

Take Heed to Yourselves

Deuteronomy 11:13–17; Acts 20:25–31

This is the second sermon on our Acts text. This is a very rich text that cannot be adequately treated in one sermon. The context is the apostle Paul's address to the Ephesian elders. Paul was in a hurry to get back to Jerusalem, so from Miletus he sent for the elders of the church in Ephesus, and they traveled about 50 miles over land and sea to spend some time with him. We might think of this as the elders going on retreat to consider their calling and ministry. What a spiritual treat it would have been to go on retreat with the great apostle and theologian, Paul! The Holy Spirit of God wisely recorded the substance of Paul's remarks for the benefit of elders in every age. We are going to consider it under three heads: *Take heed to yourselves*; *Take heed to the flock*; *Give heed to the Shepherd*. Let us consider them in turn; first,

1. Take heed to yourselves.

The apostle Paul is speaking face-to-face with the elders of the church at Ephesus. Face-to-face communication is best, but with electronic communication it is becoming rarer. When the God of heaven wanted to communicate with man, he did it in person. Before the fall, he came and spoke with Adam and Eve directly in the Garden in the cool of the day. After the fall, the only way that sinners can communicate with a holy God is through a Mediator; and when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, who came into the world in the flesh. He ate and drank with his disciples and preached to the crowds; he brought God's message personally, at great cost.

In our text this morning the elders of Ephesus have gathered with the apostle Paul. He is held in great esteem by these men, and they have traveled at great personal cost in time, lost work and hardship to be with him; thus, they are motivated to hear what he has to say. The summary of his message is "Take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock." This is a two-fold command, and we are going to consider each part separately; first, "Take heed to yourselves." "Take heed" means *pay careful attention to*. "Yourselves" is plural, but plainly the thought is that each elder is to take heed, first, to his own life: to pay careful attention to his own life. Here, then, is the first priority of a church elder: to pay careful attention to his personal life.

In the case of worldly occupations a man's or woman's personal life is not particularly germane. If I go to the market to buy vegetables, what I want is to buy good-quality vegetables at a fair price. The life and character of the person selling them to me is not particularly germane, as long as he treats me fairly and with respect. Is he a good husband and father? Does he instruct his children in the way of the Lord? Hopefully, yes, but if it is not so it is not a deal-breaker. A man might be a failure in his personal or family life but still be a good seller of vegetables.

But in the case of a church officer, his personal life *is* germane. Our Lord Jesus Christ was a man of perfect character. He is the Holy One of God. God himself is holy, and the Mediator is holy. When God says, “Be ye holy; for I am holy,”¹ it very much matters that God himself is holy. God’s law is a reflection of his character. His law has moral force because God himself embodies the character described in his law.

So it is with the church elder. If he tells his flock to follow God, then he himself ought to be a follower of God. If he tells his flock to treat people with kindness, then he himself ought to treat people with kindness. If he tells his flock to keep the Sabbath, then he himself ought to keep the Sabbath. The elder’s message ought to be an extension of his person. So the Holy Spirit wisely tells the elders of the church, “Take heed to yourselves”: take heed—pay careful attention—to your personal life. Make sure you are modeling what you preach.

The command is plural: “Take heed to *yourselves*.” But the responsibility for the carrying out of the duty is to each elder personally. In 1 Timothy 4:16 the command is singular: “Take heed to *yourself* and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” As a young pastor, Timothy was responsible to take heed to himself—that is, pay careful attention to his own personal life. Before he opened his mouth to teach God’s word (doctrine), he was to take heed to *himself* (his life). Was he telling people that God must have first place in their lives? Then God must have first place in his life as well. Was he telling people to give up their idols? Then he must give up his as well. Was he telling people to treat the holy name of God with respect? Then he must be careful to treat the holy name of God with respect as well. Was he telling people to keep the Sabbath day holy? Then he better keep the Sabbath himself. Was he telling people to love God and love their neighbor? Then he better love God and love his neighbor. This is the duty of church elders—pastors, overseers—but it is also the duty of every Christian. As members of God’s spiritual family we represent our Father, and we should embody the family likeness. Each of us should “take heed”—that is, pay careful attention to—our character and personal life. Each of us should pay careful attention to our personal commitment to the Lord—are we committed to love him with all our heart, to obey his word fully, to bring into captivity our every thought to obedience to his word? We must give thought to our priorities. Christ must at all times be our highest priority. Is this evident in our lives? Do we manage our time appropriately? We say we love Christ. How much time do we spend with him in prayerful contemplation of his word? Does Christ rule over our family? Are we honestly endeavoring to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? Do we have have “faithful children not

¹ 1 Pet. 1:16

accused of riot or unruly” (Tit. 1:6)? For as Paul says, if we do not rule our own house well, how shall we take care of the church of God (1 Tim. 3:5)? Church elders have a special responsibility to guard their heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). “My son, give me thine heart” (Prov. 23:26). God wants our heart! Are you an elder, or do you aspire to the office of elder? Then take heed to yourself! Secondly,

