

A Leader to Follow

When I was in seminary, I read these words in the very first lines of a book entitled, *The Dark Side of Leadership*:

The proliferation of significant leadership failures within the Christian church and various other Christian organizations during the final two decades of the twentieth century has been without doubt one of the most serious threats to the continued credibility and viability of Christianity in an increasingly secular and skeptical American culture.

That was written in 1997. Unfortunately, the same thing could be written 26 years later. It is not uncommon to hear of influential Christian leaders falling in our day. Each of these failures continues to be a threat to the credibility of Christianity among a skeptical American culture. How desperately the Church, Christian organizations, and even families need leaders that are truly worthy of following.

Today, we are looking at a passage in Acts, which recounts Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders – Acts 20:17-38. In this passage we see that Paul is a leader worth following. Last week we looked at Paul's ministry in Ephesus in chapter 19. Between that passage and ours, Paul has left Ephesus to go to Macedonia and Greece to visit churches he had planted. Now, he is on his way to Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 20:16). On his way he stops in Miletus, which is about 30 miles or so from Ephesus and calls the elders to come to him.

Paul believes that this will be the final time he will see them and so he wants to encourage them and prepare them for the days ahead. Paul will remind them of his life and ministry. He will also encourage and challenge them for what lies ahead in their leadership in the church in Ephesus. And so, let's look first at the model of Paul's life and ministry.

I. A Model of Life and Ministry (vv. 18-27; 33-35)

As we consider this, obviously we do not have the same calling that Paul had. But if you are a believer in Jesus, you have a sphere of influence. There are things that God has for you to do. And so Paul's model certainly has principles that apply to us.

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews;

Paul appeals to their knowledge of what they knew about his life and ministry. He had *lived among* them. They had observed him closely. And what they knew was that his ministry was all about serving the Lord. He served with *all humility*. He served with *with tears and trials*. In Ephesus, like so many places he ministered, he faced opposition. The Jews plotted against him.

Paul says they also know that in the face of such opposition, he didn't water down his message. He says, you know . . .

²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

No one could accuse Paul of sugar-coating his message to try to win the favor of people. He didn't *shrink from declaring* anything that was *profitable*. He taught boldly in public and in private going from *house to house*.

His message to both Jews and Greeks was about *repentance toward God and of faith in [the] Lord Jesus Christ*. This is the summary of the content he preached. It was all about helping people get right with God by turning from their sin and towards God and trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Now, Paul is going to say more about how he ministered among them, but before he gets there, he speaks about what's next for him. And in this we get insight into what motivated Paul. He says:

²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by 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.

Paul doesn't know exactly what will happen in Jerusalem except that he expects to suffer. The Spirit has revealed to him that *imprisonment and afflictions await* him. But Paul is determined to go because he is *constrained by the Spirit*. The Spirit is both leading him to go as well as preparing him for this challenging time.

Some might ask, "Why go, Paul, if you know that you will face afflictions and imprisonment? Why not travel west and keep preaching Christ in other areas?" Paul is going, because he knows it is God's will and because of how he sees his life related to God's will. He says:

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.

What mattered most to Paul was not his safety, or comfort, or an easy life. What mattered to Paul was being faithful to accomplish the work that God had given him to do. Paul did not hold his life as the thing that was most *precious*. What was most precious was the *gospel*. What mattered to Paul were the souls that were saved by the gospel. What mattered most to him was finishing the course God gave to him; to preach the gospel everywhere God called him regardless of what it cost him.

Now, none of us has the same calling Paul had, and yet we too have been entrusted with the Gospel. We too have people around us who don't know God. And Jesus has called us to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). As we think about what it takes to be used by God in these situations, what do we care about most? Our comfort? Staying safe? Or do we care more about being faithful to Jesus so that people hear the message of the gospel? Paul was willing to suffer for the gospel. Are we? Am I? Do we have a theology of suffering for the gospel?

Paul goes on:

²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.

