

THE MARKS OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP
ACTS 20:25-38

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

God's people 2000 years ago were in desperate need of leadership. They labored under a vassal king who called himself "King of the Jews." But Herod the Great hardly resembled the characteristics that the Hebrew Scriptures described as desirable in godly leaders. He lacked the heart for God which characterized King David.

Herod did know how to use power. He was an effective administrator. He was a great builder. You who are able to go to Israel in March will see a number of buildings and structures which he erected 2000 years ago and still stand today. Herod was also brutal and vicious and lacking in moral standards. He married a series of eight wives. He had one of them executed. He killed three of his own sons. When Herod died, few were sad to see him go, except perhaps Emperor Augustus.

Caesar Augustus was sovereign over the vassal king Herod the Great. He was likewise an effective administrator who had a long reign. Augustus was also morally unrestrained and brutal and superstitious. His people called him a god.

There was a longing among many of the Jewish people for a true Jewish king, a king who would be concerned about their interests, a king who would deliver them from Herod and Augustus. Unbeknown to most of them the real king was born about 2 BC. He became the ultimate example of godly leadership. He provided an example which the Apostle Paul emulated. He exhibited traits that Paul further explained in his teaching. Paul spoke about Christ-like traits that are needed today.

The passage before us describes some of these marks of Christian leadership. It appears chronologically at the end of Paul's third missionary journey. (PROJECTOR ON--- THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY RETURN) The Apostle Paul is traveling with representatives from churches in Greece and Asia Minor. They are bringing financial aid to help the drought stricken Jewish Christians of Judea. We saw last time that this band of Christian leaders had stopped at the port city of Miletus. (EPHESUS MILETUS) From there Paul had sent word to Ephesus for the elders of the church there to come and see him. Paul had spent almost three years in that important city establishing a church. It had been over a year since he had been there. Realizing that he might not see them again, Paul wanted to give the Ephesian elders a last word of encouragement. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We saw last time, two weeks ago, from Luke's summary of the first part of that message of encouragement that Paul was defending his ministry apparently because critics at Ephesus had been attacking it. In doing that the apostle talked about commitment. Commitment to Christ, we explained, is perhaps the most foundational mark of the

disciple of Christ. In the remainder of the message Paul identifies some additional marks of Christian leadership.

I.

In vv. 25-27 of Acts #20 he talks about the importance of DECLARING THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. DECLARING THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF GOD) In v. 25 Luke quotes Paul as saying to the Ephesian elders, **“And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face no more.”** Earlier we saw that Paul’s long range goal was to preach the gospel in the western Mediterranean area. Also we saw that Paul had been made aware through messages of prophets that some kind of imprisonment was awaiting him in Jerusalem. Either or both of these factors may have led him to conclude that he wasn’t ever going to be back in Ephesus.

Then in vv. 26 & 27 he says, **“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.”** What does being innocent of the blood of all men have to do with anything? ,Paul is probably referring to a message that God gave to the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. About 500 years before the time of Christ, when Judah was in captivity in Babylon, God told Ezekiel that his job was to be a watchman for the Jewish people. In Ezekiel #3 vv. 17-19 the Lord told the prophet Ezekiel that if he warned the wicked to turn from their way and they refused, Ezekiel would be free of guilt. But if he failed to warn the wicked to repent, Ezekiel would be accountable.

It appears that Paul saw himself as a kind of watchman who had been specially equipped and commissioned by God to deliver the “whole purpose, or counsel, of God” to Jews and Gentiles. Here he is claiming that he did that in Ephesus. Back in v. 20 Paul told the Ephesian elders, **“...I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable...”** In v. 21 he spoke of **“repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** That was at the heart of his message. The point is that Paul had fulfilled his responsibility to these Christians to give them the complete picture of who God is, who the Lord Jesus is, how man can be rightly related to them, the consequences of sin, and how to live the Christian life. Now it was their responsibility to live the Christian life and introduce others to it.

There is a special challenge here for us who are preachers and Sunday school teachers and children’s workers and Bible study leaders. We have a responsibility before God to give people in our charge an accurate picture of God and man and the Christian life. We need to challenge them to have a relationship with Christ and to mature in Him. Over time we ought to address all of the subjects which the Bible addresses. Sometimes Christian leaders avoid some topics. For example, I have found that some preachers are hesitant to talk about eschatology, the study of end time things. Yet much of the Bible talks about end time events. If Bible teachers are going to address the whole counsel of God, they need to deal with what the Bible says about the end of human history.

