

# Paul's Instruction

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[ 0 : 00 ] I'd be very grateful if you'd turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 20. You'll find that on page 929, I think, in the Blue Church Bibles.

We spent some time in this passage last week, Paul's address to the elders of the church in Ephesus. And we're going to be looking at the second half of this address this evening. But I'm going to read from the beginning again from Acts chapter 20, verse 17. Now, from Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 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, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews. How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 1 : 20 ] And now, behold, I'm going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

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 now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I've gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I'm innocent of the blood of all of you. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of 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.

[ 2 : 35 ] 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's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things, I've 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'd 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'd spoken, that they would not see his face again.

And they accompanied him to the ship. Amen. This is God's words. Amen. Acts chapter 20, please. We looked last week at the start of this wonderful farewell speech where Paul talks to the elders of the church in Ephesus about the work that he has done with them and the work that he wants them to do now that he is going.

[ 4 : 05 ] And why are we doing this? We're doing this because it will be a great help for us to be as clear as possible about the nature of the gospel ministry. Not all of us are going to be elders in churches, but all of us, if we're Christian, will have some sort of responsibility for the work of the gospel, to do it, to promote it.

And many of us will have serve in positions of responsibility where we will have the opportunity to set the agenda of the work in one way or another. What kind of work will we choose to do?

And I made the point last week that all faithful gospel ministries are like German sausages. They come in different shapes and sizes, but when you slice them open, they basically have the same ingredients.

The truth of the gospel... Sausages don't have the truth of the gospel in them. The truth of the gospel taught and a life lived in line with the truth of the gospel. And let me say that last week I was accosted afterwards by a certain Irishman who said to me, what about Irish sausages?

Let me say, unless your nation is particularly monochrome in its expression of the sausage genre, the illustration stands. Like sausages everywhere, which come in different shapes and sizes, but are made of the same thing all the way through.

[ 5 : 27 ] So gospel ministries come in different shapes and sizes, but are made of the same things all the way through. Last week we looked at Paul's example. This week we will be looking at his instructions.

And his instructions start at verse 28. So please find your way to Acts chapter 20, verse 28. Paul's first instruction is to give them two things, two things to pay attention to.

Pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Now, folks, here's a surprise.

You would expect him to say, pay attention to the church, you're the overseers. But notice that's not the first thing that he says. The first thing that he says is, pay attention to yourselves.

If you're going to be a faithful gospel worker, the thing you need to pay attention to, first of all, is yourself. And of course, others with responsibilities.

[ 6 : 35 ] He's talking to a you here, a group here. It's a plural yourselves. Pay attention to one another. And that is a slightly surprising first command, but it's undeniably there.

The elders are to look after themselves and one another. Let me say that self-care is the most neglected thing amongst Christians with responsibility for other Christians.

Why? Well, for some understandable and good-hearted reasons. The pressure of responsibility for others sometimes crowds out care for oneself.

It is always busy being responsible for other people and stressful. And there's always more to do than can possibly be done. It's easy in that situation to neglect oneself.

There are some less honorable reasons. The need to please everyone. The need to put on a good face in front of everyone. The need to be seen to be working all the time so that those who appointed you will be truly glad that they gave you the responsibility.

[ 7 : 45 ] And let me say that if you receive money for your gospel service, the pressures are multiplied geometrically. Are they glad that I'm their pastor?

I must make them glad. Do they think they're getting their money's worth? I must work harder so they do. Am I doing a good job? I must be seen to be more successful than the other guy.

Let me say that being in any position of Christian responsibility, whether paid or unpaid, brings with it strong temptations towards self-justification and competitiveness.

And those are the enemies of self-care. The best thing you could possibly do, for example, for members of your staff team, is encourage them as individuals to serve the Lord, to watch their own lives, and to look out for one another rather than competing with one another.

Same in your eldership, same in your CU committee, same in your Sunday school leaders team, same in your small group program. It doesn't matter where you are.