This doesn't necessarily mean that Paul believes his trip to Jerusalem will result in his death. Likely, he believes that the next phase of his ministry will take him all the way to Spain and because of that he will not see them again. And so, believing this will be the last time with them, Paul states that he has been faithful to his calling. He says:

²⁶ 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.

Isn't that an amazing thing to be able to say? "I've done everything I could to proclaim the Gospel. I've presented the whole counsel of God." No one could say that Paul is responsible if he or she didn't believe, and therefore ends up eternally separated from God. No one!

As we come to verse 28, Paul begins his charge to the elders, but in verse 33 he talks more about the model of his life and ministry. And so let's jump down there before we look at his charge to the elders. Verse 33:

³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

Paul did not use his influence to get rich like so many itinerant ministers did. Instead, he worked hard to not be a burden to others.

³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.

We've seen earlier in Acts how Paul worked as a tent-maker to provide for himself (Acts 18:1f; 2 Thess. 3:8). Paul didn't want to do anything that would allow someone to accuse him of doing what he did for person gain. Just to be clear, Paul did teach elsewhere that those who give their lives to preaching the Gospel worthy of support (see 1 Cor. 9:1-6), but Paul chose to give up that right.

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, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' ”

Instead of using his ministry for personal profit, Paul worked hard to help the weak, in other words to be able to give to those who are unable to provide for themselves. He found joy in this.

What a model of a life and ministry, right? Just think about all that we see here. Paul lived among the people he sought to influence. He got to know them and their needs and how to minister to them. He was humble. He had a heart that was fully invested, that's where the tears came from. He was bold. He proclaimed the full counsel of God. He worked hard at teaching them all the counsel of God in public and private settings. He was committed to following the Spirit's leading. He was willing to suffer. He valued the gospel above his own life. He didn't serve for personal gain, but rather worked hard to be able to give. That's a leader to follow.

What do you think this model did in the lives of the Ephesian elders? Certainly, it must have challenged them and fortified their resolve to live and minister in a similar way. And I hope it does for us as well.

This is the kind of life that can have a lasting impact, right? One application of this model is to pray, “God, give us these kinds of leaders. Give us leaders of integrity like this. Give us leaders who truly serve you, Lord. Who are humble. Who teach the full counsel of God. Follow the Spirit. Who are willing to suffer.”

There are all kinds of contexts for which we can pray this, but if you got the email sent out from Pastor Steve on Thursday (it was sent to everyone signed up for the Faith Weekly), you know that we need to begin praying this for our church! Many of you know that we have been in the planning phase of thinking through a succession plan for when Steve will step down from his position as a senior leader. If you didn't get the letter, Steve communicated some specific details of what he is thinking about a timeline for this. As much as we wish Steve could minister here for another 20 years, the day is coming when another leader will step into Steve's role. This is a huge thing for Faith Manhattan Church! Let's pray that God would give us the kind of leader that models the life and ministry of Paul. Let's seek God for this! Let's ask him to raise up the right man who will lead Faith Manhattan in the years ahead with the kind of character and commitment that we see in Paul.

Another way to apply what we see here is to our own lives. As I mentioned before, we all have a sphere of influence. We all have people in our lives that are impacted by the character of our lives and our ministry. And so at a personal level, what aspects of Paul's model do you need to grow in? Humility? Boldness? Willingness to suffer? Following the Spirit? Valuing the gospel more than comfort and safety? Whatever that thing is, ask God to develop you in that area.

Now, I'm not going to take the time to read it, but at the very end of our passage we see how at the end of Paul's message they pray and then there are expressions of deep affection as they say goodbye to Paul. Can you imagine what it would be like one day to gather all the people you've influenced through the course of your life and to be able to give a similar account of your life? To finish well. And to have this kind of deep affection expressed because of how you have loved and helped others? May we all be growing up in Christ and living lives that can serve as models to those around us!

