

Guard the Flock

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[0 : 00] Welcome to this week's message from Faith Bible Church of Lake Charles. We're excited to share a practical Bible-based teaching that we hope will encourage you and strengthen your faith.

Thanks for listening. Now, here's today's message. You know, we don't know much about shepherds today. I mean, really, who do you know that lives with their sheep out in the open and leads them around to find greener pasture and calm, still waters and wants to help them to feel protected and stay healthy?

No one, right? I believe that's why it's a bit of a stretch today for those of us in the 21st century to understand the biblical concept of a shepherd and how it relates to caring for God's flock, the local church.

This morning, we're going to get a glimpse into the Apostle Paul's farewell address or farewell talk that he had with the Ephesian elders.

Now, these men, they were the leaders. They were the elders there in the local church in Ephesus, and they were tasked with a very important responsibility.

[1 : 23] In the early church, elders were not just leaders, but were shepherds of their communities responsible for guiding, for protecting, for shepherding, for teaching, for nurturing their flock, the local church.

I think of the account of the early Christian leader, Polycarp, who lived in the 1st and the 2nd century. Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John, who had appointed Polycarp as the elder of the church of Smyrna.

Polycarp was known for his steadfastness, known for his commitment to the Word of God, and for his commitment to the local church. But despite persecution, he remained steadfast.

He remained diligent to take care of what God had given him, even up to the very end. While being threatened with being burned at the stake, Polycarp was given multiple opportunities to recount his faith in Jesus Christ.

As a matter of fact, the procouncil, wanting to hopefully give Polycarp a chance to save him, he gave him the opportunity to go free by swearing to the genius or the spirit of the emperor.

[2 : 51] Well, you know what Polycarp said? This is what he said. If you imagine for a moment that I would do that, then I think you pretend to know who I am.

Hear it plainly. I am a Christian. So Polycarp demonstrated true eldership required courage to stand firm, commitment to the flock, and I believe it challenges us.

And for anyone who deserves to become an elder, a biblical elder, what it means to carry that role.

In the Bible, the term elder is synonymous with the words bishop, overseer, shepherd, and pastor.

The Bible uses those terms interchangeably. Elder, overseer, bishop, shepherd, pastor. Those all refer to the same calling.

[3 : 56] And this morning, we're going to look at Paul's address to these elders that he called to meet him. And he is going to give them his farewell address.

He knows that this is the last time he's going to see them. And just as anyone who sees those they love for the last time or know that it's going to be near the end, we come to what's important.

And he wanted to leave them with what was extremely, extremely important. The biblical responsibility of an elder is not simply to be the member of a board, but to shepherd, to pastor, and to lead the flock.

And we're continuing with last week's message where Paul sent for the elders of the church there in Ephesus. And what we're going to do is we're going to get a glimpse into his farewell speech.

We're going to hear what he said to these elders for the last time. In it, Paul challenges these elders with four responsibilities. We're going to look at those four things that Paul challenged them with.

[5 : 04] In verses 25 to 27, what Paul does is he continues to vindicate his life and his ministry among them.

Obviously, there were still people that were there that were trying to bring Paul down and to say things about the apostle Paul. So he vindicated his life, vindicated his ministry.

But beginning in verse 28 of chapter number 20, where we're going to be spending our time this morning, we'll take a look at the first challenge and see what elders are supposed to be like and how it is to be like this vigilant shepherd.

Verse 28, Paul says to them, Now I want us to pause here a minute because this is really important.

Paul is talking to the leaders of the local church, but what he says to them applies to all of us, to pay close attention to our own lives first.

[6 : 23] What does he say to them? He says, Take heed to yourselves. The Greek word take heed means to be vigilant, which really means to watch over something carefully or to guard.

So he says, guard yourselves. Keep careful watch over yourselves. It's like when you're driving and you see a sign that says, Caution, sharp turn ahead.

What do you do? You know to be alert and ready to respond to something that potentially could be dangerous. And so you know that you should be on the alert.

So he starts by saying, Take heed to yourselves. So why does Paul say this? Well, I believe it's because you can't guard others.

You can't shepherd others. You can't oversee others. You can't care for others if you don't care for yourself. You can't be what you need to be for others if you're not guarding yourself, if your heart is unguarded.