[ 8 : 56 ] It is of first importance that the teacher submits himself or herself to the Word of God. Absolutely essential that that be the case.

There are many temptations to do otherwise. If you've got any measure of responsibility for teaching God's Word and leading other people, it is your first responsibility to be living under that Word yourself.

If you don't, the Word will lack integrity. It will have no heart to it. Let me say that there is no level of Christian maturity, no level at which you become invulnerable to temptation.

In fact, the bigger your responsibility and the longer you go on, the bigger the temptation to neglect yourself becomes. Pay attention to yourselves, he says.

The second instruction is, pay attention to the sheep. Now you'd expect him to say that. But notice, he makes the point that the sheep are a God-given responsibility.

[ 10 : 02 ] Pay attention to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood.

The big idea here is that the work is God-given, not just human-given. If you've got some responsibility to look after the people of God, you're to recognize it as a God-given responsibility. Now, of course, he's talking here to congregational leaders, but let me say that this applies to whatever level of responsibility you're exercising. As human beings, we've got responsibility for ourselves and for others.

When we become Christian, we recognize that that responsibility for ourselves and others is God-given. And we begin to enter into wider responsibility for other people.

We have God-given responsibilities for others. And this is a massive privilege, isn't it? And the important thing is not so much what do people think that I'm doing, but does my doing of this reflect that I think this is a wonderful privilege to have been given?

[ 11 : 23 ] What does this responsibility involve? Well, the work is described as shepherding. There's one job to do, and it's called shepherding. What are the elders to do?

They are to shepherd the flock, to care for the church. Now, folks, here we run into a real problem because in our culture widely and in our churches more specifically, the shepherding language, the pastoral language, is used in a particular way.

How do we use that language? Well, we use that language nearly always to describe human work dealing with people with obvious problems.

Most of the pastoral activity in our schools, in our educational establishments, and in our churches describes human activity that involves dealing with people with problems, personal problems, family problems, health problems, educational problems, marriage problems, and so on.

How does the Bible use the pastoral language, the shepherding language? Well, the Bible's pastoral canvas is much bigger and broader than that.

[ 12 : 38 ] We use the language for human activity dealing with problems. The Bible uses the pastoral language supremely for God's activity dealing with all of his people all the time.

You see, in the Bible, God is the great shepherd. He saves lost sheep. He guides them. He feeds them. He leads them. He protects them.

And not surprisingly then, when you get to the New Testament, the vast bulk of the shepherding language attaches to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the good shepherd. And especially to his work in dying for his sheep, John chapter 10, he lays down his life for the sheep.

He seeks lost sheep. He lays down his life for them. He leads them. He protects them. He does provide for them under shepherds, smaller shepherds, human shepherds, shepherds with a small s, pastors with a little p.

[ 13 : 44 ] There are five references in the New Testament to the pastoral language when attached to human beings. And this chapter's got one of them. He is the great shepherd.

And his work is the great shepherding work. Now, let's talk about human shepherds now. Human shepherds come in two sorts in the Bible, good ones and bad ones, true ones and false ones.

In the Bible, a false shepherd does two things. He feeds off the sheep rather than feeding them. And he fails to protect them from wild animals.

False sheep live off, sorry, false shepherds live off sheep and run away when danger comes.

Whether male or female, the false shepherd is a predator in disguise.

Now, this passage fits precisely into that broad pastoral landscape. whose sheep are they? Whose church is it?

[ 14 : 47 ] Verse 28, to care for the church of God. That's what he calls the church in Ephesus. They're God's sheep, not the shepherd's sheep.

What is the nature of the shepherding work to be done for them? Well, look at verse 28. The church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

You see, he is the shepherd and he has laid down his life for the sheep. One of the most important dimensions of small s shepherding work, small p pastoral work, the work of human under shepherds, one of the most important dimensions of that, whatever our level of responsibility, is that we remember whose sheep these are and whose work they need.

