

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.³² “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:28-32)

What Should You Want Your Pastor to Do?

I feel like I should be preaching this sermon at a pastors' conference. In the Word of God before us, St. Paul was talking to the elders of the church of Ephesus. “Elders” didn't old men. The elders were the ministers of congregation. They were guys like me and like the teachers in our congregation. Paul's words are final instructions to pastors from a veteran pastor. So this text would be easier to handle if I were preaching to ministers this morning. Or, it might very naturally serve for a situation like the one Paul was in. This was the last time he was going to speak to these men. And so, it feels a little bit like I should be preaching my farewell sermon to you this morning. Don't worry – or don't get your hopes up, whichever is true for you. This is not my farewell sermon, as far as I know. This text just happened to come up today as a part of the readings for the fourth Sunday of Easter. It's here because this Sunday is all about pastoring. Do you know what the word pastor means? It means shepherd. When we look at the instructions Paul gave for shepherding, it's natural for to ask what that means for us. **What should you want your pastor to do?**

I.

Paul says, **“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.”** Do you know what comes to my mind when I hear “keep watch”? Guard duty. I was a soldier once and every soldier has the importance of guard duty drilled into his head. You have to protect the people inside your perimeter. The Greek word here has a little different connotation. It's more along the lines of “take care of.” That makes me think of babysitting. I once watched a little boy for a couple that I knew. His mom had a little statue on an end table and clearly she didn't let him mess with it. I suddenly noticed that he had gotten very quiet. I looked down and of course, he was reaching for that statue. Little kids have to be watched to keep them from doing things they're not supposed to do. They have to be taken care of so that they stay healthy and safe. Paul tells pastors – shepherds – to keep watch over the flock. But did you catch who else he said they should keep watch over? “Keep watch *over yourselves* and all the flock,” he said. Before I can keep watch over you, I have to keep watch over myself. **What should you want your pastors to do? Take care of their own faith.**

You should want that not just for your pastors, but for all those who are charged with the spiritual care of God's people here. That includes the teachers we've called to serve in our school and in our Sunday school. It also includes all the men we've elected to leadership positions on our church council and our boards. We all live in a sinful world. There are dangers to our faith all around us – on TV, in our computers, in our own hearts. I simply cannot function as your pastor if my faith is starving. I cannot comfort you in the hospital, I cannot preach a sermon that shows your sin and your Savior, if my faith is weak and uninformed. Our teachers cannot maintain a Christian environment in our school and train our children to know their Savior if they do not maintain their own faith. Our lay leaders cannot make decisions that will advance the cause of the gospel if they don't grow in their own knowledge of and trust in God's promises.

So it's part of my job to study the Bible. It's part of our teachers' jobs. And we ask every lay leader to faithfully study of God's Word. Now there are many different ways this could be done, but in our situation, our lay leaders should regularly attend Bible class and they should open their Bibles at home. They also should lead their families in regular devotions. Pastors and teachers likewise should regularly study God's Word at home and at church, but we also need to attend conferences where the word is presented in depth. We need to include spiritual growth as part of our professional development, and the congregation needs to see that as part of our work.

Why is that so important? Because, like the elders from Ephesus, God has made us shepherds of his flock. In many ways, their situation was more like ours than Paul's. Paul had persecuted the faith. He was determined to stamp out this Christian sect. But on the way to arrest Christians in Damascus, Jesus himself appeared to Paul and converted him and then Jesus personally called him to preach the gospel. That didn't happen to me. You can ask the teachers, but I don't think it happened to any of them either. And it didn't happen to the elders from Ephesus. They were appointed or elected to their office. Yet, Paul says that the Holy Spirit made them leaders in the church. In the same way, we had voters meetings and issued calls for me and for each teacher and we elected our lay leaders. We recruited our Sunday school teachers. But the Holy Spirit worked through the church. God called us to those positions. And God tells us to care for our own faith.

All of us whom God has called have to examine ourselves. Do we make a priority out of personal study of God's word? Or are we trying to do God's work while we starve our faith? Do we put all kinds of other things first and let the truly important thing go? There're parallel questions for you: do you want ministers who regard taking care of their own faith as an essential part of serving you? Do you want lay leaders whose primary qualification is that they are faithful to the Word? Or would you prefer experts – accountants to do the finances, executives to do the administration, teachers for the board of education and so on? Do you want teachers who put faith ahead even of academics? Who view their primary job as getting our kids to heaven? Or do you want us to operate a private school that gets the best test results? Do you want pastors who study the word every week? Or do you want an administrator? Do you want a fundraiser? Do you want a likeable guy that you can get along with?

