

Acts 20:25-38

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[0 : 00] All right, this morning's text for our consideration is Acts chapter 20, verses 25 through 38. Again, we're going to look briefly at these exhortations Paul gives to the Ephesian elders as he is saying farewell to them.

We're shortening the time significantly for the allowance of good discussion in those who are in groups. Our text this morning, Paul, in effect, says to the Ephesian elders, shepherd the church well, do so in the following ways.

So if you're not an elder today, you may already be checking out, maybe thinking this is not a text for me, but I want to have you hang in with us for two reasons. Number one, I think that considering the work of your elders, the way that God has ordered the church and given to it leadership, the responsibility that those elders bear should make you thankful for elders.

Us, I could say. We certainly live in an age of great skepticism toward anyone in authority, much of that for very good reason, but some of it not.

So we ought to consider the leadership that God has given to our church and to the church for that reason. Secondly, you should know how to pray for and support your elders as you'll be well served by elders who are leading well, who are supported, and then serving as they should.

[1 : 25] So that said, I want to structure our study of Acts chapter 20, verses 25 to 38 in six points. So I'm going to rattle those off to you quickly, and then we'll repeat them as we move along.

And I'm going to move fairly fast this morning. So number one, faithful shepherds look after themselves. Two, faithful shepherds lead their people.

Three, faithful shepherds protect their people. Four, faithful shepherds pray and study.

Five, faithful shepherds serve the weak. And six, faithful shepherds love and are loved. So let's read the text together.

Acts chapter 20, beginning in verse 25. Remember, this is about halfway through Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders. So he says, beginning in verse 25, And now behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.

[2 : 29] Therefore, I testify to you this day that I'm innocent of the blood of all. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Take 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.

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 everyone with tears. 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.

I coveted no one silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know these hands minister to my necessities and to those who are 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.

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.

[3 : 45] And they accompanied him to the ship. So in verse 25, Paul states that he will never see these men again. So these are his parting words, right?

Although he would later write them a letter, this is the last time he would speak to them face to face. And I think that that really punctuates this address. What does Paul deem of greatest importance to remind these men of?

The first point Paul makes about the faithful shepherd is that the faithful shepherd looks after himself, or that they look after themselves. And we see this in the first part of verse 28, where Paul says, In order for the man of God to lead others to God, he must be pursuing and growing in his own holiness.

That is to say, elders cannot lead others faithfully if they themselves are not walking uprightly. Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2, verse 20 and 21.

And do you know where Timothy was when Paul wrote this letter to him? He was in Ephesus. He said, Now in a great house, there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable.

[5 : 02] Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

So faithful shepherds are meant to be out ahead of others in their pursuit of holiness, to be endeavoring to that very end so that they can lead others in the very same pursuit.

So firstly, faithful shepherds look after themselves, look to their own holiness. Secondly, faithful shepherds lead their people. We see this in the last half of verse 28.

Paul says, 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. Elders are also called overseers.

We see that here in verse 28. What is it that they are to oversee? Budgets and properties? Well, maybe that's part of it. But predominantly, the primary work of overseers is to oversee people, and to oversee specific people, those people who are in covenant membership in the church that those elders are over.

[6 : 17] Your elders are placed in their position to give you leadership for your good, to help you in the way that you should go. What is the tool of the faithful shepherd in leading his people?

It is the very word of God. Paul states in verses 26 and 27, 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. Paul says that he has done everything that he could do to lead the Ephesians because he had boldly declared to them the whole counsel of God. A lot of times leaders get drawn into particulars of leadership, have to make wisdom applications from God's word.

And often this is where the mistrust of leadership comes in, as leaders make decisions that may vary from the decision you might make concerning any given thing.

But the primary task, the large task of elders is to declare the word of God. I do not believe this means that Paul preached an expositional sermon on every text of the 39 books of the Old Testament, right?

[7 : 33] Their scripture in that day, right? How would he have possibly had time for this? But I do believe it means that Paul was very clear to them about how a man was to be saved, God's purpose in his salvation, and the way of obedience to God.

He taught them all they needed to know from the scripture to please their God. They understood all things necessary to be in relationship with the Lord and to follow him.

There is great need in our day for faithful shepherds to lead their people by the word of God. In Amos chapter 8, verse 11 and 12, God issued a frightful prophecy, which I believe is very true of us today.

This is what he says, Amos chapter 8. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

They shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east. They shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. Your elders are to be bastions of light so that you will know God's word and can share it with those who so desperately need it, right?

[8 : 49] So that you'll be saturated in God's word. God's word is good for his people, and we should be concerned about the good of God's people because they were obtained with Jesus' own blood, right?

Jesus died for the church. Your elders know that we are not to be playing about in our leadership, but that it is a serious matter, right?

This church should matter to us, and it should matter to every single one of us because it matters to Jesus. It matters to Jesus, right, to the very point that he gave his own life for hers.

So faithful shepherds lead their people. Third, faithful shepherds protect their people. You see this in verses 29 through 31.

He says, Paul says that people will come from outside and inside the church to deceive the disciples.

[10:05] I take his meaning that he's saying to the Ephesian elders, even from amongst you, you who I am speaking to, some will arise that will lead the church astray.

How is it that people are deceived? People are deceived through the transmission of ideas, which means that in our day, we have to be all the more vigilant as ideas are moving at lightning speed, right?

We have media bringing ideas of all varieties to the minds of our people. Sometimes I wish I had the power. I do not, to be clear, but I wish I had the power to just ban you guys from being on social media and tuning into any news stations.

