



## Sermon Transcript

### May 13, 2018

## Shepherds and Souls

### The Heart of an Elder

Acts 20:17-38

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 13, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Acts 20:17-38**

<sup>17</sup> Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup> And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup> how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. <sup>25</sup> And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup> for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

<sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

<sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

<sup>33</sup> I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" <sup>36</sup> And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup> And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup> being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken,

## Introduction

For the last several weeks we have been engaged in a conversation about leadership in the local church. Particularly, we have been looking at what the Bible has to say about the office of elders. In the New Testament, elders are referred to as “overseers” or “shepherds” of a local church. It is also a word used interchangeably with the word “pastor.” While we are yet to work out the particulars of what elders and deacons would look like in our setting here in this local church, we do want to move in this direction and hopefully by this time next year, we will have a clear understanding of how that will look for us. The goal in all of this is to provide good care for God’s people.

So what have we discovered to this point and where are we going with this conversation over the next several weeks?

Jesus is the Template: We began by acknowledging that Jesus is the template for “shepherds” in the church.

Psalm 23 - Jesus is MY Shepherd: He knows the sheep

John 10 - Jesus is the GOOD Shepherd: He loves the sheep

Hebrews 13 - Jesus is the GREAT Shepherd: He leads the sheep

1 Peter 5 - Jesus is the CHIEF Shepherd: He equips the sheep

So it is with elders, who are called to shepherd the people of a local church. They know the people they serve. They love the people they serve. They lead the people they serve as “servant-leaders.” They equip and watch over the people they serve.

Qualifications for Elders: We then looked at the qualifications for elders and we discovered from 1 Timothy 3 that primarily an elder is a godly example to the church. The only “ability” that was listed in the qualifications for an elder was that he must “*be able to teach.*” He is to pay close attention to the way he lives and what he teaches.

Elders are Needed: Last week we were in 1 Peter 5 and we saw that elders are accountable to God and that they are needed in the life of the church. Peter reminded us that it is not easy living in a world that is often hostile to faith and filled with suffering. Consequently, elders are there to provide spiritual care to encourage people of faith to persevere and to keep their eyes on Jesus.

Heart of an elder: This morning we are going to be in Acts 20 and we are going to listen in on Paul’s parting words to the elders of the church in Ephesus. In his sorrowful and tearful departure, Paul teaches us something out the heart of an elder.

Looking Forward: Let me share with you where we are going with the rest of the series. Next week we are going to look at how an elder guards the truth and carries out the ministry of the Word of God. The last week in May we will ask the question, “What do deacons do and what is their role in the church?” We will conclude the first Sunday in June, when we will present to you the spiritual leaders of WEFC for the next year. We will install them into their roles for the coming year and I will have a charge to give to them and a charge to give to the congregation as we serve God together here at WEFC.

It is good to take time to study what the Word of God has to say about leadership in the local church. Spiritual leadership is important to the vitality and the health of the local church. We are discovering that the Bible has a lot to say on this matter. So let's dive into Acts 20 and see what we learn this morning about the heart of an elder.

### **Set the Scene: Deep Relationship**

Let me begin by setting the scene of our passage in Acts 20. Paul is coming to the end of his third missionary journey as he is heading back to Jerusalem. His ship is docked in the harbor of Miletus. This is one of his final stops before making the long journey across the Mediterranean Sea. Miletus is only 30 miles from the city of Ephesus. And so Paul calls for the elders of the church at Ephesus to come and visit with him. The reason he calls for the elders is because he is heading back to Jerusalem and he knows that he is walking into danger. He says in verse 23 that the “*Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.*” Everyone at this meeting knows that they will never see Paul again. That is why you find the elders of Ephesus weeping and sorrowful at the end of our passage this morning.

