

# The Elders' Pulpit

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Acts 20:13-34

These next 25 verses form an excellent, profound, and rich passage. How poorer we would be without them!

There is much of Paul the Apostle here:

Paul's Manner - 13-21

Paul's Bonds - 22-24

Paul's Testimony - 25-27

Paul's Charge - 20:28

Paul's Warning - 29-31

Paul's Commendation - 20:32

Paul's Exemplary Life - 33-35

Paul's Departure - 36-38

But this passage is not all about Paul nor is it all about ministers. Paul's farewell speech is not self-serving.

It is much more about the elders, or presbyters, and with them, the church of God and her needs. He does not call the whole church out, but the 'elders of the church'.

And it is with a note of great solemnity and seriousness that he brings this farewell message, which will be sealed with tears. So it is then with this intense and pivotal church-concern that we open this treasure in two messages.

The next is going to be "The Elders' Proclamation" – which will bring out the message and might of the ministry. But first we will look at the men and their manner, what I have called, their "Pulpit" – and that pulpit is their life, that pulpit is their ways, as illustrated by Paul. The testimony of his life and faith and ministry are before us here – his

manner. And this is passed on to the elders –they too were to follow this pattern in their lives. This what it means to be ‘apostolic’.

You see something of Paul’s ways in 13-16 – of his approach to Miletus, which is some 30 miles from Ephesus. He is first a man of decided action; he has a plan and is following that plan. He is not just a planner, without action; nor is he a man of activity with no direction.

Here he is on the boat, next jumping off and travelling by foot, in order to make contact with believers and perhaps to reach unbelievers. The plan is revealed in verse 16.

Why not go into Ephesus? Did he recognize his limitations here? Did he foresee that such a detour would take him away from his goal? And what is his goal – why, it is to make it to Jerusalem for holiday, right? No – we saw last time that his diaconal heart was beating for the collection for the poor saints of Jerusalem, of Gentile believers helping Jewish Christians.

*<sup>25</sup> but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. <sup>26</sup> For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup> Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them... (Rom 15:25-27a)*

There is secondly a sense of divine leading here as well – see verse 22. He is a man of action, intention, limitation and obedience – all to his Master.

How about you? What are your plans and purposes in life? Are they made under the Word of your Savior, under the Bible’s direction? And are you following through in following Him? Great plans without action are worth as much as great activity with no Christian direction.

And this is especially so for leaders – the elders, they are called in verse 17. Paul calls for the elders of the church, and here we need to make a quick stop to ask, “who are these men?”

We believe from the Bible that the title ‘presbyter’ stands for leaders in their capacity for wisdom; the term means aged, and with age should come experience and keen insight regarding faith and life. The NT does not separate this title from an overseer or bishop – they are used interchangeably in Titus 1 and in 1 Peter 5, and likewise in verse 28 – the elders are to shepherd, or pastor, as well as to oversee as bishops. The elder was chosen by the church, as with the separate office of deacon; you find this vote by show of hands in Acts 14.

Furthermore, there is to be a plurality of elders and not just one elder overseeing the local church. Again, Acts 14 says ‘when they had appointed elders in every church;’ and Titus 1 – appoint elders in every city (prob referring to the church in each of the cities); and here, the elders of the Ephesian church.

These elders are of two kinds – teaching and preaching elders, and ruling elders. 1 Tim. 5:17 says: *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.*

Remarkably, there are some who have limited the term elder to mean only the teaching pastor – or to say that really only a very few verses speak of governors, of ruling in the church, and apply to ruling elders. What a denigration this is of ruling elders! What an undermining of their place and authority! Only 4 verses in the Bible apply!?

So take this as the elders – the pastor or pastors at Ephesus, with the ruling elders of the church, brought to this farewell on an island. What are these elders to model, as they follow Paul, for the being and well-being of the church?

They are first of all **men who have a great commission** given them, considering 18-27. Paul had a duty placed upon him by the hand of the Lord. The church didn't give it to him; men didn't give it to him; the church only testifies and acknowledges what God has granted. Here is a commission which must have muscle behind it – not put off by trials, or discomfort, or opposition; willing to face hardship as a good soldier, men owned by the Spirit of God, of Christ, of grace.

Paul had a proper humility in verse 19, serving the Lord, because he had a proper self-evaluation in verse 24. Like his Savior, he gave himself; he gloried in the cross of Jesus, and thus carried his burden and that of others. Notice how in that verse he mixes two metaphors – running a race and fulfilling a service, a ministry. There is a “MUST” in his life. That *must* was a bond in him by the grace of the Spirit – a bond to run and serve his Lord, and a bond to make known Jesus to all.

Now, as an apostle, that will look different than that of a minister of the gospel; and different for a ruling elder; different for a deacon; different for a churchman – for businessman, a salesman, a laborer, a loving mother caring for her little ones, or a young person just starting out. But the whole church should have the sense, being led by their leaders, that we have a mission to fulfill in this brief time here on earth.

It is a universal mission, to Jew and Greek. It is a full mission, to hold nothing back, to not fear or be intimidated, but out of love for the truth, love for God, love for our neighbor, let the whole counsel of God be declared. This is to be done so broadly as well as intensively – from house to house. The whole truth, for the whole world, for the whole soul of man.