There is also an application to all of us who are parents and grandparents. Whether we teach our kids at home, send them to Christian school, or send them to public school, we have the responsibility before God to declare to them the whole counsel of God. That primarily involves the gospel and what it means to be a Christian. But it also involves whatever is profitable, as Paul puts it. It means telling our kids about forgiveness, about sin, about love, about forgiveness, about God's judgment, and about God's view of sexuality. Christian leadership means addressing the issues and giving them the straight stuff.

II.

Verses 28-32 describe another mark of Christian leadership. It is the responsibility of GUARDING THE FLOCK. (II. GUARDING THE FLOCK) Quality Christian leaders are careful to guard their flocks. There are only two verbs of command in this little talk. In v. 31 Paul tells the elders, **"Be on the alert..."** In v. 28 he says, **"Pay careful attention..."** Specifically he says, **"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."**

The primary responsibility for this task rests with the elders, or overseers, of the church. Here they are called "overseers." The more literal translation is "bishops." Back in v. 17 they are called "elders." So in the New Testament the terms "bishop" and "elder" refer to the same position. "Elder" is a Jewish term. It has more of an association with character and age and maturity. "Bishop," or "overseer," in its original Greek usage focuses more on the job that was involved in being an elder.

Paul stresses the importance of the job by mentioning that the church was bought with the price of the blood of the God-man Jesus. Here that church is compared to a flock and its elders are compared to shepherds. Shepherds have a twofold responsibility toward their sheep. They have to feed them, and they have to keep them safe. Here Paul is stressing the importance of protecting them. In vv. 25-27 he was addressing the importance of feeding them spiritually.

What adds to the weight of the responsibility of the elders is not only the importance of the task but also the fact that they have been appointed to their position by the Holy Spirit. Paul may be making reference to prophetic utterances by which the Holy Spirit communicated to the church at Ephesus who its elders should be.

It may also be that Paul is saying that God raises up elders in local churches and equips them and matures them spiritually so that they are fitted for the job at hand. If that is the case, it should affect the way that we look at the job of choosing elders in a local church. It means that we aren't just electing elders or appointing people that we think might do a good job. It means that we should be watching for people who are functioning as elders and who have the characteristics necessary for elders. The job of the church is simply to recognize those people and affirm them for being people whom the Holy Spirit has raised up to do the job.

A.

In this section Paul says that guardians of the flock need to have three concerns. (II. GUARDING... A. BE ON GUARD FOR YOURSELVES) He says in v. 28 that overseers must "BE ON GUARD FOR YOURSELVES." Leadership that is Christian must begin with the self. Any Christian impact that comes from our leadership ultimately has its roots in our own spiritual life. We need to demonstrate control over our financial life, our work life, our sexual life, our family life, and our business life.

If we are going to be faithful to guard ourselves, we all need to make our personal devotions a priority. When a person is praying and reading and meditating on the Bible regularly, it is tough not to have to confront areas of our lives that are off track. Beyond that we need to stay accountable to our wife or our husband or our family or our Christian friends or our church leaders. Guarding the flock begins with guarding ourselves.

B.

Then secondly Paul says that we need to BE ON GUARD FOR WOLVES FROM OUTSIDE. (II. A. B. BE ON GUARD FOR WOLVES FROM OUTSIDE) In v. 29 he warns the Ephesian elders, "**I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock...**" How did Paul know that there would be outsiders who would threaten the church at Ephesus? From being in Ephesus for three years he was no doubt aware of those who opposed the gospel there. He had also heard that there were critics of him and his ministry in Ephesus after he left. Then also Paul had enough spiritual experience and experience in dealing with local churches to know that the forces of evil would be at work to undermine the thriving congregation in this city.

From our studies of Paul in general and of his earlier visit to Ephesus in particular we know that there were at least two doctrinal wolves which threatened the well being of the congregation at Ephesus. One was the Judaizers. In most of the churches that Paul had started there were problems with Jews who came along and claimed to be followers of Jesus who would tell the Gentile Christians that in order to be right with God, they had to be circumcised and follow all of the laws of the Hebrew Bible.

