



SHEPHERDING GOD'S FLOCK
ACTS 20:17-38

Career day—get to see what people do! But for me it's career day every week. Some *only* see me at my job. I *never* see you at yours. And even though you see me, you don't see it from this side of the pulpit. Only speech in Acts addressed to believers. It's a pastor talking to another group of pastors about how he's ministered to them and how to shepherd the church that God has placed under their care when he leaves. It kind of feels like pastors conference.

You may be wondering, if I'm not a pastor why does this matter? Because God wants you to know what makes a good pastor—what faithful ministry looks like. If you don't have a picture of what a pastor is supposed to be then your idea of a good pastor will be based on what you want him to be. What is a good pastor?

When people say they have a good pastor, they usually they mean “We like him” but that can't be it—do you know folks who you like personally but aren't good professionally? Then what is a good pastor? Maybe idea of a pastor is shaped by what you grew up with—a guy who yelled a lot in the pulpit, maybe someone who primarily visits hospitals or does revivals like Billy Graham, maybe it's someone who's always trying to get people's money, maybe it's a guy in a box you confess your sins to. What does it mean to be a good pastor?

I want to give you a look at ministry from my side of the pulpit...and here's how your response comes into play—once you understand what God has called pastors to do for their people you need to ask yourself “Am I making that easier or harder?”

“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.” (Heb. 13:17). Shameless plug for membership class Sept 8th. So as we talk about pastors, the immediate application will be, when it comes to our pastors keeping watch over your soul, are you making that easier or harder?

Paul has ministered in Ephesus for over three years. He's stayed longer here than any other city on his journey and he's currently in a city 30 miles south of Ephesus and calls for the elders of the church, not to preach, but to make his farewell speech to the group of men who he had entrusted to pastor the church in Ephesus. And his final speech to these men he does two things: He highlights his faithfulness as a minister of the Gospel, and then charges the elders with duties in pastoring the church in Ephesus. **Pray.**

Paul's Example

18 You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19 serving the Lord with all humility—always thought it was bold to lead with humility—and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; vs 33 I coveted no one's silver or gold or

apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and those who were with me. 35 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, I is more blessed to give than to receive.” So first thing we’d want to notice about Paul is his godly example,” 1 Pet. 5:3 says that pastors should be examples to the flock. Paul is humble, he’s compassionate, he cares for the weak and he endures trials, he’s not in it for money. This is a picture of faithfulness in practice. And it’s interesting to me that in his farewell speech, his example is what he leads with—he doesn’t start with, “Remember all I taught you” but “You know how I lived.” The pastor is to set an example for others to follow.

I became a Senior or Lead Pastor at a young age. I candidated for this position when I was 28, formally started when I was 29—I’ll be 31 exactly one month from today. One person asked, “How do you feel about being the youngest adult in the congregation?” The reality is that I pastor a church—along with a team of elders—the vast majority of whom are older than me; many of whom have children that are my age or older. That’s been my experience from day one, I’m sure you can experience the weight and maybe even some of the intimidation of stepping into that context.

And Paul addresses it, when he talks to a guy named Timothy—who is a young pastor in a similar situation. “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” (1 Tim. 4:12) Set an example. And I think the most natural response for pastors in Timothy’s situation is not to focus on setting an example but on setting themselves apart from their congregation because of their knowledge. And that’s the wrong approach. He doesn’t say, “if people look down on you, remind them of how much more you know” he says, “set an example.” The old teaching adage is certainly true, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Setting an example is hard. Especially when it’s for folks who are better at it. The reality is there are plenty of people in this church who I’m called to set an example for who have walked with Jesus longer and know Jesus better; who are more humble, more gracious, and more compassionate than me. You see I grew up thinking that the pastor was more loving, more compassionate, more wise, more gracious, more humble than everyone in his church, and that’s what qualified him to be a pastor. It’s not. I’m not going to be a better example of compassionate than _____. So what can it mean? He means faithful example, not better example. I’m not going to give a better example, but a faithful example (faithful is a high bar).