Verse 27 gives us the content of our message, which we will return to next week: the proclamation of the truth. So you see, don't you: there

is so much here, isn't there!? Are you a Spirit owned man, woman or child – willingly led even to suffering for Christ's sake? And still you march forward? Is your name 'Fearless' or 'Fearful'? Courage or Coward? There is an excellent book published lately called 'Impossible People' – and it is a clever title because it is speaking of Christians – we are to be impossible people – impossible to move from trust in Christ, impossible to move from our commitment to the Bible, impossible to make compromise what is right and good and true!

Do you clearly see your responsibility to confess Christ before men? To not be guilty of the blood of those around you, for not testifying to the grace of God in your life? Always be ready! said Peter. Are you a servant who has been deeply and effectively impacted by the truth, the whole truth – the gospel of life truth first; the truth of God's glorious kingdom, in which you are now a citizen; the truth of the whole counsel of God, in a full world and life view? Recall the words of James Orr! "He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity."

Let us continue to the next point – **Men who have a Great Church.**

How love for Jesus does not translate into love for the church is beyond me! Why love the church? Because the Father does, Jesus does, the Spirit does! At the least, wouldn't you want to be a part of the church, of this flock of God, the bride of Christ, the body of the King, the city of God, the temple of the HS?

The centrality of the church translates into at least a three-fold dedication to her. **First**, for her *purity* (teaching of the Word of God);

**second** for her *growth*, or what we might call, her prosperity; and **third**, for her *protection*.

The teaching and confessing of the truth, especially of the gospel, is central here. This should be a no-brainer, but for some reason, some have less than a brain, so it needs to be explained! The purchased flock of God needs shepherding, and chief in that shepherding is to be pointed to her Lord and Savior, who bought her with His blood, who gave to her an inheritance, and who has sanctified them. “Sanctify them by your truth; your Word is truth.” We will return next week to that interesting word, “admonish” in verse 31.

Then the *growth* in the church – the Ephesian church had exploded in size; and verse 32 shows the concern for future building and growth and expansion – both qualitatively and quantitatively. The prosperity of the church – how is the church doing? That is the concern of the elders especially – knowing and promoting the health of the body. And if she is not, is that not a concern for us all?

Then the greatest point here – her *protection* – the church has enemies. Enemies are found within and without. So be on guard! Unsparing wolves are coming! And from among yourselves! Perverse speakers! Paul is about to insist that his motivation was not that of money, of filthy lucre. Why? Well consider his words to Timothy in Ephesus later: read 1 Timothy 6.3-5, 9-10

“Covetousness spoils relationships and hinders the work of the gospel, since those who are seeking to advance themselves materially will be tempted to evaluate their contacts and ministry opportunities in economic terms.” Peterson

Lastly, **elders are to be men of great charity** – men who love others. I almost wanted to say, great character, for earlier Paul charges the elders to not only be on guard for the flock, but be on guard for

themselves. Timothy again is charged by Paul in this way in 1 Timothy 4.15-16 – quote

The pulpit of the preaching elder, the ruling elder, of all God's people, is that they have found the pearl of greatest price, and rich beyond words. Our desire is to make the riches of grace in Christ Jesus known to all. Paul insists that he has not lived covetously, has not ministered or served so as to make financial gain.

Most pastors – not all – are not serving for the money. I find it interesting that he includes clothes in the list of 33. What a sham to live for outward appearances, or the prestige of wealth and fame.

Paul ministered with his hands; he worked hard; he helped the weak; he followed his own Lord's admonition – 'more blessed to give than to receive.' He who has been forgiven much, loves much; he who is shown much mercy, will be forward to forgive much, love much, show much mercy. Here we are given a word from Christ not found in the 4 Gospels.

You are to be givers – not that you are never to be receivers – in fact, your being givers is based entirely upon the full reception made of Christ and His grace! We cannot give what we do not have! But isn't this the mark of the church, of faith, of salvation? They will know you are my disciples by your love.

And why do we love? Because **He** first loved us. This is a good point to close then. The pulpit of the elders, the place from which they are to serve and pursue their race and ministry, is found in the character, the manner, the life of Paul. That then becomes the currency of the church, from the leaders to the led, from the pulpit to the pew.

You have a great commission, a great church and concern for her, and a great charity. This makes for a bond which is tough to break – a fellowship that is broken only with tears.

You have a Savior, a message, a church, a calling, which is worth all your efforts, all your concerns, all your tears, even your very life, if need be! Oh, may the world see that again in the family of God!

May the people be singing with their lives the familiar lines from the once President of Yale University:

*I love thy Kingdom, Lord,  
The house of thine abode,  
The church our blest Redeemer saved  
With his own precious blood.*

*I love thy church, O God:  
Her walls before thee stand,  
Dear as the apple of thine eye,  
And graven on thy hand.*

*For her my tears shall fall,  
For her my prayers ascend;  
To her my cares and toils be giv'n,  
Till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joy  
I prize her heav'nly ways,  
Her sweet communion, solemn vows,  
Her hymns of love and praise.*