

CARING FOR THE FLOCK
Acts 20.28-31

INTRODUCTION: at one time in my life I had an aquarium. I have always thought aquariums were kind of cool. There was a hotel on the island of Guam that had a large saltwater aquarium in their lobby and it was a very cool aquarium. I like just sitting and watching the fish in the aquarium on the rare occasion if find myself in a Bass Pro Shop. Anyway, I bought an aquarium and had it for a while. If you have every had an aquarium you know they are a bit of work, and never have an aquarium that gets any direct sunlight because direct sunlight causes algae to grow on the glass and that can make your maintenance even more special. So anyway there was a local pet store I would go to, to trade fish. One day I bought an aquarium catfish, or so the owner told me. Aquarium catfish are not regular catfish, they are bred for aquariums and stay small. So after about a week or so, I noticed one of my other fish was missing. I could not figure it out, didn't know where the fish went. Then a couple of weeks later another fish was missing and I started to see little pieces of fish on the bottom of my aquarium; and my so-called aquarium catfish was getting bigger. Come to find out my aquarium catfish was a regular channel cat and it was eating every other fish in the aquarium until they were all gone! So when all the other fish were gone and the catfish was then about 6" long I could see it was a regular catfish, took it back to the pet store, and the owner put it in a tank with regular fish!

The whole point is this: what the owner thought was an aquarium cat was actually a regular cat and ate every other fish in the tank; it was an imposter.

In Acts 20, Luke wrote about the apostle Paul's third missions journey. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and stopped to give the church some parting instructions about false teachers in the

church. We will learn from what Paul warned the early church about, and why membership in the local church helps guard you against false teachers.

[SCRIPTURE: READ 17-38]

Why does membership in the local church help guard us against false teachers?

Being a Christian carries with it a:

I. A SOLEMN RESPONSIBILITY (v. 28)

To the elders: shepherd, be on guard

Let's get some context here. The apostle Paul is winding up his third missions trip. Paul's normal manner of missions work would be to return to his home church in Antioch of Syria at the end of every journey. Along the way, Paul would normally stop in at the churches he helped to plant to encourage the believers there. Paul is winding up his third missions trip and knew he would not be going back that way again. Paul was going by ship along the northern coast of Greece and had stopped in at the port city of Miletus.

v. 17

Paul sent for the elders, the church leaders at Ephesus, a church he established and had spent three years. Ephesus was probably the greatest ministry of Paul's. The young pastor Timothy became the pastor there along with the apostle John. Ephesus is an example of what can happen if we are not careful and I'll explain that in a minute.

Paul gathered the church leaders from the church at Ephesus to give them his final instructions because he knew he may never see them again. Paul had been instructed by the Holy Spirit

that, in his words, “bonds and afflictions” awaited him. In fact, in Acts 21.10, a prophet named Agabus came to Paul with the following message:

ACTS 21.10-14 [READ] Agabus was referring to the fact that Paul would be eventually arrested and taken to Rome to stand trial before Ceasar for preaching the gospel.

So notice what Paul warned the church leaders about in v. 28:

BE ON GUARD: pay attention, be cautious

This caution to be on guard was for two groups of people:

The leaders first, and then the congregation.

Paul was warning them about false teachers that would try and come into the church.

SO WHY WAS IT, WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR CHURCH LEADERS TO BE ON GUARD FOR THEMSELVES?

As one commentator put it:

He that is careless about his own salvation will never be careful about the souls of others¹.

In other words, if a church leader is not growing and being careful about his or her walk with the Lord, that person cannot look out after others in the church.

Church leaders have to take care of their own walk FIRST.

In our modern day context, who are the church leaders?

¹ A.C. Hervey, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 18 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 147.

The pastor, deacons, Sunday School teachers, and ministry leaders.

But wait, don't think that just because you are not a ministry leader you are off the hook, absolutely not. Every single person in the church is responsible to be very careful in their walk with the Lord because false teaching affects everyone, not just church leaders.

In order to guard the flock, then you have to be growing yourself.

1. Trust in God's word;
2. Grow in God's word;
3. Obey God's word (from the warning passages in Hebrews above)

If every church member is serious about their spiritual growth, then the ministry of watching over the church becomes much easier.

The Book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were considering abandoning the Christian faith and going back to Judaism because they were being persecuted for leaving the Jewish faith. The writer of Hebrews gives the readers five specific warnings about their walk with the Lord that is on the screen here. I am not going to elaborate on them but they are there for you to read later, but quickly here they are:

Warnings in the Book of Hebrews about the Word of God:

1st warning: Don't ignore the delivered word (2.1-4)

2nd warning: Don't refuse to believe the word (3.7-19)

3rd warning: Don't remain spiritually immature (5.11 – 6.12)

4th warning: Don't be disloyal to Christ (10.19-39)

Final warning: Don't refuse God's word (12.14-29)

Taking care of your own personal walk with the Lord is called the pursuit of holiness. Here is what one commentator wrote about this pursuit:

Holiness is necessary for faithfulness in ministry. You may be gifted to do the work to which God has called you, but if you aren't godly, then you won't have a ministry. It doesn't matter how good your theology is or how dynamically you speak if your character doesn't match your teaching. I'm talking about living above reproach².