And this is so freeing. You’re called to be a loving spouse not more loving than everyone else’s spouse. You are called to be a faithful parent, not better than everyone. The fact is that the Jones across the street may well be better parents than you and unless your identity is in Christ you’ll either deny or be intimidated by it—“If they’re better, I’m nothing.” It’s only in the Gospel that you can accept that God has gifted other people in ways he hasn’t gifted you and find your identity in outperforming other believers but by resting in what you have in common with other believers and trying to be faithful to live out the Gospel. Which leads to the second characteristic of Paul’s ministry and that’s his teaching.

Paul’s Teaching

vss 20-21 “[You know] how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,²¹—love how he doesn’t separate himself. Shepherd should smell like his sheep—testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” vs 26-27, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, 27 for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” These are sobering words for me as a pastor. There is a part of me that is tempted to simply teach on topics or passages that are easy and

happy. There are pastors and churches who simply aim to have people leave each week feeling good about themselves. And that can grow a church very quickly, but at the cost of being guilty.

And Paul knows this is going to be a temptation for people and for pastors and so when he writes to Timothy, his delegate in Ephesus, he reminds him, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” Rebecca’s friend, “I want a church that makes me feel good about myself” “We don’t want all that doctrine”, we want “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for you life.” But how is that going to be profitable—it may therapeutic—for you when you get the phone call that it’s cancer? How is that going to equip you to deal with shame? Failure Anxiety? How is that going to sustain you in suffering and help you learn to forgive in your marriage. It’s not. Only the Gospel is going to do that.

This is what it means to teach the whole counsel of God—not to go through every verse of the Bible but to show how the Gospel—the repentance and faith in Christ that Paul’s talking about—relates to all of life. And if I and the other elders aren’t preparing you for that and equipping you for that, I’m guilty. I’m failing you. And not only is that bad news for you it’s bad news for me. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” (Js. 3:1) I will be judged with a different rubric.

This is why we don’t shy away from talking about hard things; sin and God’s hatred for it. We don’t shy away from the our failures and where we need to repent. This fall we’re talking about a number of things that are difficult man and woman, marriage, homosexuality, sex, racism, poverty. Why? Because the elders collectively felt like we need to equip people to think biblically about these things and even though that may take us into difficult spaces we can’t shrink back from teaching the whole counsel of God.

And so whether you’re visiting today or you’ve been here a while the question for you would be, “Is that what you’re looking for?” Because if you’re looking for purely therapeutic material this will be a hard place to call home. But let me say this—we’re not passing out cotton candy—doesn’t mean we’re not all about deep joy and gladness and encouragement and hope. Some pastors and churches make the opposite error and preach in such a way that everyone leaves wounded and feeling terrible about themselves each week. I’ve even heard people say you’re not supposed to leave church happy. Like if it doesn’t hurt it doesn’t count. Not true.

The goal each week is not to leave you thinking you’re the best or the worst but for you to leave not thinking about yourself. The goal is for you to leave thinking about Christ! Our hero and rescuer who’s grace is sufficient for every failure and who’s mercies are new every morning. “He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater, He sendeth more strength when the labors increase; To added afflictions He addeth His mercy, To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace. His love has no limits, His grace has no measure, His power no boundary known unto men; For out of His infinite riches in Jesus He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.” (Annie J Flint) Seeing that, savoring that grace and goodness is what we’re trying to do here. That is what’s profitable and that is what empowers a life lived for the glory of Christ. Which is exactly what Paul says here...

“²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by^[a] the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.²⁴ 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.”

This is inspiring—the Spirit has told me that things aren’t going to go well from here on out. I’m gonna have a rough go. But I don’t count my life of any value nor as precious to myself as long as I finish my course and do what God called me to do. This is so challenging to me as a pastor and for us as a church—everything in this man’s life—every hope, dream, friendship, comfort—was shaped by his love for Christ that was superior to all of those things. God give us this kind of singularity in our devotion so that nothing rivals you in our hearts.