[7 : 30] So the first thing we see is to guard your own lives first. This goes not only for elders. This goes not only for deacons. This goes not only for all of us.

We need to be guarding our own life first. It's like when you're on an airplane and they give you that safety briefing. And they say in the event of an emergency, oxygen mask will fall from the ceiling.

And what do they encourage you to do? Take the oxygen mask and put it on yourself first before you help someone else. Why? Because by the time you try to help someone else, you may already be passed out and you cannot help anyone else.

So he says, guard yourselves first. Take heed. Paul knew the dangers to the local church. Began with spiritual drift in its leaders. If they're not careful, if they're not watching over themselves, because it's easy to get caught up in the busyness of life, isn't it?

We get caught up in the things that we do and in the busyness. And then we begin to let our spiritual disciplines slide. You know, talking to God, spending time in God's word, sharing our faith, because if we're not careful, those things will begin to slip away.

[8 : 44] So Paul is warning these elders to be intentional about your faith. Be intentional about the responsibility that you have. So to our elders, to our spiritual leaders, remember, guarding the flock starts with guarding your own lives, guarding your own hearts first.

But this also goes for every one of us. We need to be vigilant about our own spiritual life, about our own spiritual health, and in order that we can take care of those around us.

The question is, what are you doing to care for your own spiritual health? Or are you even thinking about it? Throughout the week, when you go through your daily routine throughout the week, are you thinking about, am I right with God?

Am I spending enough time with Him? Am I doing what He's called me to do? Have I even taken time to spend time in God's word? Am I memorizing God's word so the Holy Spirit can use it in my life?

So like I said, this is for all of us. We need to guard ourselves, guard our hearts, guard our minds, guard our lives. So let's continue. It's not enough for our spiritual leaders to guard their own lives.

[9 : 56] They have to, number two, shepherd the church with the right perspective. Let's look at the second part of verse number 28. Second part of verse number 28, where He says, To shepherd the church of God.

What does He say next? Which He purchased with His own blood. So when we lead, when we care for, when we feed, we've got to make sure that it's not, that we understand that it's not our church.

The church doesn't belong to us. The church doesn't belong to any one individual. The church doesn't belong to the pastor. The church doesn't belong to the founders of whatever church that it is, or the church planters.

He says, Take heed, guard yourselves and the flock, because among which the Holy Spirit made you overseers. He says, To shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.

That's a very, very powerful statement. The word shepherd means to guide, to protect, to care for. Just like a shepherd guards a flock, guards them from wolves, from bears, whatever it is.

[11 : 14] He makes sure that they have enough grass to eat. He makes sure that because of the way sheep tend to eat all the way down to the roots, He makes sure that He then leads them to other pasture near water where they can feel safe, where they can drink.

So that's the idea. That's the picture of a shepherd and what He does for His sheep. But here's the key. Paul reminds them, and I believe he reminds us, that the church isn't just any group of people.

It's the church of God, with Jesus Christ bought, with His own precious blood. And it's important for those that lead the church to have the right attitude. Why are we doing it?

What's our motivation? What's our attitude? So we need to check our motives. It's not about being in control. It's not about being the one who helps make the decisions.

That's not what biblical eldership is all about. And one who aspires to the calling of an elder aspires to shepherd, to lead, to teach, and to pastor the flock.

[12 : 30] Not just be on a board. You know, that's a legal corporate position. That's not what biblical eldership is. Biblical eldership is spiritual oversight, is teaching, is shepherding the flock.

That's what biblical eldership is all about. In the early church, elders were known for their deep commitment to their congregations. This reminds us of the serious duty of elders to guide the church, not simply with authority, but with love and wisdom, ensuring that each member is cared for, that we are discipling, that we are encouraging one another, that we are building one another up, and when it's necessary, to exhort someone.

And sometimes it's necessary for the spiritual leaders to take care of church discipline. Sometimes that is necessary. So think about it for a moment.

The church isn't a business, nor should it be run like a business. Now, yes, for financial and for legal purposes, we can borrow from sound business practice.

I think that's wise. But the church is not a business. We should not try to make it a business. It's not a social club. The church is not a personal platform.

[13 : 47] And to go even further, strictly, in a strictly biblical sense, the church isn't even an organization. The Lions Club, the Jaycees, even the Iwana Clubs International are organizations.