It is a scene that suggests a very close and intimate relationship that Paul has with these elders from Ephesus. We know from Acts 19 that Ephesus was a hub of ministry for Paul on this third missionary journey. In Acts 20:31 we discover that for three years Paul was among them and he was constantly in and out of their homes. Ephesus was a base of operations that led to a massive church planting movement throughout Asia. Luke tells us in Acts 19 that Paul “*reasoned daily in the hall of Tyrannus*” for two of those years and as a result “*all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.*” This is how the church in Colossae got planted. It is likely that the seven churches in Asia Minor who received the book of Revelation from John were planted through this ministry during this time. Paul experienced a very close working relationship with the elders and the church at Ephesus and they shared a very effective ministry together. And so naturally, as we see in Acts 20, they grew very fond of each other.

Consequently, the setting of Acts 20 is not just about geography. It is not just about Paul passing through Miletus and being in close proximity to the city of Ephesus as he makes his way back to Jerusalem. But rather, the setting is anchored in deep relationship between Paul and the elders of Ephesus. It really sets the tone for what life in a local church ought to look like. The church ought to be a place of relationship. It ought to be a place of community. Can I give you a simple assignment? When the worship service is over, introduce yourself to someone you don't know. Or, connect with someone and ask them how they are doing. Make that your weekly ambition. Why would I want to do that? It is because the church is about relationship with God through Jesus and with one another. Every relationship begins with an initial greeting. So greet one another.

And furthermore, as we will see in this passage, relationship is the context for discipleship. Discipleship happens when you get into relationship and you observe what it looks like to follow Jesus by the way others live in front of you. As Paul gathers these elders together, he is giving them his farewell speech. In his final good-bye to these elders, Paul is calling these elders to do what they observed Paul did among them. In the first part of his address to the elders, Paul reminds them of how he conducted himself when he was among them. He begins in verse 18 by saying, *"You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia."* This is the first principle of discipleship. Paul didn't just talk the talk as he lived among them, he also walked the walk. And so he says to them in verse 28 that he wants them to do the same thing among the people they serve in the church at Ephesus. He says to them, *"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."*

While the context of this passage is dealing with elders, the application can apply to any kind of discipling relationship. Today is Mother's Day. I find it interesting that Paul characterizes his ministry to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:7 to be like *"a nursing mother taking care of her own children."* Like a mother, he was gentle with them and affectionate with them. You get the sense from Acts 20 that Paul also had this kind of deep affection for the elders at Ephesus. It is the desire of a Christian mother to pass her faith onto her children. How does she do that? She does it in the context of relationship and by her godly example. And so the instruction Paul gives to elders can be applied to mothers, and anyone else who is seeking to influence others for Christ. So yes, we are looking this morning at the heart of an elder who wants to have influence for Christ on the church he serves. But the heart of an elder needs to mark all of us as we seek to pass faith from one generation to the next. What kind of heart do we need? We need a heart for God. We need a heart for God's Word. We need a heart for the church.

## A Heart for God

The first thing that becomes very clear in this passage is that Paul has a heart for God. It is a passion that the elders saw in Paul from the first day he “*set foot in Asia*” and it is a passion that carried him through his entire ministry. His entire life was about “*serving the Lord.*” That is how he characterizes his life and ministry in verse 19, “*serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.*” His three missionary journeys were fueled by a heart to serve the Lord. The letters he wrote to encourage and instruct the churches were an act of service to the Lord. He endured severe trials because what he did was in service to the Lord.

You can see Paul’s heart for God when he says in verse 24, “*I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*” That is what he says in Philippians 3 when he says that he counts everything else as loss compared to knowing Jesus. When he speaks of his suffering in 2 Corinthians 1 he said that the upside of his suffering is that it taught him to rely even more on the Lord. He sums up his view of life well in Philippians 1:21, “*For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*”

Now before I go any further with this point, I want to highlight a danger that may come in reading this passage. The notion of a life lived in service to the Lord is not something that is reserved only for someone like Paul who has been called by God to a life of vocational service as an apostle. And furthermore, we are in a context of Paul passing the baton of ministry to these elders. In verse 28 we discover that they have been set apart by the Holy Spirit to be *overseers, to care for the church of God*. They have been ordained and set aside to “serve the Lord.” But the notion of “serving the Lord” is not just for those who serve in an official capacity as a leader in the church. All who follow Jesus are to have the same heart that Paul has for serving the Lord. For “US” to live is Christ and for “US” to die is gain!