It's a struggle for us leaders to care for our own faith. It's easy to let the crisis of the week push regular Bible study off. It's easy to let weariness or even pride keep us from coming to another Bible study. For you members, it's easy to put practical qualifications ahead of a mature faith as the most important leadership trait. It's easy for all of us to dismiss what God says is important and follow our own judgment. It's easy, but it's sin that deserves nothing but death and hell.

Thank God that he knew how weak we are when he set up the ministry. He sent his Son to die and pay for all the sin that we pastors and teachers and lay leaders are guilty of. Jesus washed away all the times that we didn't do what was important, and all the times we were too lazy or too occupied to care for our faith and study his word. Jesus died and paid for all the times that you, the members of his church, forgot what is really important in a pastor or a teacher or a lay leader. He washed away all the times that you thought you knew better than God what the church needs. Jesus paid for all of our sin. He died and then he rose. Because he rose, we are free. That sin is gone forever. He already suffered the hell that we owe and now when we die, we will enter eternal life with him. That promise means peace when our consciences accuse us of not being faithful. And in the light of that forgiveness, he calls us to change our attitude and our priorities and to put our faith and the faith of our workers first, so that the ministry here at Peace is indeed a ministry of the Word.

II.

Ministry is what this text is all about. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and he knew he would be arrested there for the faith. He stopped and called the elders from Ephesus, a congregation that he had served for a full three years, to say good-bye. Luke says that they had to tear themselves away to continue their trip. But Paul's last words to these men were not about him. They were about them and the work God had called them to do. He reminded them of the importance of pastoral care. There's a lesson here for us. **What should we want our pastors to do? Watch over the flock.**

God called me to be a shepherd. He chose that picture on purpose. It's the same picture Jesus used for his work. There is no ministry on this earth apart from the work of Christ. Whatever spiritual benefit you get from my service to you, you get because Jesus works through the gospel I proclaim to you. Jesus chose the image of a shepherd to teach something important. Sheep have no natural defenses. They have no claws or sharp teeth. So they gather in flocks. When they get separated from the flock, they almost always die unless someone rescues them and brings them back to the flock. The flock, of course, is the church.

St. Paul tells all pastors, **“Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”** That's how valuable the flock is. God bought it with his own blood. That's a reference to Jesus, the Son of God, who died and paid for our sins. The blood of Christ is the blood of God. It is the richest payment that could ever be made. You are worth the life and death of his only begotten Son to God. So once he bought you and made you a part of the flock, he instituted the ministry to care for your spiritual needs to bring you to

heaven. So you want a pastor who values you as God's own treasure because the flock is in constant danger. Paul says that savage wolves will attack the flock. The devil hates the church. He wants to drag us all down to hell so he sends all those forces that we see out there against us. A pastor's job is to warn the flock of those dangers and lead them away from the traps and temptations of the devil and comfort them when life is hard.

Paul says, **“Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”** False teachers always come from inside the church. They distort the truth. Why? Sinful pride. They want disciples to follow them and to be impressed with what they say. Christians who follow false teachers are wandering away from Christ. It's the job of pastors and teachers and lay leaders to warn God's people of the real danger false teaching presents. That means we have to teach the whole truth, even the parts people don't like today, even the parts that seem like tedious “pastor stuff.” And it means that we leaders must insist on proper practice in the church, even in emotionally charged situations like funerals and weddings and baptisms. We must follow what God says because false practices will bring false teachings into the church.

Who's up to a job like that? I hate being the bad guy. But even if that isn't your weakness, no sinful pastor or teacher or lay leader could ever live up to the job of shepherding God's flock. That's why Paul says, **“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”** What is going to enable pastors and teachers and lay leaders to properly care for the flock? What is going to keep you, the people Christ died for, from wandering away from the truth? What is going to protect you from the false teachers who rise up and divide the church? God and his word of grace.

The gospel is the very power of God. His grace comes to us in his word and builds us up. What do I need so I can stand up for the truth when it's under attack? A strong faith. What do you need to follow the Good Shepherd and to recognize those who are leading away from him? An unyielding faith. Where does that faith come from? The word, specifically the gospel. God worked through the word to create faith in you. Through the gospel God keeps your faith strong in a world that never ceases to attack it. And he gives you the gospel through the Holy Ministry. And so through his word he gives you an inheritance: eternal life.

That gospel is why God sent me to you. It's why he called every teacher we have. It's why he called our Sunday school teachers and our lay leaders. The church exists to proclaim that word. The church gathers around that word. The church grows and is protected by that word. So what should you want your pastors to do? Proclaim that word, first to themselves and then to you. God grant that such a ministry always remain among us. Amen.