They are God's sheep and they need his work. They're not ours and they don't need ours nearly as much as they need his. They belong to the Lord Jesus.

He bought them with his own blood. They're his sheep, not ours. They're the product of his work, not ours. He paid the phenomenal price to purchase these sheep.

[16:14] The blood of God paid for this congregation. That Sunday school class that you teach every Sunday, that small group Bible study that you lead, that Christian union, that youth group, whatever it is, the blood of the Lord Jesus paid for them.

They're not yours. So don't treat them as though they are yours. Woe betide the person who treats that group as his group or her group, who mistreats or neglects such an important group of people, who uses that group of people to boost his or her ego, who feeds off that group of people in one way or another.

Woe betide the person who directs groups of Christians to trust them and their work in place of trusting the Lord Jesus and his work.

That's the main job of pastoral ministry, to push people towards the Lord Jesus and his work.

Whatever group we have responsibility, it's not ours, it's his, and we are not the focus of attention.

He is the church of God which he obtained with his own blood. Now notice that the elders are given this instruction to watch over the church in the context of a danger that Paul knows is coming.

[17:43] Notice the certainty in verses 29 and 30. 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.

This church needs to be looked after because it's under threat and it's under threat from two directions. There are two dangers to expect. And do you notice that these two dangers reflect the instruction in verse 28?

Look at verse 28. Remember the two instructions. Pay attention to yourselves and to the flock. Look at verse 29. There are two dangers.

Fierce wolves will damage the flock and you will damage them. Why do they need to pay attention to the flock? Because there are wolves out there.

Why do they need to pay attention to themselves? Because, verse 30, they will behave like wolves, some of them. Now folks, if that's not a shocking statement to make, nothing will shock you.

[18:55] If you're not awake now, you're dead for the rest of the day, aren't you? Let's look at these in turn. Ferocious wolves are expected from outside. Paul says, when I go, people will arrive from elsewhere and will be ferocious in their attempts to divide the flock.

You may have heard me use this example before, but it does brilliantly for this situation. I've got a friend who worked for many years in a small church in rural Belgium. I met him about seven or eight years into his first stretch in that church on summer holiday.

He said, this is the first year that I have felt even moderately comfortable going on holiday because every previous summer holiday, the week after I've gone on holiday, people have arrived in church the next Sunday to try and grab it for themselves.

Every week, every summer that happened to him and that means, of course, that they're watching and waiting for his departure so that they can move in. Now, that happens in every church from time to time.

Sometimes, especially when the church is young and relatively defenseless, as that one was, the attacks are particularly ferocious. My daughter's been working in China this last year, learning Chinese.

[20:15] There are three people in my daughter's language class in China last year. Herself, a Japanese guy who couldn't hardly speak any Chinese at all, and a Jehovah's Witness. Question, why are the Jehovah's Witnesses sending people to Beijing to learn Chinese?

Answer, so that back home they can, under the guise of being Christian, catch Chinese students to belong to them. Unlike good shepherds seeking the lost, they will not lead them to the Lord Jesus Christ and to faith in him and his finished work on their behalf.

What do wolves do? They prey on the weak. They divide and damage flocks. Just to say, it's always a bad sign when you run into people in church or around it who really don't seem to mind all that much when congregational life is damaged and when sheep are set against sheep.

It's always a bad sign. That's wolfish behavior. That's the first danger then. Ferocious wolves from outside. The second danger is false shepherds from inside.

Verse 30. From among your own selves, you Ephesian elders, will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

[21:41] from your own number. From among the leaders of the church, people will arise and distort the truth. Now folks, this is the great motivation for the false teacher in the New Testament.

They want to possess people. They want people to follow them. The people of God bought with the blood of God. I want those people to listen to me and honor me and follow me and love me. It is very common for people with Christian responsibility to be driven by that motivation. And these leaders are to take steps to ensure that they are not among those who end up distorting the truth so that people follow them rather than following the Lord Jesus.