The church is not an organization, it's an organism. Why do you think the Bible refers to the church as a body? He talks about heads, arms, legs, feet.

Why? Because the church is a living being. The church is us. The church, in the biblical sense, is simply people. And he has placed elders as a responsibility for overseeing, leading, caring, shepherding the flock.

Because that's exactly what the church is. A body that is designed to work together synergistically to glorify God, to take care of one another, and to spread the gospel to the world who needs to hear about Jesus Christ.

So Paul reminds us that the church belongs to God, and it was purchased at the cost of the blood of Jesus Christ. So this means we need to treat the church as sacred, not something that we use for our own purposes.

[15 : 06] You know, it's easy to get caught up in our own agendas. Is it not? And we need to remember, the church is not a building. Or even an organization.

Do you realize that we don't go to church? We go to meet with the church. It's the people. We're called the family of God. Do you realize that the church does not exist at 6294 Tom Bay Bear Road?

Because when nobody's here, this is not the church. When nobody's in this building, this is not a church. This is a building that the church owns. This is a building that the church meets in.

So we need to remember that. And yes, we use the term, I'm going to church. I'm going to the church. I mean, yes, we use that kind of language because it's what we're used to. As long as when we say that, we understand that we're just using colloquial language.

But when we think about it, the church is not a building. The church is not property. The church is the people. And think about it. It's important to God. The church is important to God because His name's on it.

[16 : 15] The church is important to Jesus because He died for it. The church is important to the Holy Spirit because He's equipping people to minister and serve God.

So it's a serious thing to be the spiritual leader of a local church. Matter of fact, the Bible says He will hold those who are overseers, those who are elders, those who are teachers, doubly accountable.

Think about this. You who are Sunday school teachers, you who teach children, you who teach adults, God's going to hold you doubly accountable for what you say to them, how you treat them, how you care for them.

Well, that's sobering, isn't it? You say, well, I was just given a responsibility and I'm just a helper in Awana. Well, God's going to hold you accountable for that. Or I'm a Sunday school teacher. Or I work in the nursery.

God holds us all accountable for that ministry. So, how do we lead? How do we oversee? How do we serve with awareness and help bring others to Jesus Christ?

[17 : 24] Well, it starts with humility. And it starts with a heart for service. So no matter what ministry you have, it could be cutting the grass. It could be cleaning the church. It could be working in the nursery.

It could be helping in Awana. It could be being a deacon. It could be being an elder. It could be whatever. Whatever. It starts with humility and a heart for service. That's really where it all began.

So we need to ask ourselves, are we putting God first? Are we putting our own purposes first? Are we caring for others with the love and respect that Jesus Christ showed to us?

When we remember that the church is God's treasured possession, it changes how we approach everything that we do. It literally does. So to our leaders, let's commit to shepherding the church with the reverence and the dedication that it deserves.

And always keeping in mind the incredible price that Jesus Christ paid for it. It's not ours. It's been given to us in order to care for, to shepherd it.

[18 : 24] Just like when someone says, can you take care of this for me? It could be something very valuable. Like their child. When they say, would you take care of so-and-so? Would you babysit? Would you watch them for me?

It's precious to them. The church is precious to Jesus Christ. The church is us. The church is the person sitting next to you, across from you, behind you, in front of you. So, as leaders, as teachers, as whatever we do in the ministry, let's remember that we're guarding God's precious possession.

Guard yourselves first, but then also take care, because understand, we need to be doing it from the right perspective. So, as we continue talking about what Paul told these Ephesian elders, he was very clear about something else.

He was very clear about spiritual attack. Let's look at verses 29 and 30 together. Paul goes on. So, he says, you're elders. Holy Spirit made you overseers.

Guard yourself. Guard the flock. And it's very precious. Do it with the right attitude, because it's not yours. It's God's. But then Paul also knew that there was going to be some danger ahead.

[19 : 31] Verse 29. For I know this, that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse or crooked things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

So, what's Paul warning these elders about? He's warning them to recognize the reality of spiritual attack. Warning them to recognize that there's going to be people that'll come in.

There will be people from within that are going to try and lead you astray. And when Paul talks about wolves, as he does in verse number 29, savage wolves, he was using as a metaphor to refer to false teachers.