Let's maybe all read one newspaper and carefully think about the reporting that we find in it.

Information is moving so incredibly quickly, right?

All the more the church needs to be protected by God's word. We find ourselves every day in a war of ideas, and the faithful shepherd protects his people.

[11:14] We must be so careful. Listen to the warning of Jesus from Matthew chapter 7 and verse 15. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

So some will seem to be part of God's people, right? They will seem to be speaking on behalf of God, but they will not be, and they will work to devour the sheep.

The faithful shepherd is going to be steeped and to be steeping in God's word in a continual way. He is not going to react rashly to each new wind of teaching, but should be a steadying force in the life of a church.

Paul issues a similar warning in Romans chapter 16, beginning in verse 17. I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.

Avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. And by smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the hearts of the naive, right?

[12:27] So I think an application of Romans 16, 17, and 18 is for elders not to get wrapped in, pulled into every single controversy, right?

It's not possible for us to sort all of that. We're actually told here that we should avoid people like this. So the faithful shepherd must protect their people.

But the aim is not just that our people would know some things about God, but that they would know God. This ought to be the primary point. Not that we know exactly how to navigate the political landscape, but that we know God.

Not too many decades after Paul says his final goodbye to the Ephesian elders, the Apostle John receives a vision, which is recorded in the book of Revelation chapter 2, verse 2 and following. This is a revelation. This is Christ speaking to the church in Ephesus. He says, They had defended the church against false teachers, right?

[14:16] They were being very careful about their doctrine. They had hated the deception of the Nicolaitans, but they were failing to love, which means they were not rightly believing the truth of God's love for them.

So faithful shepherds, as they're protecting the church, are concerned not just about the facts and figures, but about knowledge of God himself and then how that knowledge works out in love for others.

So faithful shepherds protect their people. Fourth, faithful shepherds pray and study. First, faithful shepherds pray and study. Verse 32. Paul says, 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.

Right now, I recognize that this text is not specifically calling the shepherd to pray, but it is another example of Paul and his commitment to prayer, right? We can learn a lesson from his leadership as he says, And now I commend you to God.

If we rightly understand the gravity of the task of faithfully shepherding God's people, we will pray. Prayer expresses a dependence on God and lines up our wills with his.

[15:40] A shepherd who does not pray shepherds in vain. And we can pray in confidence that our people would know God and walk in his ways. Jesus states in John chapter 14 and verse 13, Whatever you ask in my name, and whenever you hear that, you want to think, consistent with my character and my command.

So whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

Shepherds have such reason to pray, such encouragement to pray, because we know as we pray that God will equip and grow his church, that he'll be quick to grant these prayers.

Also, the faithful shepherd is to study, right? Paul commends to them to the word of God's grace. If we are to look to ourselves to lead and protect our people, then we must be students of the word. We must know it and be increasing in our knowledge of it and our understanding of its application. Elders must study. We must study more and we must study broadly, right?

We must have time for study. With the people like you, seven days a week, 24-hour days, right? Human men, frail, and we must have time and be able to make time for study.

[17:06] Paul wrote again to Timothy, 2 Timothy 3, 16 and 17. Remember, he's in Ephesus. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

So faithful shepherds, pray and study. Fifth, faithful shepherds serve the weak, verses 33 through 35. We see that Paul didn't take advantage of anybody in doing the work, but rather turned and served them, provided for himself, so that they would be able to learn from him.

He says and quotes Jesus at the end of verse 35, it is more blessed to give than to receive. For the sake of time, I won't belabor this point. The faithful shepherd does not look to his own self-interest, but rather serves others.

Paul said to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 12, 15, I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. This is a scripture reference that I run through my mind often.

What should be my attitude in serving the church? I will most gladly spend and be spent. So my material possession, my material well-being to be given for your sake, and my own self to be given for your sake, right?

[18:31] Your shepherds all feel this way. The faithful shepherd puts aside his self-interest and pours out his life for the sake of his people. So faithful shepherds serve the weak.

And sixth and lastly, faithful shepherds love and are loved. And this is verse 36 through the end of the text.

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. I take all to mean that Paul also wept. If you do not love your people, pray with desperation that God would work in you a love for them.

Beloved, your elders love you in this way. If you don't have a love for your elders in this way, pray that God would work in you a love for your elders in this way.

[19:40] Paul wrote to the Corinthian church again in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 concerning love. And I think we all need to hear this this morning, regardless of what position we may hold.

He wrote beginning in verse 1, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Right?

Just stop for a minute and just propose to you. Maybe on social media, you could be guilty of this noisy gong, clanging cymbal.

Right? What are we doing in this age to love others? Well, verse 2, if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

And I take this tongue in cheek, prophetic powers, understanding all mysteries, all knowledge, right? We've all sorted out every theory that's out there.

[20:43] You totally get it. You're totally in the right. He says, don't have love, you're nothing. And none of us have any of these things he's mentioned. So if we have not love, then we're less than nothing.

Verse 3, if I give away all I have, and if I deliver it, my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind.

Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

[21 : 46] When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So now faith, hope, and love abide. These three, but the greatest of these is love. So faithful shepherds love, and they are loved.

So just as a recap, faithful shepherds look after themselves, lead their people, protect their people, pray and study, serve the weak, and then lastly, love and are loved.

So I hope that'll give you guys some things to chew on, some possibility of expansion of the text this morning as well. I think there's some space for that in this, and that you'll really enjoy your time further studying the words.