I imagine these words must have been very shocking to hear, don't you? Notice how definite he is again. I know that from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things. It must have been shocking to hear. But folks, they did it. For if you look onto 1 Timothy written probably little over a decade further on, written to Timothy in the church in Ephesus, in 1 Timothy it is quite clear that falsehood and congregational upset is alive and well in the church in Ephesus and the elders are involved in it.

[ 23 : 23 ] Think of what they'd had they'd had the Apostle Paul as their teacher, their church planter for probably three years ish.

He had trained them, I have no doubt that he put them through his pastor's training course. They were not ignorant. They'd had the best of models for how to do ministry and they had this warning and they did it all the same.

Now, I don't know about you but if that doesn't frighten you, nothing will. You would think, wouldn't you? I mean, if you could get the Apostle Paul on sabbatical for a year or two and have him teach your church or your Christian union or your home group, you'd think that that would last them for a generation, wouldn't you?

How long did it last in Ephesus? Around a decade. Not long, is it? And if he can't guarantee a good outcome and if he's certain, back there at his departure that some of them will go wrong in the end, then that's normal.

That some of them will go wrong in the end. What should we do about this? Well, first of all, do not make any assumptions about yourself not being able to do this kind of thing.

[ 24 : 47 ] You think you wouldn't mislead the people of God that you've got responsibility for? Think again. Do not make any assumptions about your own church leaders not being prone to this kind of temptation.

Do not assume that for a second. If Paul's boys can turn into those who feed off the congregation, anyone can turn into a person who feeds off the congregation.

And the big application for them and for us is simply this. Be alert. Verse 31. Be alert therefore, he says.

For yourselves, for the congregation, we need to beware of ourselves. To take steps against this being ourselves.

So, think about your area of ministry, whatever it is. Think about what you do. Think about why you do it. And watch out.

[ 25 : 58 ] Now, our time's nearly gone, but I do want to draw your attention to Paul's closing instruction because it contains another warning, really, against greed that belongs with all that's gone before.

Notice in verse 32 that Paul talks about the great inheritance that is to come for faithful shepherds and rescued sheep. Verse 32. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up.

It's possible to avoid these sorts of temptations and is able to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. In verse 33, he reminds them of his example.

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.

In all things, I've 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.

[ 27 : 10 ] A great inheritance is held out here. to the faithful shepherd and the rescued sheep. A great inheritance in the future.

And in verse 33, he indicates that ministry now must reflect that future. If you have got a great inheritance coming, you will not be coveting other people's stuff now.

need to be more. Let me say that having responsibility in church gives you access to people and to their stuff.

That kind of greed can take many forms and the church leader has access to them all. In the New Testament, I think there are three particular manifestations of greed that false teachers are prone to.

You can see them most obviously at work in religious groups that become cultish. Three sorts of greed. First, financial greed. Christian leaders all over the world have access to other people's money.

[ 28 : 19 ] You might not think it, but it's a profitable business being in Christian ministry if you work it that way. Second, sexual greed.

Christian ministers people with church responsibilities have access to people's homes and lives and bodies. It is very common for the religiously powerful to be sexually exploitative.

And third, if you like, emotional greed. The desire for people to big me up. To make me feel good about myself all over the world.

people who want power and influence and honor for themselves can find it easily in the Christian community.

And that's what this warning is about. He majors on the financial one. I did not do the work that I did. It was obvious to you that I didn't do the work that I did in order to get your stuff off you.

[ 29 : 30 ] In fact, I provided with my own work what I needed and what those around me need. I didn't take your money. I wasn't here to get from you. Why?

Because I'm following the words of the Lord Jesus. It is more blessed to give than to receive. The antidote to greed, of course, is the word of God, verse 32, the gospel of the Lord Jesus and the example of the Lord Jesus, verse 34 and 35.

