

Main Idea: In Acts 20:13-38, we see a ministry that lasts. If we want to arrive at the end of our lives without regret, we must learn to live with three passions Paul modeled in this passage.

- I. Live for the will of God (13-16).
- II. Live for the Word of God (17-24).
- III. Live for the work of God (25-38).
 - A. Here’s what it takes (25-31).
 1. Shepherding involves feeding (25-27).
 2. Shepherding involves leading (28).
 - ⇒Remember who made you a leader.
 - ⇒Remember whose church it is.
 - ⇒Remember why the church exists.
 3. Shepherding involves heeding (29-31).
 - B. Here’s what makes it possible (32-35).
 1. We need God’s grace (32).
 2. We need a clear conscience (33).
 3. We need hard work (34-35a).
 4. We need the humility of Christ (35b).
 - C. Here’s what you can expect (36-38).
 1. There will be joy.
 2. There will be sorrow.
 3. There will be eternal reward.

Make It Personal: Am I ministering in a way that will last when I am gone?

Nepal trip report...

Today we continue our series in Acts 20. I’m grateful for the Lord using Rex and Matt the past two weeks. This morning we want to address an important question. How can we minister in a way that lasts when we are gone?

Scripture Reading: Acts 20:25-38

If only I had. Those are painful words, tragic words.

“If only I had spent more time with my children. Maybe things would have turned out differently.”

“If only I had guarded my eyes when I first started using the internet. But I didn’t and I’ve lost my spouse.”

“If only I had taken my children to Sunday School instead of just sending them. If only I’d taught them God’s Word in our family times. But I didn’t and now they’re older. Now they don’t have time for God’s Word. Now they’re just like me.”

“If only I had kicked that foolish habit sooner. My health would be different today.”

And worst of all, this confession from the torment of hell itself, “If only I had received Jesus Christ as my Savior when I had the opportunity. *If only I had.*”

It is possible to live a life free of regrets, not by our strength or ability, but by the grace of God. How? Like Paul did.

In Acts 20 we find the record of a farewell speech he gave to his friends from Ephesus. It was the Spring of A.D. 57. Paul was on his way to deliver a benevolent offering to the needy saints in Jerusalem, hoping to arrive by Pentecost. He had but a few weeks left so he declined to visit the city of Ephesus again, but he did want to minister to them. So he called for the elders of the church in Ephesus to travel to meet with him at the seaport city of Miletus.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the Acts series preached at WBC 8/17/03.

Luke records what Paul said in that goodbye address in Acts 20. One thing that strikes me about Paul's message is this. There's not one, "If only I had." I don't see a trace of regrets. Again, it's all by the grace of God as Paul himself admitted, but *no regrets*.

And it can be true for us, too. How? In Acts 20:13-38, we learn in plain and simple terms how to live a life of no regrets. If you want to arrive at the end of your life without regrets, you must learn to live with three passions Paul modeled in this passage.

I'll simply mention the first two, since they're found in last week's passage, before we move to the third, which will be our focus this morning.

I. Live for the will of God (13-16).

People who live life for their own agenda will have regrets. It's as simple as that. Paul didn't live for his agenda. He lived for God's agenda. That's why he made sacrifices like choosing to walk rather than ride the boat to Assos (in verse 13). That's why he took risks like going to Jerusalem though he knew he'd face danger. He had a passion for the will of God. Once he discerned God's will, he did it and left the consequences up to God.

Know this. If you choose to live in obedience to God's will you will never have to look back and say, "If only I had." So settle this today. *I'm going to live with a passion for the will of God.*

II. Live for the Word of God (17-24).

It was his passion for God's Word that took Paul to Ephesus in the first place. It's why he went to their synagogue for three months (19:8). And when the Jews became obstinate, it's why he moved to the lecture hall of Tyrannus where he taught the Word of God daily for two years (19:10). So great was this passion that Luke records that at the end of this two year teaching ministry, "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (19:10)." Paul was not exaggerating when he told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:20, "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house."

There's one more passion that Paul modeled in this farewell speech, and to it we now turn our attention. The will of God, the Word of God, and thirdly...