We are all called to love the Lord our God with all of our being. Psalm 1 tells us that blessing in life comes to the one who delights in God. Proverbs 1 tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Jesus tells us to *seek first the kingdom of God*. A heart for God is something that ought to mark all of us as we seek to serve God faithfully. This is what enables us to endure through hardships and trials. This is what enables us to be humble towards others. This is not just a word for those in leadership.

But, nonetheless, when we think of elders in the church, they must have a heart for God.

When Paul gathers these elders around him, he says in verse 32, “*I commend you to God.*” He places them under God’s care and it is God they serve. Why is it important that an elder be marked with a heart for God? The “*tears*” and “*trials*” Paul experienced are now going to be their “tears” and their “trials..” In verses 29-30, Paul acknowledges that there are going to be struggles that come against the church from the outside and there will be challenges that arise from the inside. And the stakes are high. Paul says at the end of verse 30 that these challenges could “*draw away the disciples.*” And so it is hard work. There are joys to be gained as the kingdom of God advances in the lives of people. But there are sorrows as some go astray and difficulty and challenges threaten to undo the work that has been done. If an elder loses sight of the fact that he is there to serve the Lord, he too will be tossed around by various shifting winds of “success” and he won’t be able to endure the challenges that come with serving the church.

Henri Nouwen wrote a book called *In The Name of Jesus*. It is a book written for leaders in the church. In the book he deals with three temptations that often come to leaders. One of those temptations is the temptation for relevance. Often you step into a role of leadership because you want to make a difference, you want to be relevant and make your mark in this world. Henri Nouwen discovered this temptation when he moved from being an esteemed professor at Harvard to living in a home with those who were mentally handicapped. He went from what culture calls “relevant” to what most consider to be “irrelevant.” Through that experience he said, “I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, this work I have been called to is not about me. An elder is set aside to serve the Lord.

It is interesting what he says is the discipline that helps move us to embrace our own irrelevance. It is prayer, It is dwelling in God’s presence. It is a heart for God. Nouwen says, “Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in an intimate relationship with Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> This is what keeps it from becoming about ourselves. An elder has a heart for God and when his heart is set on the Lord, Nouwen says “we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative.”<sup>3</sup> Everything flows out of a heart to serve the Lord.

By the way, this also applies to being a mother. Gloria Furman wrote an article with this title: *Jesus Canceled Your Mommy Guilt Trip*. She addresses the same temptation for

relevance in this incessant quest to be the best mom ever. She writes, “Jesus frees me from the need to constantly evaluate myself. Instead of obsessively doing mommy hood mirror-checks, my heart can be taken up with Christ as I fix my eyes on him. With my affections bound up in Jesus, I’m free to look at the accomplishments of other moms and rejoice in the beauty of them, like the way I enjoy the wonder of a newborn’s tiny fingerprint without regard to myself. The gospel frees me to be the type of mom who replays the day in her mind and feels neither boastful pride nor wallowing self-pity, but joyful thanksgiving to the praise of God’s glory.”<sup>4</sup> As a mom she serves the Lord.

And so an elder . . . a mother . . . . A follower of Jesus must be marked with a heart for God. This is what enables us to serve the Lord faithfully and lovingly and freely.

