

Home group Leaders Discussion Guide

Acts 20:16-38

It might be tempting for some, when they read this passage, to think to themselves, “Well, I’m not an apostle. I’m not an elder. Thus, this passage really doesn’t apply to me.” Oh, but we’re not let off the hook that easily. To regular “church-folk” Paul did say, *“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”* (I Corinthians 11:1) Additionally, to the Philippians Paul said, *“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”* (Philippians 3:17)

So, we should take note of what Luke records for us from Paul in this passage in Acts. And beyond what we can learn by Paul’s example, it is also important to remember that before there can be elders of a church, there must first be a church...and before there is a church, there must be someone preaching the Gospel and making disciples...this, each and every one of us is called to do.

As Paul is wrapping up his third missionary journey and heading to Jerusalem he sent for the elders of the church in Ephesus while in port in Miletus. This would be the last time he would see them face to face. Paul’s words to them were impassioned and imperative.

Paul reminded them that he had served the Lord (primarily in the form of preaching the Gospel to those who had not yet heard it) with great humility, putting up with all kinds of struggles, opposition, and adversity. The hardships and struggles that Paul faced did not discourage him. We get the sense from Paul that these challenges almost fueled him or confirmed for him that what he was doing was from God. It is tempting for us to think that if we’re doing what God wants us to be doing, then things will be smooth sailing. It appears that Paul thought differently, almost oppositely...that all this adversity confirmed the Gospel must be true. And this Gospel was worth giving his life for—either spending his life preaching/declaring it, or giving up his life for the cause of it.

This being the last time he would see these elders from Ephesus, and having just reiterated his own calling, Paul reminded them of their calling. So what is the responsibility of elders? First is to watch over themselves—i.e. to remain faithful to the King Jesus. Second is to watch over the flock (church/congregation) who they are called to lead/shepherd. Let’s get technical for a moment. We know Paul was speaking to the “elders” of Ephesus. This is the Greek word “presuteros” from where we get the word presbyter or Presbyterian, meaning older or aged or senior. Paul mentioned that the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers”, which is the Greek word “episkopos”, from where we get the word episcopal, and Paul tells them to feed, tend, or shepherd the church...this is the same word that is usually translated “pastor”. All that to say, Biblically speaking, the role, function, responsibility of elders and pastors is the same, or different ways of saying the same thing.

Feeding sheep (usually, metaphorically, understood as teaching) is a pretty benign, albeit important, task. But Paul focused more on the protective responsibility of shepherds, which is

tougher and trickier. One must first recognize a threat, then deal with it in a Christ-oriented way. That is no easy feat. Mistakes can be made in not recognizing a threat, or in identifying something/someone as a threat when they're not. Or, perhaps the threat is recognized but then dealt with in a way that is not Christlike. Tough stuff. It takes constant vigilance, constant discernment, constant love.

Notice how trusting of God Paul was. Even though he knew tough times were ahead for this church he started and loved, he could walk away trusting that God is the ultimate Shepherd. This sort of trust is required of church leaders, otherwise the fear/concern would be paralyzing.

Paul also reminded them of how hard of work church leadership is. At the same time, it's obvious that Paul believed it was worth it. Additionally, in the closing paragraph we see the deep love and affection that Paul has for them and they have for Paul. That level of community is what makes all the tough work worth it.

- Q. Paul was clearly a motivated and driven person. What motivated him? What motivates you? Perhaps to ask it another way, what gets you up in the morning, what gets you excited?**
- Q. (From verse 19)...speaking for yourself, how would you complete this statement, "I serve the Lord with..."**
- Q. Notice what Paul said in verse 24, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord has given me..." Is there anything you feel that strong and convicted about? Sadly, many Christians take the task we've been given as optional...we can dabble in it if/when we feel "called" to it, or if it fits in our schedule and plans. Why do you think more Christians today aren't more like Paul? Do you even want to be more like Paul? What do you think it would take to be more like Paul?**
- Q. It is clear that Paul and the Ephesian elders had a heart-felt connection with one another. Describe your experience of being that closely connected with a group of people. (Or describe the deepest level of community that you have experienced.)**
- Q. When you think of "church elders" what comes to mind? What is your general attitude toward church leadership? From your experience, share some stories of good eldership that you've seen.**
- Q. Do you think eldership is something you could see in your future? Why or why not? What sort of training/equipping, growth and maturity do you need in order to be ready for such a task? It might be helpful to take a gander at the list of "character qualifications" that Paul laid out in I Timothy 3 (interestingly, to the church in Ephesus). What thoughts/feelings do you have as you read over that?**

- Q. How are you tempted to get discouraged when faced with opposition? What might Paul say to you/us about that?**

- Q. Who has been a spiritual role model for you? What about that person has rubbed off on you?**

- Q. If someone observed you for the past year, what would they assume the Christian life is like based on what they observed in you?**