III. Live for the work of God (25-38).

You see, we need something bigger for which to live than a fat paycheck. We were created to live for a higher purpose, one that will matter for eternity, namely, the *work of God*.

You say, "What's involved in living with a passion for God's work?" As we listen closely to Paul's farewell we'll find the answer. We discover three issues related to having a passion for the work of God.

A. Here's what it takes (25-31). The section of Scripture we're about to read is vital to any person who is interested in doing ministry, especially pastoral ministry. Remember, Paul is talking to the elders—the pastors—of the church in Ephesus. He uses an agricultural metaphor, one emphasized not only in the Old Testament but by Jesus Himself, to depict what it takes to be God's kind of leader. Verse 28—"Be *shepherds* of the church of God." A pastor is a *shepherd*. If you are going to do God's work as God intends, you must see yourself as a shepherd.

Now, what does that mean in practical terms? What do shepherds do that pastors and those who engage in pastoral ministry must do? Paul mentions three activities in verses 25-31.

1. *Shepherding involves feeding (25-27).* “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.”

A candidate for church membership was asked, "What part of the Bible do you like best?" He said: "I like the New Testament best. Then he was asked, "What Book in the New Testament is your favorite?" He answered, the Book of the Parables, Sir." They then asked him to relate one of the parables to the membership committee. A bit uncertain, he began as follows:

"Once upon a time a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves; and the thorns grew up and choked the man. And he went on and met the Queen of Sheba, and she gave that man, Sir, a thousand talents of silver, and a hundred changes of raiment. And he got in his chariot and drove furiously, and as he was driving along under a big tree, his hair got caught in a limb and left him hanging here! And he hung there many days and many nights. The ravens brought him food to eat and water to drink. And one night while he was hanging there asleep, his wife Delilah came along and cut off his hair, and he fell on stony ground. And it begin to rain, and rained forty days and forty nights. And he hid himself in a cave. Later he went on and met a man who said, "Come in and take supper with me." But he said, "I can't come in, for I have married a wife." And the man went out into the highways and hedges and compelled him to come in! He then came to Jerusalem, and saw Queen Jezebel sitting high and lifted up in a window of the wall. When she saw him she laughed, and he said, "Throw her down out of there," and they threw her down. And he said "Throw her down again," and they threw her down seventy-times-seven. And the fragments which they picked up filled twelve baskets full! NOW, whose wife will she be in the day of the Judgment?" The membership committee agreed that this was indeed a knowledgeable candidate!²

Okay, so the story isn't true. But what *is* true is that there are a lot of people who have been sitting in churches for years who *don't* know their Bibles. For starters, they don't study it on their own—that's another issue. But another reason they don't know it is because they're not hearing it in their churches.

When Paul went to a city he did the same thing over and over. He did God's work by giving people God's Word. That was the task the Lord gave him, as he put it in verse 24, "the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." In verse 25 terminology he came to Ephesus "preaching the kingdom."

By comparing verses 24 and 25 we discover that "to testify the gospel of God's grace" is synonymous with "preaching the kingdom." To tell people there is a King is to tell them the good news of God's unmerited favor. To tell them this King has come to earth to save them from the kingdom of darkness so they can serve Him forever is to testify to the gospel.

In verse 26 Paul said he was "innocent of the blood of all men," picking up a phrase from Ezekiel. In other words, he had no regrets. And why not? Here's the reason, verse 27, "*For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*"

² Source Unknown.

Let that sink in. Yes, shepherding involves proclamation, but what kind of proclamation? Is the pastor to give the flock his opinions? No. He is to proclaim “the whole will of God,” or as the KJV reads, “All the counsel of God.”

It seems black and white, doesn't it? Shepherding involves feeding and the diet is supposed to be the Word of God. But is that the diet the sheep are eating in the typical church today? Sadly, the answer is *no*. The need is great for solid Bible teaching these days.

The shepherd's job first and foremost is to *feed* the sheep. Here's the diet again. It's the *whole* will of God. It's *all* the counsel of God. Shepherding involves feeding.

2. *Shepherding involves leading* (28). “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.”

The order is significant. It starts with feeding. Then comes the leading. The feeding builds the credibility for the leading.