### **A Heart for God’s Word**

It is quite obvious from Paul’s parting words to the elders of Ephesus that Paul had a heart for God’s Word. We know from 2 Timothy 3:15 that the Word of God is “*able to make us wise for salvation.*” Hebrews tells us that the Word of God is alive and active and it penetrates the inner places of the heart. That was the confession of the two men on the Road to Emmaus after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As Jesus walked along the road with them he opened up the Scripture to them and these two men testified, “*Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?*”

Clearly, Paul had this kind of confidence in the Scriptures. Two times he tells the Ephesian elders that he did not shrink back from *declaring* the Scriptures to them. He said it in verse 20, “*I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house.*” And his teaching centered on the message of repentance and faith in Jesus. He said it again in verse 27, “*for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.*” Paul had full confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture to guide them. And so as he passes the baton on to them he says in verse 32, “*And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*” And so an elder must be someone who has full confidence in the Word of God.

It is interesting that two times Paul says that he didn’t shrink back from declaring the Word of God. It makes you wonder what could tempt an elder or a leader in the church to “shrink back” from declaring God’s Word. Clearly in the context, Paul faced persecution from those who didn’t like the message he preached about Jesus. We know



that as he goes back to Jerusalem it will land him in jail and will eventually lead him to standing trial in Rome and someday he will face his own martyrdom. That could cause someone to shrink back from declaring God's Word.

There is also the sense that the Word of God often counters the prevailing thought of culture. Paul warns the elders that there will be "*men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*" Sometimes, leaders in the church are more swayed by the prevailing winds of culture and they shrink back from declaring the message of the Word of God. But an elder must let the text shape the context of our lives. He must have confidence in the Word of God and a heart for the Word of God. I like what he calls it in verse 32. It is "*the word of his grace, which is able to build you up.*"

One of the reasons why an elder needs to have a heart for the Word of God, is because like anyone else, his heart needs to be shaped by the love and grace of God. In verse 28 Paul tells the elders to first of all "*pay careful attention to yourselves.*" Why? We know our own hearts. We know the temptations that come with leadership. One of the other temptations of leadership that Nouwen exposes in his book is the temptation for power. It is a temptation to lead, rather than to be led. He said that "it is easier to control people than it is to love people."<sup>5</sup> The discipline he calls the leader to embrace is to engage in serious theological reflection. It is driving us back to the Word of God. Do you know why this needs to be at the center of our heart? I think it is the most powerful thing Nouwen says in the book, and I summarize: As "elders: we are not pseudo – psychologists, pseudo—sociologists, pseudo—social workers . . . trying to help our fellow human beings cope with the stress of life. (There is a place for those things.) But as spiritual leaders we offer so much more in Christ. "We act in the name of Jesus, who came to free humanity from the power of death and open the way to eternal life!"<sup>6</sup> So we better not shrink back from the Word of God because it brings life and the elders must see to it that "the whole counsel of the Word of God is declared." Souls are at stake!

I saw an article titled, "8 Things I Want My Toddler to Thank His Mom For (In 20 Years): Here was number 5: **Thank you for knowing that gospelling me was your and Dad's job.** Thank you that you told me Bible stories, sang Bible songs with me, prayed with me, and told me about God as we went about our day-to-day chores and trips. Thank you that you didn't think you could delegate this job to my children's and student ministry leaders. Thank you that you didn't shoehorn Christ into every conversation, as though mentioning him every other sentence would convert me; but thank you that he didn't need shoehorning in, because he was a constant companion in our family. Thank you that I'm one of those kids who can't remember the first time they were told about

the Lord Jesus, and can't remember a day since when they didn't hear about him.”<sup>7</sup> A heart for God's Word is a heart for the gospel.

Elders . . . moms . . . and any follower of Jesus is to be marked with a heart for God's Word.

## **A Heart for the Church**

Finally, as I listen in on Paul's charge to the elders of Ephesus, he has a heart for the church. His own tears convey the depth of his passion and heart for the church. His desire to meet with the elders from Ephesus and give them this charge also conveys his heart for the work that has already been started there. His instructions for these elders passes this mantle of care for God's people onto them. He charges them in verse 28, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”* We have mentioned several times that the church is precious to Jesus. He died for the church. He shed his blood so that we could be the church. That means, every person sitting in this room who knows the promise of forgiveness of sin through the blood of Jesus is loved by God. For that reason alone, we are to love each other. For that reason alone, the elder is to love the church.