2. Take heed to the flock.

The second part of Paul’s command to church elders is “Take heed to the flock” —“Take heed to yourselves *and to all the flock*, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God” Notice, he is speaking to *elders*, he recognizes them as *overseers*, and he commands them to *shepherd* the flock. We see the same pattern in 1 Peter 5:1–2: “The *elders* which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: *feed* the flock of God which is among you, taking the *oversight* thereof . . .”—elder, shepherd, overseer. In the New Testament the terms *elder*, *pastor* and *overseer* refer to the same person. “Elder” refers to spiritual maturity, “overseer” refers to his office, and “pastor” refers to his work of feeding the flock the nourishing truths of God’s word. The elders of the church (always plural, as we have before pointed out) are appointed to the office of overseer and have the responsibility to teach the word of God to their people.

Notice the force of the phrase “among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” The word for overseer is ἐπίσκοπος—ἐπί means *upon* or *over*; it is the root of our English word *upon*; σκοπός comes from a verb meaning *to peer about*; it comes into English in our word *telescope*. The ἐπίσκοπος is an overseer, a man having spiritual oversight in the church; the word occurs a handful of times in the New Testament; in the KJV it is uniformly translated *bishop* except for this one text, where it is rendered *overseer*.

When the apostle says, “Take heed to the flock,” he is referring to the elder’s duty—together with the whole session—to oversee the spiritual life of the congregation of God’s people. The overseer or bishop always carries out the functions of his office in concert with the other overseers. In biblical church government there is always a plurality of eldership. The only single person to whom a person owes total and unquestioned obedience is the Lord Jesus Christ. Any other person demanding total and unquestioned obedience is a usurper and a tyrant, and is to be resisted. Contrary to the practice of episcopacy (Romanism, Anglicanism, etc.), there is no biblical pattern of a bishop having sole oversight over a congregation or a group of congregations.

So the elder’s duty—with the whole session—is to give spiritual oversight to the people under his care. The church, at the man’s ordination, has acknowledged his spiritual authority. It has vowed to “acknowledge and receive this brother as a

ruling elder” and promised to “yield him all that honor, encouragement, and obedience in the Lord, to which his office, according to the Word of God and the constitution of this Church, entitles him.” The elder, likewise, has vowed before God, “Do you accept the office of ruling elder in this congregation and promise, in reliance on the grace of God, faithfully to perform all the duties thereof?” The vow for a minister is similar. So in a presbyterian church the congregation has voluntarily put itself under the care of its elders, and the elders (ruling elders or teaching elders—pastors) have vowed faithfully to perform the duties of their office. And the apostle’s words, “Take heed to the flock,” apply to all those men set apart by the church to special office. And note: the importance of the office is seen in the fact that it is the “Holy Spirit” who has made men overseers. In other words, it is God himself, through the inward call of his Holy Spirit, ratified by the church, that makes men overseers. The book of Acts has been called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” because the third Person of the Holy Trinity figures so prominently in the text. It is through the Holy Spirit that Christ gave commandment to the apostles whom he had chosen; it is the Holy Spirit who is the promise of the Father; it is by the Holy Spirit that the apostles would be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth; it is the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon the church on the Day of Pentecost; it is the gift of the Holy Spirit which is given to all true believers; it is by the filling of the Holy Spirit that the apostles preach with power, speaking the word of God with boldness; it is the Holy Spirit who makes men ἐπίσκοποι—bishops, overseers. And their God-given duty is to “take heed to the flock” under their care. In other words, the office of an overseer in Christ’s church is not just a figurehead, not just a source of pride (“I am a presbyter; you have to give me respect”); possession of the office requires the overseer to actively *shepherd* the souls under his care. Unless a man, by reason of incapacity or advanced age, is granted emeritus status, the apostolic command applies to him: “take heed to the flock.” And the primary duty, as shown by the words following, is to “*feed* the church of God” (KJV) or “*shepherd* the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (NKJV). The word “feed” comes from the verb form of the word for *shepherd* or *pastor*. The elder’s duty, then, is to feed the flock of Christ with spiritual food appropriate to the spiritual state of the people under his care. At times a congregation might need the milk of the Word; a more mature congregation might need the meat of the Word. A wise shepherd knows his sheep, knows their capacity, knows the challenges they are facing, and feeds them with food appropriate to their situation. All elders must be “apt to teach.”² Grace OPC is blessed to have ruling elders who are capable of teaching adult Sunday school or even filling in for the pastor on rare occasions. But the

² 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24

minister's primary job is teaching, fulfilling the biblical command "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and *doctrine* [teaching]" (1 Tim. 5:17). Ministers or teaching elders give their life to "labor in the word and doctrine"; teaching the word is their primary work. This why the form for calling a pastor includes the language "that you may be free from worldly care and employment, we promise and oblige ourselves to pay you the sum of"³ Holy Scripture gives us the reason: "For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer is worthy of his wages'" (1 Tim. 5:18).

