in praying these days that God will be pleased to raise up faithful pastors who will resemble what Paul here puts before us in these verses. Let's bow together for prayer.

Father we thank you that we could examine this passage tonight. Father we pray that you would just lay it upon our hearts that shepherding God's flock is not just a matter for pastors to be interested in and pastors

to be concerned about. It's a matter of concern Father for the whole church.

And how we need faithful pastors these days. How much damage has been done to the flock of Christ by pastors who have not heeded the words of the Apostle Paul. So Father put it upon our hearts these days to pray for you to send forth laborers into the harvest.

Men who will take heed to themselves. Men who will take heed to the flock of God. And Father we pray that you'd be pleased to honor in a powerful way the ministries of faithful men all around this world.

We do thank you that there are many and we pray Lord that you would honor their efforts, bless their ministries, and use them Father to the salvation of souls and the upbuilding of your kingdom. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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