When Paul describes his ministry with the church at Ephesus, he says that he was *“serving the Lord with all humility.”* This is a trait we have seen over and over again in the passages that deal with elders and their care for the church. Last week, as Pater was wrapping up his instruction to elders, we ended with 1 Peter 5:5—*“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”*

This leads us to one last temptation that Nouwen brings to the surface. It is the temptation for popularity or to do the spectacular. It is the thing you do that wins applause. Applause often is directed to the individual and it keeps the individual from being transparent because there is an image to maintain. It prevents the elder from truly entering into mutual community with the church he serves. And so the discipline that draws the elders into community with the church is the discipline of confession and forgiveness. The implication is that a leader often feels the need to hide his “wounded self” because there is an image to protect. If he can't be known, he can't be fully loved. My hunch is that this is not just a reality for leaders in the church. There are probably a lot of masks worn all over this room this morning. I am not talking about publically

airing out dirty laundry. But I am talking a place where accountability can be found and forgiveness and acceptance tasted and experienced. This requires humility. Dave Harvey puts it this way, “Elders need humility like engines need oil. Without humility, breakdown is inevitable. An important way to pursue humility is through accountability.”<sup>8</sup> It is out of this humility that a love for the church can grow because as AA teaches us, “it is not my brother, or my sister, but it is me Oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” Let us not lose sight of the fact that when Paul commends the elders to God he also commends them to *the word of his grace*. May we be elders of grace. May we be a church of grace. From this flows a heart for the church.

Elders . . . moms . . . and any follower of Jesus is to be marked with a heart for the church. It is a heart of humility and grace.

## Conclusion

Why are we talking so much about church leadership? It is because a healthy church flows from healthy spiritual leadership. That means our leaders are marked with a heart for God . . . A heart for God’s Word . . . A heart for the church. When Paul came to the end of his instructions, he prayed with them all. Let us pray that we too would serve the Lord with our lives. That we would not shrink back from declaring the truth of Jesus and the Word of God. And that we would pay careful attention to all of the flock represented here at WEFC.

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<sup>1</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989) Kindle Reader Location, 175

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., Kindle Reader Location, 288

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., Kindle Reader Location, 288

<sup>4</sup>Gloria Furman “Jesus Canceled Your Mommy Guilt Trip” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) July 2, 2013

<sup>5</sup>Nouwen, Kindle Reader Location, 447

<sup>6</sup>Nouwen, Kindle Reader Location, 500

<sup>7</sup>Carl Laferton “8 Things I Want My Toddler to Thank His Mom For (In 20 Years)” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) May 7, 2014

<sup>8</sup>Dave Harvey “4 Ways Elders Should Seek Accountability” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) May 7, 2018

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is a word of encouragement you would like to offer to someone in your Community Group?
2. Which one or two of these emotions are you feeling the most and why?  
Sad, Angry, Scared, Happy, Excited, Tender
3. What is something you took from the sermon on Sunday?



### Diving Into The Word

4. Read Acts 20:17-18 and 36-38. Describe Paul's relationship with the church at Ephesus. What do you learn about the power of relationships when it comes to discipleship in this passage? What implications does that have for us?
5. Read Acts 20:19-27. What do you learn about "serving the Lord" from Paul's life in this passage? How does the temptation "to be relevant" keep you from serving the Lord? How does prayer keep you focused on serving the Lord?
6. Read Acts 20:31-32. What do you learn about the ministry of the Word of God from this charge given to the elders? How does the Word of God lead the leader? Why do you think Paul calls the Word—"the word of his grace"?
7. Read Acts 20:28-30. What is required of an elder to "pay careful attention to all the flock?" How important is humble accountability for leadership in the church? Why is it necessary to be known in order to be truly loved?



### Taking It Home

8. A heart for God—A heart for the Word of God—A heart for the church. Which of these three do you need to give attention to this week? What do you think that might look like? Pray for each other.