So does something else. Answer this. *Who* are pastors to shepherd? You say, “Well, that's obvious. The sheep!” Yes, but note again Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders, “Keep watch over *yourselves* and all the flock.” Shepherds are sheep, too. Shepherds need accountability, too.

A church janitor was heard to say, “The blower still works, but the fire has gone out.” He was discussing a problem with the furnace, but the parishioner who overheard him thought he was speaking about the pastor.³ Sadly, that happens.

One New Year's Day in the Tournament of Roses parade, a beautiful float suddenly sputtered and quit. It was out of gas. The whole parade was held up until someone could get a can of gas. The amusing thing was this float represented the Standard Oil Company. With its vast oil resources, its truck was out of gas.

If a leader neglects his spiritual maintenance, he's in trouble. He may soon discover he's run out of gas.⁴

Don't miss the plurality in verse 28. “Keep watch over yourselves,” Paul told the elders. A man is in trouble when he functions as a lone ranger. The Ephesian elders were to look out for one another as they together led the church in Ephesus.

The well known fourth century pastor John Chrysostom said, “The minister's shortcoming simply cannot be concealed. Even the most trivial soon get known...However trifling their offenses, these little things seem great to others, since everyone measures sin, not by the size of the offense, but by the standing of the sinner.”⁵

Before shepherds can lead others (and this applies to pastors and any who do pastoral ministry, such as Sunday School teachers, Awana leaders, deacons, etc), they must take heed to themselves. They must function as a part of a team where there is accountability and evaluation.

My friends, the sex scandals that are rocking American churches these days goes right back to a neglect of this. I cannot keep watch over others unless I am keeping watch over *me*. Leadership starts *here*.

Having said that, this also must be said. A leader must lead. “Keep watch over yourselves,” Paul said, “*and all the flock* of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” The term “overseer” is from the Greek *episkopos* which comes from *skopos*

³ E. Lutzer, [Pastor to Pastor](#), p. 67.

⁴ Steve Blankenship in [God Came Near](#) by Max Lucado, Multnomah Press, 1987, p. 95.

⁵ John Chrysostom (347-407).

(“to look”) and *epi* (“over”). An *episkopos*, then, is “one who looks over” or “one who keeps watch over” someone else.

Shepherding involves feeding and *leading*. God has given to His church certain men who are to lead. Yes, the Bible teaches the priesthood of all believers—all believers may equally come to God directly through Christ. But the Bible also teaches that we need leaders, men who will watch over our souls (Heb 13:17), who will teach us God’s way and even rebuke us when we wander (Titus 2:15).

We need leaders. We need to be a part of a local church where we are in submission to God-ordained leaders. You say, “But what if a shepherd becomes a dictator? That can happen, you know.” Yes, you’re right. That’s why Paul offered three cautionary truths to the Ephesian pastors—and to us. If you are a leader you need to remember these three truths from verse 28.

⇒Remember who made you a leader. “Keep watch over...all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Who places pastors in leadership positions? You say, “The local church does when it calls a man.” That’s true, but that’s not the ultimate reason. Paul says *the Holy Spirit* places shepherds over congregations. A pastor needs to know that. It keeps him from running when times get tough.

⇒Remember whose church it is. “Be shepherds of the church of God.” Sometimes I hear fellow pastors say, “Well, at *my* church we do this.” I think it’s more than semantics. This isn’t my church. This isn’t the Board’s church. This isn’t your church. This is *God’s* church.

⇒Remember why the church exists. “Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” Why are we here today? Because two thousand years ago the Great Shepherd came and lay down His life to buy us out of the market place of sin. He bought us at the price of His own blood. That’s why the church exists. And if you want to become a part of the church you must enter this way, through the blood of Jesus.

I hope you love the church. God does. As Wiersbe points out, “The church is important to God the Father because His name is on it—‘the church of God.’ It is important to the Son because He shed His blood for it; and it is important to the Holy Spirit because He is calling and equipping people to minister to the church.”⁶

3. *Shepherding involves heeding (29-31)*. Please know this. Though vital, feeding and leading are not enough. There must be *heeding*. What’s involved in heeding? It’s what Paul did in verses 29-31: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”

In addition to feeding sheep and leading sheep, a good shepherd must do this. He must give attention to *heeding* the sheep, that is, protecting them from ever-present dangers.