A few years later Paul would write a letter to his younger associate Timothy working in the church of Ephesus. (1 TIMOTHY 4:3) In #4 v. 3 of 1 Timothy he would warn him about "**[men] who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.**" Part of the Old Testament law prohibited the people of God from eating certain foods. That prohibition was removed with the death of Christ. But there were these Judaizers who wanted the Gentile Christians to live like Jews and to focus on following a code of dos and don'ts. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Churches face the same kind of danger today. Jehovah's Witnesses and some of the other cults are notorious for convincing new Christians to get caught up in their systems

of works and rules. Typically the cults teach their followers that in order to be accepted by God a true believer must work hard and live by a code of dos and don'ts.

But it isn't just cults that are guilty of this. Some churches and some pastors and teachers become so focused on rules and regulations that they consciously or unconsciously teach that the true measure of spirituality is how well someone lives by the rules. Full acceptance by fellow Christians and by God comes only when people live and behave in a certain way.

Now the New Testament does prescribe certain rules and principles by which Christians ought to live. But the basis of our acceptance before God is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. It is not our behavior or our living up to a certain set of rules. Salvation is by grace and faith, not by works. When we trust in Jesus, our forgiveness by God is total. Christian growth is also by grace and faith, not by works. Christians get messed up when they get caught up in legalism and in an inappropriate focus on rules rather than upon a relationship with the living God.

The second threat to Christianity at Ephesus came from the occult. Ephesus was a center of witchcraft and magic and what today would be called New Age spirituality. People came to Ephesus looking for experts who could contact the dead, who could cast spells upon their enemies, who could remove curses, and who could use formulas to get the gods to give them what they wanted. Ephesus was regarded as a place where people could find spiritualists who could manipulate the gods to accomplish their individual purposes. The danger to the church was that Christians could transfer that attitude into their approach to the true God.

That danger is still present today. "Radio listeners, send for my new book *The Secret of Getting Your Prayers Answered Every Time*. For a gift of only \$25 you can learn how to always get what you want from God." "TV viewers, call this toll free number and for a gift of x amount, I will send you my miracle water which will heal you of your ailment."

God does delight in our prayers and in our faith. But the God of the Bible is a sovereign God, not a genie waiting to be manipulated to accomplish our will.

C.

Not only does Paul say that elders should be on guard for themselves and for wolves from the outside, but in v. 30 he also warns them to BE ON GUARD FOR PERVERSITY FROM WITHIN. (II. A. B. C. BE ON GUARD FOR PERVERSITY FROM WITHIN) In v. 30 he says, **"...and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them."** The original word for "twisted" was used of a piece of pottery on a pottery wheel that was misshapened. The idea is that there will be people who will come along and will misshapen the word of God. They will twist it and misuse it and take it out of context and misapply it.

Sometimes within our own midst there are people who arise to threaten the flock. Among denominations and Christian educational institutions perversity from within has

been a major problem. Yale and Harvard are typical of too many Christian organizations. Both schools began with the purpose of training young men for the ministry. Over time their philosophical convictions drifted. Today they are hotbeds of modern liberalism.

The YMCA is another example. Earlier in the twentieth century the YMCA was an evangelical organization. Today it is a fine community organization. But there is nothing especially Christian about it. What happened in all of these cases is that Biblical distinctives were gradually compromised and weakened. More compromises and more compromises were made. More Christian distinctives were lost. Leaders gave in to the desire to be more inclusive. Before long these institutions were no longer Christian.

Perversity from within can happen from moral failures and from doctrinal compromises and also from power struggles. People become motivated by a desire for power and position and recognition within the church. Cliques develop. Tensions develop between, or among, the cliques over different issues. The result is divisions in the church.

Paul concludes this section in vv. 31 & 32, **“Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one 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.”** Here we see Paul’s example of balance. He admonishes, but he does it with tears. His concern is for truth, but it is communicated with love. Guard the flock, but do it in love. A few years later he would write to the Ephesians encouraging them at one point to “speak the truth in love.”

This concern to guard the flock has primary reference to the church. But there are legitimate applications that we could also make to any sphere of influence where we have relationships with people. It could involve a responsibility toward people in our Sunday School class, in our children’s program, in our circle of friends, or in our family. Our children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews especially need guarding in this perverse world in which we live.

Charles Colson used to say that 70% of long-term prison inmates, 60% of rapists, and 72% of adolescent murderers grew up in fatherless homes. What was the problem? Besides the fact that the boys probably didn’t have a male role model, they also didn’t have a dad to guard the flock. All of us who are Christians need to be on the lookout for wolves in the world around us.