In addition to preaching/teaching the word publicly, ministers/elders are also to teach "from house to house" (Acts 20:20). Wherever ministers and elders go, they are to be ministers of the word, teaching by both word and example.

As I stated moments ago, elders are ἐπίσκοποι—bishops, overseers. Christ himself is the supreme bishop, as Peter reminds us: "for ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:25 KJV). Christ is the Bishop and Overseer of our souls; those who serve as bishops or overseers in his church watch out for the flock on his behalf. This leads us to our third point,

3. Give heed to the Shepherd.

Our text instructs the elders of the church to "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Clearly, this is a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who shed his blood on the cross of Calvary for his people's sins. We read in John's gospel that one of the soldiers carrying out his crucifixion pierced his side with a sword, and out of it poured blood and water. In Romans 3 it asserts that God has set forth Christ "to be a propitiation through faith in his blood." Hebrews 9:22 states that "without shedding of blood is no remission." Clearly, "blood" refers to the death of Christ.

Our Confession of Faith, chapter 8, is entitled "Of Christ the Mediator." It demonstrates from Scripture that God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity—eternally divine—was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. He took on a human nature, yet remained fully God. Jesus is thus the unique God-man who went to the cross to die for the sins of mankind.

Notice the remarkable language of our text this morning: "shepherd the church of *God* which He purchased with His own blood." This is very striking language. The eternal God cannot change and cannot die, yet Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speaks of the church which *God* purchased with his own blood—the blood of God! How could this be? The Confession explains that "Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which

³ OPC Form of Government XXII.9, https://opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter_XXII

is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.”⁴ This had been previously observed almost a century before in the 1560 Geneva Bible, which noted, “That which appertains to the humanity of Christ is here attributed to his divinity, because of the communion of the properties and union of the two natures in one person.”⁵ The nineteenth-century theologian Robert Shaw explained, “the works peculiar to each nature are ascribed to the person of Christ, in which both natures are united. The human nature alone could suffer and die; yet it is said, ‘The Lord of glory was crucified;’ and ‘God purchased the Church with his own blood.’”⁶

What a costly salvation! It required the death of Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, the God-man. Church elders are charged to “shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” Here is a clear proof of the deity of Christ: the blood with which he purchased his church was the blood of *God!*

The reason the members of the church give heed to their bishops/overseers is because they represent *Christ*. In him alone is salvation; apart from him—apart from his church—there is no salvation, for it is his church alone that was purchased with his precious blood. In our highly-individualistic American culture there has arisen the notion that a person may receive Christ yet remain outside his church—that this is a perfectly acceptable state of affairs. Yet the book of Acts teaches us that “that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” To what were they added? To the *church*. “The Lord added *to the church* daily such as should be saved.”⁷ Christian, you are saved to live in fellowship and harmony with your brothers and sisters in the church of Jesus Christ: speak to one another, encourage one another, learn from one another. Don’t run from the church; embrace it as your spiritual family, your dear brothers and sisters with whom you will spend eternity.

Brothers and sisters, you all have a responsibility to “take heed to yourselves.” Ruling elders and ministers, you have a responsibility to “take heed to the flock.” Every human being has the responsibility to “give heed to the Shepherd”; he alone came into the world to save sinners; he alone purchased a people for God’s own possession with his own precious blood. Amen.

⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 8.9, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_08

⁵ Geneva Bible 1560, note at Acts 20:28 (spelling modernized). *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison, Wisconsin: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

⁶ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1992 [1845]), p. 112, citing 1 Cor. 2:8, Acts 20:28

⁷ Acts 2:41, 47

The Lord's Supper

Recently I read an account of missionary John Paton (1824–1907), who took the gospel to the people of the New Hebrides islands, out in the Pacific Ocean east and north of Australia. After many trials and difficult seasons, Paton reported the unspeakable joy he experienced when he served the first Communion to a group of new believers at Aniwa:

“For years we had toiled and prayed and taught for this. At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those dark hands, once stained with the blood of cannibalism but now stretched out to receive and partake the emblems and seals of the Redeemer’s love, I had a foretaste of the joy of glory that well-nigh broke my heart to pieces. I shall never taste a deeper bliss till I gaze on the glorified face of Jesus himself” (John G. Paton, Ch. LXXIII).

What a powerful picture it paints! What a privilege to memorialize the Lord’s forgiveness in the Lord’s Supper and to share the meal with other believers. Each of us was dead in sin and unworthy to take the Table until God made us alive in Christ. May we never get over the wonder of the gospel—the wonder of taking the bread and the cup, reminders of the Lord’s torn flesh and precious blood shed on our behalf.⁸

⁸ Adapted from *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary*, Acts 20:7 (Olive Tree Bible Software)