Don't ever stop putting sin to death and pursuing Christlikeness, no matter your job. As a Christian, you are also a minister³

Paul warned the leaders to take care of their own walk with the Lord FIRST,

FLOCK: the church. Paul used the picture of the shepherd watching over a flock of sheep, just as

Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd in JOHN 10.11

MADE YOU: appointed. It is God who appoints the leaders in each individual church as He sees fit

OVERSEERS: those who exercise watchful care, who have a duty to look after.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul uses the word overseer like a pastor in vv. 2-7 in giving qualifications. But here, think of the overseer as the pastor, but also deacons and even Sunday School teachers and ministry leaders because they all have a responsibility to teach the word of God.

² Tony Merida, *Acts, Christ-Centered Exposition* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 317.

³ Merida, 317.

SHEPHERD: to guide, guard, lead, and feed.

Membership in a local church matters because God has placed leaders in each church to teach the church and lead the church in understanding and living the Word of God. This is a solemn responsibility because no church is immune to the attacks of the enemy. As church leaders live their own walk with the Lord they can in turn lead the church as well. But the local church family is the best place in the world to grow in your faith and have others help in that growth through small group Bible study, encouragement, and prayer.

Membership in the local church has a:

II. A SERIOUS REALITY (vv. 29-30)

v. 29

Wolves will come in not sparing the flock

Paul is referring to the false teacher. Jesus also referred to false teachers as wolves:

MATT. 7.15: Jesus compared false prophets to wolves in sheep's clothing, and false prophets are false teachers.

Jesus also had this to say about the false teachers compared to wolves:

JOHN 10.12-13: He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep.

v. 30

They will arise among you

Their goal is to draw some away

False teachers arising from among the church is nothing new. False teachers want to go their own way, they want to be the focus of attention. The enemy uses false teachers to draw people away from God and towards the false teacher. False teachers love attention, they want the focus to be on them and their supposed special spiritual insight. Be aware of the so-called biblical teacher who claims to have some special spiritual insight, that is a sure sign that person may be a false teacher. This is why you must stay in the word of God because any time a teaching contradicts the Word of God, then you had better beware. This is why I always tell people when they are looking for a church, find the church that preaches the Word of God faithfully, and everything else will take care of itself. But if that church does not teach and preach the Word, find another church, there are plenty of them out there.

Paul also gives us the purpose of the false teacher:

v. 30

to draw away the disciples. That is the whole point, to draw people away from the Word of God and away from the God of the Word.

Paul warned the young pastor Timothy about false teachers in the church:

1 TIM. 4.1-3; 2 Tim. 3.1-9

2 TIM. 2.17-18: Paul named two men in the church who were false teachers

Two of the seven churches in Asia had a problem with allowing false teaching to come into the church:

The church at Pergamum (Rev. 2.12-17) and the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2.29). With both churches the Lord told them to repent or He would bring judgment on those churches. Remember I told you about the church at Ephesus, Paul's greatest ministry that also had Timothy and the apostle John as pastors. The Lord rebuked that church as well because they were accused of leaving their first love, which is the love of Christ. Any church can suffer spiritual atrophy if it does not carefully guard the spiritual health of the congregation.

No church, no matter how faithful it is in preaching and teaching the word of God, is immune to the attacks of the enemy. This is why it is so important to bring the word of God with you, follow along with the preaching and teaching, help and encourage others as they read and study the Word of God. membership in the local church matters because there is safety in numbers and we can all benefit from each other's walk with the Lord.

Guarding against false teachers is a:

III. A SINGULAR REMEDY (v. 31)

Be on the alert: literally to stay awake; to care for the salvation and preservation of others. Don't think that just because you are not a deacon or a Sunday School teacher or a ministry leader that you do not have a responsibility, you do. All of us, as children of God by faith in Jesus Christ and as members of Bethel Baptist Church have a responsibility to guard the spiritual health of the church.

Ministry requires safeguarding the truth of the gospel and warding off its manifold human misrepresentations⁴.

Now this does not mean that when you come to church each week you are looking into the Word of God for any false teaching. But it does mean that the more familiar you are with the word of God, the more time you spend in the word of God, then the more prepared you will be when false teaching tries to infiltrate the church because you will know if it does not square with the word of God.

HOW?

TEACH faithfully

LIVE responsibly

CARE affectionately

⁴ David E. Garland, *Acts, Teach the Text Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 215.