Now, folks, one doesn't need to despair about the dangers from inside or the dangers from outside. The gospel message is able to do the work of protecting the Christian worker and of protecting the congregation.

It is able to do that. Notice Paul's confidence again, verse 32. The word of his grace is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance, but there are many temptations to go for present reward rather than future reward.

Our time is gone. Let me point out two implications. First, you cannot read this passage without being really clear about what the gospel work involves.

[ 30 : 53 ] The work is a work of bringing the gospel of God's grace to bear on the lives of everyone. The gospel is for all people.

The gospel is for the whole church, the sick and the well, the needy and the not terribly needy looking, everyone. the shape of the work is verse 32 to entrust people to God and to his gospel. That's the work. Our chief responsibility, no matter what our level of responsibility, is to ensure that people are being taught the scriptures, understand the gospel.

It's the very heart of the job. That's what you find at the middle of the gospel worker sausage. the communication of the gospel of God's grace, leading people to trust in him.

The work is absolutely clear. That's the work we're to do and to promote. But the second obvious thing from this passage is that the danger is real.

[ 32 : 01 ] We are to expect from time to time ferocious people sneaking in from outside. It's normal for that to happen.

It's not a surprise. Paul knows it's going to happen. And most importantly for these leaders, they are to recognize that there is in all of them, and it must be true of all of us as well, a tendency that is to be watched out for, guarded against.

Paul is not exaggerating here. And so let me say, whatever your level of responsibility, whatever your level of responsibility, who are you doing it for?

And what steps are you taking now to ensure that you won't misuse your position of responsibility?

It's a good question to ask yourself. It's a good question to ask your small group leader. Small group leader, what steps are you taking so that you won't become an abuser of this group?

[ 33 : 12 ] It's a great question to ask. We'll bring them up short next Thursday evening. It's a good question. question. It's a good question to ask your CU leader, what steps are you taking?

It's a good question to ask your church elder, what steps are you taking? Your minister, what steps are you taking to ensure that you will not become an abuser of the responsibility you've been given?

What steps have you taken with your responsibility to ensure that this won't be you? If no steps have been taken, that demonstrates for certain that an assumption has already been made.

This could not happen to me. And if that's the case, all one can say is that our assessment differs radically from that of the scriptures.

Let's pray together. just a moment to respond in the quiet to what God has said to us, and then I'll lead us in prayer.

[ 34 : 30 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Scattered all the way through this passage are many reminders of the magnificently generous character of our God and of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to these words. The church of God, which he obtained with his own blood, the words of the Lord Jesus, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

We thank you, gracious God, that we belong to a good shepherd, full of generosity and kindness, not one who made much of himself, not one who came to be served, not one who came to be honored, but rather one who came to lay down his life for sheep.

Thank you that we benefited from such a generous Lord, such a generous rescuer, one who says that it is more blessed to give than to receive and doesn't just say it, but has done it himself.

[ 36 : 45 ] And so we pray, Heavenly Father, that for ourselves, whatever level of responsibility we have for looking after brothers and sisters, for the growth of the gospel, we pray that you would help us to be people who give ourselves to the gospel of God's grace, and we pray that you deliver us from being people who want to receive rather than to give.

We acknowledge the many temptations. We see in Paul's words the certainty that some of his best leaders will succumb to these temptations.

We pray that you'd give us humility of heart and honesty, and you'd help us to take steps to ensure that that is not true of us.

We pray for our church, for faithful leaders, for people who will look not to their own interests, first of all, but to the interests of others, for people who will not use their positions to exalt themselves, but rather for the sake of the protection and salvation of others.

And we pray for ministries throughout the world, so many places and ministries represented around the room this evening, so many different countries, in some where those conducting faithful ministry are persecuted, in some where there are patterns of ministry that are abusive.

[ 38 : 22 ] We pray, Heavenly Father, for the raising up of faithful under-shepherds in this congregation, in this nation, and throughout the world.

We ask this for Jesus' sake and for his honour and glory. Amen.