III.

Verses 32-35 describe another mark of Christian leadership. Paul here talks about MAINTAINING FINANCIAL INTEGRITY. (III. MAINTAINING FINANCIAL INTEGRITY) We saw earlier that Paul was a tentmaker and a leatherworker. At Ephesus he used his skills in this trade to support himself financially. He chose not to take money from the church that got started there. In fact he did more than that. In vv. 34 & 35 he says, **“You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to 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, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Paul not only supported himself financially, but he also helped to support some of his missionary associates. He also gave financially to help the weak and needy.

So the lesson is that pastors shouldn't get paid, right? Well at other times Paul did accept money from churches to help him in his missionary exploits. In his first letter to Timothy he said that elders who work hard at preaching and teaching are worthy of double honor. In the context he is talking about financial support. Then also Paul said a couple of times in the New Testament that he had the right to be paid for his work, but in Ephesus he chose not to receive it. Why?

Besides the fact that Paul was a single person who didn't have a family to support, the Apostle was also acutely aware of the hucksterism that was prevalent in Ephesus. When people came looking for help from the occultists, they knew that they were going to have to shell out a fair amount of money. The spiritists in Ephesus were pretty well off. Also many of them had the kind of reputation for money collecting that some of the worst examples of televangelists have had in our day. Paul became known in Ephesus for performing miracles far beyond anything that the Ephesian New Agers had come up with. Paul wanted to be so squeaky clean and so removed from the money grubbing of the Ephesian occultists that he wouldn't take anything at all for his work of ministry.

At the very least we can take away from Paul's example the lesson that in our individual dealings as Christians and in our work as a church it is important to maintain financial integrity. In our church I have no authority to sign checks. We have one set of people who count our offerings. We have a bookkeeping service that cuts our checks and balances our books. We have separate people who sign the checks. We have a treasurer who makes sure that expenditures match up with our budget. We make our detailed budget available to all of you every fall, and the congregation has to approve it. As individuals and as a church we need to work at maintaining financial integrity.

In his book Management Peter Drucker observes, **"They may forgive a man a great deal: incompetence, ignorance, insecurity, or bad manners. But they will not forgive his lack of integrity."**

IV.

The last mark of leadership that we can identify in our passage comes from vv. 36-38. It is PRODUCING TIES THAT BIND. (IV. PRODUCING TIES THAT BIND) The historian Luke writes, **"And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, 38 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."**

A mark of leadership is having followers. Successful leadership results in followers who are not just along for the ride or are just tolerating the leader because of the official position in which he or she serves. Successful leaders produce followers who become committed to the cause and to the goals of the organization. This requires a balance of truth and love. If you have only love and friendliness and concern for making other people happy and comfortable, nothing much will be done. On the other hand if you have commitment only to the cause or the plan or the company or oneself to the neglect of concern for the people being led, you will get resentment and anger and foot dragging. Quality leadership, especially Christian leadership, produces ties that bind. It produces strong relationships.

Do you have kids who will rise up and call you blessed? Do you have people who work for you who would really be upset if you left the job? Do you have kids in your class that look forward to seeing you each week? If you moved away from the area and from the church, are there people who would want to keep up with you because of the positive Christian influence that you have had upon them? If you can answer yes to these questions, it is evidence that you have been successful in producing ties that bind.

Seminary professor William Lawrence writes, **“Perhaps the thing that makes Christian leadership most distinctive is the fact that so many want it but so few have it.”** (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, #575, p. 329) Do you want to be a Christian leader? Follow the example of our Savior who was born in Bethlehem. Make sure, as we talked about last time, two weeks ago, that you are truly committed to Jesus Christ.

Next make sure that you are declaring the whole purpose of God to those in your sphere of influence--- to your kids, to your class, to your friends, to your family. Give them the straight stuff.

Then guard the flock. Make sure that you have your own spiritual life in order. Then look out for the wolves. Know what your kids are being taught at school. Exercise influence over the friends that your kids choose. Watch out for wrong philosophies and unbiblical ideas that are exercising influence on your family, on your Christian friends, and upon others who are subject to your Christian influence. Then maintain your integrity, especially in the area of finances. Finally, maintain that balance between pursuing the goal and accomplishing the mission, and caring about the people whom you lead.