Now, sandwiched between Paul's recounting of the model of his life is his encouragement and charge to the elders. Certainly, for the elders of Faith Manhattan there is a strong word for us here. But for anyone entrusted with any kind of spiritual leadership, including parents, or group leaders, or mentors, there are principles here for all of us. Let's look at Paul's charge to the spiritual leaders in Ephesus.

II. A Charge to Spiritual Leaders (vv. 28-32)

²⁸ Pay 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.

There are two things that the elders are to pay *careful attention to* – their own lives and the flock. They are to pay attention to their own spiritual vitality. How easy it can be for spiritual leaders to neglect this. But here's the deal, if leaders are not tending to their own spiritual lives, they will not be able to care for the people God entrusts to them, which is the second thing to which they are to *pay careful attention*.

In calling the church, *the flock*, Paul is using a common Old Testament metaphor for the people of God. Jesus, of course, used this metaphor as well (John 10). Elders have the responsibility to tend to the spiritual health and safety of the people in their church.

The elders have this role because the Spirit made them *overseers*. The word, *overseer*, is another term for elder. "Elder" focuses on the maturity of the individual, whereas "overseer" focuses on the function. Paul says that the function of an overseers is to *care for the church of God*, which is so valuable because it was *obtained with [Jesus'] own blood*. The church belongs to Jesus. He purchased it at the cost of his own blood.

This constant vigilance for themselves and for the church is vital in light of what the future will bring. 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.

Wolves of course are predators of sheep. Paul says that such people will show up in two ways. They *will come in among you*. In other words, they will come into the church from the outside. But they will also arise *from among your own selves*. Men, who are part of the church, will rise up and speak *twisted things* to selfishly develop their own following. We know from Paul's letters to Timothy that this indeed happened (1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:15). And so what do the elders need to do? They need to stay vigilant to the threat of false teachers.

³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

Be alert. Remain watchful. This is what an overseer does. Paul wants them to remember how his watchfulness for the church in Ephesus was expressed in how he never stopped *admonish[ing] every one*. With tears of love, Paul never stopped warning of dangers.

As we come to verse 32, having reminded the elders of his life and ministry, and having given a solemn charge, Paul now entrusts responsibility for the church to the elders.

³² 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.

To *commend* means to entrust to the care of another. Paul entrusts the elders to God's care. The elders are not alone. God is with them. The all-wise, all-powerful, good and faithful God is with them.

Paul also entrusts them *to the word of [God's] grace*. They have the gospel that expounds God's grace. It is this word that can build them up and bring the elders and the church to maturity. It is also the word that can protect by exposing any false teaching that threatens to sneak in among them or arise from within them.

It is a sober and weighty responsibility with which the elders are charged, but they have great resources. God himself and His powerful word.

These same resources are available for anyone who is called to lead others whether that is an elder in a church, leading a Life Group, teaching a Sunday school class, raising children, or mentoring a younger person. You are not alone in this. God is with you. And God's word is with you to mature you and equip you as well as those under your care. And so, trust God as you seek to lead and shepherd others. Seek him. Pray often for the help that you need. And lean into what the word of his grace has to offer – wisdom, guidance, truth, and clarity. Spend time in his word allowing it to form your life and how you seek to influence others.

I started this sermon talking about how so many Christian leaders have fallen and how devastating that is to the cause of Christ. I truly believe that most of them started well. They had a heart to serve God and be used for good in the kingdom. But at some point, they failed to do what Paul charged the Ephesian elders to do; they stopped paying careful attention to their

own lives. Their spiritual lives got off track and they fell spiritually and because of this harm has come to the church.

How desperately the Church, how desperate THIS church, and Christian organizations, and families, and dozens of other ministry contexts, need leaders that are truly worthy of following. I can't do anything about leaders who have fallen. All I can do is tend to myself. All I can do is pay attention to my spiritual health. May we all do this and be men and women who serve and lead and shepherd others out of spiritual health. May we seek God personally and stay submitted to him. May we follow His Spirit. May we serve with humility. May you and I be a leader to follow.