Paul predicts a twofold hazard. First, in verse 29, he warns of wolves that would come from the *outside*. Who are these wolves? Jesus called them false prophets in Matthew 7:15-17, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people

⁶ W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, p. 487.

pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.”⁷

A good pastor teaches the Word, yes, but he also has to warn the flock to beware of bad food. Peter did that in 2 Peter 2:1, “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.”

I mentioned the hazard is twofold. In verse 29 Paul warned about wolves on the *outside* of the church. In verse 30 he warns of those from the *inside*, “from your own number,” who would distort the truth for personal gain.

Don’t miss that. As Paul looked into the eyes of these church leaders that day at Miletus, he said that even some of them would turn from the truth. No, Paul didn’t have a crystal ball. He just knew that wherever the truth is proclaimed Satan will counter it with lies, so convincing will he be that even church leaders will fall.

That’s why God’s kind of shepherd engages in a *heeding* ministry. It may not sound very “positive” but he must warn his people to beware.

Sad to say, what Paul predicted did in fact materialize. False teachers did begin to spread their gangrenous ideas in Ephesus within a short period of time. That’s one of the reasons Paul sent Timothy back to Ephesus and wrote the letter of 1 Timothy, just seven years after this warning at Miletus. Listen to what he wrote to Timothy:

1 Timothy 1:3 “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer.”

1 Timothy 1:18-20 “Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.”

It didn’t get any better either. Just two or three years after sending 1 Timothy Paul penned 2 Timothy and had this to say:

2 Timothy 1:15 “You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.”

2 Timothy 2:16-17 “Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus.”

Even the Lord Himself had this to say about the church in Ephesus in the last decade of the first century. In Revelation 2:4 Jesus said, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”

To reiterate, shepherding involves feeding, leading, and heeding. We need all three, and those who are passionate about God’s work will be passionate about feeding, leading, and heeding. You may be thinking, “That assignment is too big for a mere mortal!” True! I’m sure the Ephesian elders must have thought the same thing. So Paul addressed issue #2...

⁷ Jeremiah 23:1-4 “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD. “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD.

B. Here's what makes it possible (32-35). To do God's work we need four things.

1. *We need God's grace (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." The Word can do what nothing else can do, namely, build up the people of God so they experience the inheritance God offers them in Christ. This word is the means by which God accomplishes His gracious work. It is the "word of His *grace*."

Beloved, this is what makes biblical ministry possible, *God* and His *grace*.

2. *We need a clear conscience (33).* "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing." Pastor J. Sidlow Baxter once said, "No man who is full of himself can ever truly preach the Christ who emptied Himself."

This is quite an admission by Paul. As he looks back over his ministry in Ephesus he can say with all honesty, "I didn't do it to get rich. In fact, I didn't do it to get anything temporal."

Sadly, many in ministry today can't say that. The following poem, "A Church Perish," says it well.

*There is a pastor, himself he cherished,
Who loved his position not his parish
So the more he preached
The less he reached
And this is why his parish perished.⁸*

To do God's work God's way there must not be a trace of self-seeking. Jonathan Edwards said, "I go out to preach with two propositions in mind. First, every person ought to give his life to Christ. Second, whether or not anyone else gives him his life I will give him mine." There's the heart of God's kind of servant. It takes a clear conscience.

3. *We need hard work (34-35a).* "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak..."

It takes more than the gift of gab and good people skills to do pastoral ministry, contrary to what some think. Paul did back-breaking work as a tentmaker so that people couldn't accuse him of foul play. He made tents in the morning and late evening hours, taught at the lecture hall of Tyrannus in the afternoons, and conducted a house to house teaching ministry besides. To do God's work there must be a willingness to *work*.

James Boice observes, "It is a scandal to the ministry that so many ministers are lazy. They can be because in most churches they do not have anybody to supervise them, at least not very well...So if the minister is not thinking about God and remembering that he is answerable to him, it is very easy to waste a great deal of time. There are always easy things he can do rather than working hard."⁹

Yes, God's work takes grace and a clear conscience, but it also takes *hard work*.