Refer to those who would bring a harmful influence upon the body of Christ that would end up creeping into the church. So, he says these false teachers want to ravage the flock.

According to verse number 29, they are counterfeits who would exploit the body of Christ for their own purposes. We see those referred to in Matthew chapter 7, verses 15 through 20.

[20 : 48] Verses chapter 10 of Matthew, verse 16. Luke chapter 10, verse number 3. And also 2 Peter. We're in 2 Peter on Sunday evenings. He talks about those false teachers in 2 Peter chapter 2, verses 1, verse 2, and verse 3.

Peter, by the way, that was one of the main points of his letter that he wrote. He wanted to make sure that they would watch and be careful over these false teachers that would come in.

But Paul's warning is twofold. First of all, he says there will be wolves that come from without. Those that come from outside the church. Those that, and today they come in the form of radio waves.

They come in the form of TV. They come in all types of forms, using all types of media. They'll come in and they will lead people astray. They might even knock on your door and try to lead you astray by saying, Hey, let's do a study.

Can we come and meet together with you? And they're going to bring maybe the Book of Mormon. Maybe they're going to bring whatever else it is. And they're going to try to lead people astray by teaching a little bit of truth, but some error that's mixed in.

[22 : 02] These are the false teachers. They'll deny the existence of Jesus Christ. They'll deny his deity. They'll deny that what he did on the cross of Calvary is effective for you and me to save us from our sin.

But the second thing is, Paul warns, what does he say in verse 30? Also from among what? From among yourselves. He said people will rise up.

He says not only will they come from without, but they'll also come from within. Because there will be people within the church who are ambitious for position and ambitious for power.

Church history, ancient and modern, is filled with people like Diotrefes, or as we've called him, domineering Diotrefes. We read about him in 3 John 9-11.

He just wanted to have the preeminence. He wanted to be in charge. He wanted to call the shots. And we're told by John that there are people like that in the churches. There are people who are ambitious for power and control.

[23 : 05] And that's one of the reasons why there are many churches that have pastoral tenures of less than three years. Because there's no way that they can lead, because there's already leaders in the church who want to control.

And so that's what John is warning about. That's what Paul here is warning about. So, to anyone who would aspire to the calling of an elder, we would have to ask, what's your motive?

What's your motive? Are you simply ambitious for position or ambitious for power? The question is, are you ready to humble yourself and put the needs of others ahead of you, so that you can lead and shepherd the flock of God, understanding that it's His precious possession?

So, there will be power-hungry individuals within the church. Do you realize that more than one cult leader got started within the Christian church?

There are many cult leaders that started out within the local church, and they started out looking like they were toeing the line. And eventually, they went off into error, and then left and started their own cult.

[24 : 21] And that's how many started. They started within the local church. As a matter of fact, read 1 John 2, verses 18 and 19 sometime, and it will talk about that. That's why we need to be discerning.

That's why we need to be grounded in Scripture, so we can recognize false teaching when it comes. So, how do we prepare for it? First of all, it begins by knowing the truth ourselves.

Spending time in God's Word. We need to be like the Bereans. You heard about them? You want to read about the Bereans? They're in Acts chapter 17. What did the Bereans do?

Every time someone came in and talked to them, what did they do? Do you remember? Those of you who know about the Bereans, if you don't know about the Bereans, read Acts chapter 17 sometime.

But what they would do is, if someone came in and taught them, because that was a common thing. Someone would come in, maybe there were itinerant preachers who would go around the countryside, and they would come and they would invite them to teach them.

[25 : 22] What they would do, they would go to the Scriptures that they had, and they would search the Scriptures daily. Did they tell us the truth? Oh, wait a minute. This doesn't line up with what Moses taught us.

This doesn't line up with what we heard from so-and-so from Paul or from one of the other apostles. So, they searched the Bible to understand whether these teachers were telling the truth or not.

We should be like the Bereans. You know what, it does not offend me one bit when I say something and I see people flipping through Scripture to make sure that what I'm saying is right. Because there have been times when I've said something, and somebody said, Pastor, you said this, and they'll bring me to a Scripture.

And I said, you know, you're right. And so, there's no shame in being corrected when we're wrong. So, understand that.

So, we have to make sure that we know the truth. This is the way I put it. Know what you know and know why you know it. Know what you believe and know why you believe it.