Paul’s Charge

And he ends his speech by giving these elders a final charge. Remember elders are pastors overseers. And notice that there are more than one. There is never the idea in the NT that a church has “a pastor” We have 6 pastors—6 people on the shepherding team—but all of them are equally pastors. And all of us are going to be held accountable before God for how we lead and love the people God has entrusted to our care.

And so this is what Paul says **“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.”** Notice the first thing he says is actually self-focused—elders are to be guarding and cultivating their relationship with Jesus. I had a youth ask me once Chase do you just sit around all day and read the Bible and pray? That would be really nice—no. And this may sound crazy but in ministry in can be difficult to prioritize caring for yourself spiritually, because you’re consumed with meeting the needs of others. And this sets so many pastors up for failure. Without exception, every pastor who has a moral failure—adultery, porn, misallocation of resources—all of them failed in private long before they failed in public. All of those failures started with a dusty Bible. Jesus of Nazareth regularly left sick people and poor people to go be alone and pray—Paul is telling these pastors and us that we’re fools to think that we could somehow get by without it.

So he tells them to pay attention to themselves and the flock... **“to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood.”** Paul wants them to know so clearly—this is not your church. It’s God’s church and he paid a supreme price for his people. Which means that, anyone who entrusted with leading a local church can never approach like it belongs to them. Ever driven someone else’s car? That’s how careful you want to be.

You want to make sure it’s safe and protected. That’s exactly what Paul says, **“29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”**

Why did Paul teach day and night with tears? What is the threat the pastors are supposed to be on the lookout for: The pollution of biblical truth with false doctrine. The biggest threat is people having their beliefs about God and joy and purpose shaped by something other than the Gospel. You may think the biggest threat to the church is moral failure. It is not. The biggest threat to the church is doctrinal failure.

That’s why everything that is taught at New Century whether it’s small groups or youth group, or Sunday school everything is approved by the elders, overseen by an elder, or taught by an elder—without exception. Because the biggest threat is having your beliefs about God and where joy is found and what count as a valuable life being shaped by our culture.

My biggest fear isn’t that you’ll be terrible people, and murderers or criminal, my biggest fear is that you’re to live your life believing that family, marriage and children can satisfy your soul. My fear is that you’ll think abundant life is found in comforts and ease and you’ll protect yourself against sharing the Gospel or going

overseas or given generously to those in need. My fear is that you'll believe the lie that you can have an intimate relationship with Jesus apart from participating in the local church.

My fear is that when you're depressed or anxious and addicted—you'll take the wrong approach to fighting for joy and peace. My fear is that you'll believe the value is the sum of your achievements in this life and work to climb the ladder so you lay in bed at night and feel like your life counts. My biggest fear isn't that you'll be a bad person, but that you'll be a really good person who thinks being really good is good enough for God. It's not only Christ is. That's why we preach the gospel every week not so you can reminded of how to go to heaven no so that beauty of Christ and everything he is for you in the Gospel can take over and shape every aspect of your life.

I can't tell you how much I identify with Paul in this last statement, "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." Has to feel like dropping off a kid at college. He's like I love you and I've taught all I can and now I'm entrusting you to God's grace to build you up and give you what you need. This is one of the hardest parts of ministry—you can't change people's hearts. Like I can get up here and say it but I can't make you hear it. Only God's grace can do that. 2 Cor 11 after Paul talks about beatings and getting stoned "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."

I start on my sermon Thursday I do my research and get started on my manuscript. Friday I write most of it. Saturday evening I finish it out. Come in and pray. I preach and remind us but I know Monday's coming. Room empty's out, and it's all over and you beg oh God please don't let them forget this before lunch is over. Please build them up. And I just have to entrust you to God's grace. I am not what you need. That's what a benediction is.

Believers who I entrust to God's grace. And unbelievers.