4. *We need the humility of Christ (35b).* "...Remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Dr. Earl V. Pierce used to call this "the supreme beatitude" because, unlike the other beatitudes, it tells us how to be *more* blessed!¹⁰

Anybody can call himself a Christian, and just about anybody these days can wear the title "pastor." But if you want to discern the real thing, look for this trait, *the humility of*

⁸ [Source Unknown](#).

⁹ James Boice, *Acts*, p. 348.

¹⁰ Wiersbe, p. 488.

Christ. A true Christian lives with a radically different orientation, the same one our Savior exhibited. Life isn't about self but *others*. It's not about getting but *giving*.

Whether you are a pastor or not, this applies to you. If you want to do legitimate ministry, here's what it takes: God's grace, a clear conscience, hard work, and the humility of Christ. One final issue...

C. Here's what you can expect (36-38). The final scene of the chapter shows us in vivid terms the product of God's work done God's way: "When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship."

If you do biblical ministry you can expect three results.

1. *There will be joy.* You'll experience the kind of joy Paul felt as he looked into the eyes of men who, though once blinded sinners, were now his cherished brothers and partners in the ministry. As they knelt next to each other and as they prayed together, they felt a bond that is stronger than blood ties, a love that the world can only imagine. If you have a passion for the work of God, you will experience *joy*. But know this...

2. *There will be sorrow.* I'm challenged by the tears here. Luke says they all wept. If you search the New Testament, you'll discover that three things in particular moved Paul to tears. One, he wept over the condition of lost people (Rom. 9:2-3). Two, he shed tears over struggling, sinful Christians (2 Cor. 2:4). Three, he cried over the threat of false teachers (as he just stated in verses 29-31).

There's no escaping this fact. If you're passionate about God's work there will be joy, yes, but also *sorrow*, sometimes unspeakable sorrow. You say, "What keeps us going then?" This...

3. *There will be eternal reward.* That's what sustained Paul, as he testified in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

When but a young man (before he was even twenty), Jonathan Edwards wrote down seventy resolutions by which he intended to live his life. He didn't want to finish with regrets. Listen to this resolve, #52: "I frequently hear persons in old age say how they would live, if they were to live their lives over again; *Resolved*, That I will live just so as I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age. July 8, 1723."

That's good, isn't it? Instead of looking back at the end of your life and having to say, "If only I had," take inventory right now and *do it!*

Here are a few more of Edward's resolves, certainly worthy of our careful attention:

4. *Resolved*, Never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God, nor *be*, nor *suffer* it, if I can possibly avoid it.

17. *Resolved*, That I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.

19. *Resolved*, Never to do any thing, which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour before I should hear the last trump.

37. *Resolved*, To inquire every night, as I am going to bed, wherein I have been negligent,--what sin I have committed,--and wherein I have denied myself;--also, at the end of every week, month, and year. Dec. 22 and 26, 1722.¹¹

How can I live a life of no regrets? By taking Paul's example to heart.

Make It Personal: Am I ministering in a way that will last when I am gone?

¹¹ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1*, pp. xx-xxii.

Life is too short to coast along. Live with a passion for the will of God, the Word of God, and the work of God, and then—and only then—like Paul you can finish life regret free.

Closing Song: #369 “O Jesus, I Have Promised” (all three verses)

Community Group Discussion:

1. This morning’s message from Acts 20:25-38 was entitled, “*A Ministry That Lasts When We Are Gone.*” Take time to read again this touching account of Paul’s final interaction with the elders from the church at Ephesus. What stands out most to you from this passage?
2. In verse 26 Paul said he was “innocent of the blood of all.” In other words, he had no regrets regarding his ministry while in Ephesus. That is a staggering statement. What was the basis of his confidence? Can we have such confidence?
3. What’s involved in faithfully shepherding God’s people, according to verses 25-31? What does God call His servants to be and to do according to this passage?
4. What burdened Paul according to verse 29? What does this teach us about the heart of a faithful minister?
5. Ministry is hard work and at times heart-breaking. What then makes it possible and worthwhile? Scan through verses 32-38 to see how Paul answered that question.