[26 : 29] Because there will be others who will try to come and tell you something different. Always go to the Scripture. Because what's our foundation for faith and practice?

It's the Word of God. That's our only foundation for faith and practice. That's where we need to be going. So, let's be vigilant, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the entire community.

So, as we wrap up our message this morning, there's one more thing that we need to see. Being an elder is more than just making decisions and leading. It's about staying alert.

It's about teaching. Paul warns the elders to stay watchful and persevere in teaching. Verse number 31. Verse 31 says, Therefore, he tells these Ephesian elders, Watch and then remember.

And Paul gives himself as an example. He says that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. Paul uses that term watch.

[27 : 32] It comes from the word that means to be awake, to stay alert, to be vigilant. It's like being on guard duty. Always ready to be aware and be aware of what's happening around you.

Paul didn't just teach doctrine. He warned them over and over again with passion and persistence. That was Paul's way. He was deeply interested, deeply invested in their spiritual well-being.

That's what Paul wanted to see. And I believe it's a powerful example for us as well this morning. So, are we vigilant? Are we vigilant about the things that shape our faith, our spiritual growth, and also the faith of those around us?

You know, it's easy to become complacent. But if we follow Paul's example, he was passionate about the word of God. He was passionate about taking care of people and shepherding them, caring for them.

You know, we need to be intentional about our leading, about our teaching, and about caring for others as well. So, as we come to the end of our time together this morning, I want to leave you with a picture, I believe, of what it really looks like to truly guard the flock.

[28 : 46] Imagine a community where each person is committed to watching their own hearts, and leaders are taking seriously the call to shepherd, to lead, and teach the church with the dedication and love that it deserves.

I think it's the kind of community where Paul envisioned a church that's alive, a church that's vibrant, and is strong because every single one of us, every body part, is doing its job.

Whether we're a hand or a foot, whether we speak, whether we serve, whether we clean, whether we take care of babies and change diapers in the nursery, whatever it is, if it's all working together as it should, as a body does, then it's going to be healthy.

I believe that's why God uses that analogy of a body, because he talks about health. There's the way a body is healthy. When all the systems within our body are working like they're supposed to, the circulatory system, the cardiovascular system, the nervous system, all these systems work together.

That's health. And I believe that's what Paul envisioned for the church. And here's the best part. We don't do it alone. So we have the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide us, and to direct us to be vigilant.

[30 : 06] So we have each other. We're a family. I heard someone just a couple of weeks ago say that they are, this is the first time in a number of years that they felt like they were part of a family.

Amen? You know who you said that. You know who I'm talking about. And that's exactly what we are. We should be. We should be a family. We should be a family that cares for one another. When one hurts, and I think we've done a good job at this, when one part of our body hurts, people step up and take care of them.

People step up and watch for them. Sometimes it's just simply cutting their grass. Sometimes it's fixing a meal and bringing it over. Sometimes it's just sitting down with someone.

So let's commit to deepening our faith, sharpening our discernment. Let's be a people that guard what God has entrusted to us, knowing that the church is not simply an organization.

It's a body. It's an organism, a living body that needs to be protected, needs to be cherished, needs to be guarded, needs to be cared for.

[31 : 12] So to our leaders, let's follow his lead. Let's lead the flock with courage and love and an unwavering faith. So together, we can make a difference in our community.

And may God bless you as you go out and you live that calling that he's called you to. Let's pray. Father, this morning we've come together as the body of Christ. I pray, Heavenly Father, that we would be able to care for ourselves, guard our hearts, and care for one another, knowing that we are all precious in your sight because not only you created us in your image, but your Son, Jesus Christ, died on the cross in our place.

And so, Father, we pray that we would be, in fact, a family that cares for one another and watches out for one another. And so we pray this morning that you would help us to serve together and encourage one another, build one another up.

Lord, that we may go out and spread the love of Jesus and the truth of the gospel that Jesus died on the cross and is offering us the free gift of eternal life.

Father, we thank you. We praise you. It's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Thanks for joining us today. We hope this message encouraged you and gave you something to apply to your life this week.

[32 : 43] If you'd like to learn more about Faith Bible Church or connect with us, visit our website at meetfaith.org. We'd love to hear from you. Have a great week, and we'll see you next time.

Amen.