

“Bodybuilders And Bodyguards”

Acts 20:28-35

Series: Book of Acts [#25]

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Theme: **The Church Must Have Alert Leadership.**

Introduction

This morning we are going to think about “*Bodybuilders and Bodyguards*.” That might sound a bit strange. Are we going to bring out some oiled up, bulging-muscled bodybuilders? Or, some men in suits, with sunglasses, ear pieces and expressionless faces?

No. We are thinking about leaders and leadership in the church.

Last week we surveyed Acts chapter 20. Today we are zooming in on eight verses of the chapter in which Paul gives a charge to the Elders from the church in Ephesus. This charge is for every elder in every church. Elders are to be *bodybuilders and bodyguards* in the church. The core truth from this compact eight-verse message, *The Church Must Have Alert Leadership*.

The Double Imperative To Church Leaders: Be On Guard! Be Alert!

We begin with an imperative. In fact, there is a double imperative to church leaders in this charge. The first, in verse 28, is “*Be on guard*.” The core meaning of this word is to pay attention to. Luke also used it in his gospel, 17:3, as he gave us Jesus’ instructions on conflict. “*Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.*” The force here is, “*Always be on guard.*”

The second imperative, in verse 31, is “*Be on the alert!*” The core meaning of this word is to be awake, keep awake; and so, be watchful or alert. Paul used the word in Colossians 4:2 about prayer, “*keeping alert in it.*” John records Jesus’ message to the church at Sardis in Revelation 3:2 where the term is translated, “*Wake up!*” The force here in verse 31 is, “*Always be alert!*”

And so leaders are to always be on guard, always be alert.

Specifically, church leaders are to be on guard and alert for themselves. Again, verse 28, “*Be on guard for yourselves.*” Before a leader can give good care, oversight and leadership to others, he must be paying attention, he must be on guard and alert to himself—to every area of his life.

- Spiritually—his overall walk with God, his growth in understanding and living God’s word, his maturing in the character of Christ.
- His home life and relationships, work and business.

- His personal life— what he focuses on, reads, listens to and views; his goals; and his views of others.

Paul wrote to Timothy,

“Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” (1 Timothy 4:16)

Then, in 2 Timothy 2:15,

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”

And, back in 1 Timothy, 3:2-7, Paul summarized leadership qualities in this way,

“An overseer, then, must be above reproach, [a one-woman man], temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

Paul gave in a similar summary in Titus 1:7-9.

Church leaders need to be on guard and alert for themselves. If you are a leader, or aspire to lead and care for others in the church, this is essential. Perfection is neither required nor possible. Demonstrated basic qualities and growth are required.

The importance of this is not limited to leaders. Every believer must be on guard and alert for himself to have a vital, growing and faithful relationship with Jesus Christ.

Secondly, then, leaders are to be on guard and alert for the church. Verse 28 tells leaders to be on guard “for the flock”... “to *shepherd* the church of God.” To *shepherd* a flock is to lead and care for it. The Biblical pictures of shepherding have a range of emphases. Here the focus is two-fold:

- to guard it (28);
- to build it up in God and His word (32).

We read God’s scathing denunciation of unfaithful, false shepherds from Ezekiel 34 earlier.

“Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered.” (34:2b-4)

For both Israel in the Old Testament and the church today, God expects leaders to be true spiritual leaders who are constantly on guard, constantly alert for *His* flock.

God reserves special, severe judgment for false teachers and leaders who lead people away from Him. In Galatians 1 Paul says anyone preaching a false gospel “is to be accursèd! (8,9). In 2 Peter 2:3 we are told that false leaders’ “just punishment has long been getting ready for them, and destruction has been watching for them” (Beck). Jude 4 tells us false teachers “were long beforehand marked out [for this] condemnation.” And so, it is no surprise to read the apostle John’s words in his second letter directing us not to receive, greet or associate with false teachers, because if we do, we “participate[s] in [their] evil deeds” (10-11).

Good, godly, faithful leaders have a vital role in the church. No leader is perfect. Every leader must “be on guard and alert for the church.”

Why?

Having said that, a good question is *Why?* Why must the church have alert leadership? Why must leaders be on guard and alert for themselves and the church? Let’s survey five reasons Paul cites here.

The church must have active leadership because its leaders are chosen by God. Paul reminded the Ephesian elders in verse 28, “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” The New Testament recognizes two offices in the church.

- Overseers, also referred to as elders, pastors, bishops.
- And deacons, along with, many believe, deaconesses.

It was Paul’s practice to appoint elders when he planted a new church (e.g., Acts 14:23), and this was followed by the other first church planters as well (e.g., Titus 1:5). Then, in time, local churches chose their own leaders.

However church leaders are recognized and affirmed, leaders are first chosen by God. The church’s task is to recognize His choices through prayerful consideration.

The term overseer, again, is used interchangeably with elder, pastor and bishop in the New Testament, but has its own emphasis. The word comes from a term with the basic idea

of looking at, considering, watching over or supervising. So it came to be used for a protector, patron, and a variety of government and business officials with oversight responsibilities.

In the new Testament the term is used once of Christ, in 1 Peter 2:25, where he is called the “Shepherd and *Guardian* of [our] souls.” The New Testament always shows a group of overseers or elders in a local church, not just one. From the onset, an office is involved, not just a function. Because they are selected by the Holy Spirit, their authority to watch over, lead and care for the church is from the Holy Spirit. The purpose of this office is service—to serve God by leading, feeding, and guarding the church, all the church in all conditions and circumstances. Being an overseer or elder is never a matter of seeking and exercising power.

Why must church leaders be alert? Because they are chosen by God and so then, are accountable to Him.

A second reason for church leaders to be alert is because the church has been purchased by Christ’s blood. Paul charges the elders to “to shepherd the church of God *which He purchased with His own blood.*” This is not just a nice church-language phrase tacked on to the end of the charge. First, the wording underscores the deity of Christ—“the church of God which *He purchased with His own blood.*”

Paul reminds leaders of the great value God places on the church, the people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation who were purchased for Him with the blood of Christ (cf. Revelation 5:9). And because the church is so valuable that God the Son gave His life to purchase it out of sin and judgment, it also is of great importance to Him. The care of the church—building and guarding it—are of highest concern and importance to God. And so, the God-given responsibility of shepherding the flock is sacred and sober.

No man should ever serve as an elder because ...

- of the status;
- to exercise power;
- to accomplish his own agenda;
- because he is flattered by the possibility.

Nor should any elder at any time ...

- take the responsibility lightly;
- simply fill a spot or put in time;
- nor see it just or primarily as a board and meeting function encompassing a couple hours a month.

Why must church leaders be alert? Because the church is so valuable, so important to God that He purchased it with Christ’s blood.

A third reason for church leaders to be constantly alert is because they and all the church need to be built up in God and His word. Drop down to 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.”

Some versions render the word *commend* as “commit” or “entrust.” The word is made from two words: (1) to set or place; and, (2) beside or before. So, the original idea was to set beside or in front of something or someone.

We see that in Luke’s gospel, chapter 10. Jesus sent 70 men out in pairs to all the places He would visit prepare the way and to minister. One of his instructions to them was to “eat what is set before you.”

It is easy to see how the word then came to express *setting before* as entrusting to something or someone. As Jesus was dying on the cross He said, “Father, into Your hands I commit [I entrust] my spirit” (Lk. 23:46). This is the sense here.

When we believed we were not made instantly mature in the faith, nor immune to temptation, attacks and sin. Being *built up* or maturing in the faith is a life-long need and process. Two of the indispensable and inseparable components in this always ongoing building process are:

- a vital growing relationship with God, and
- a vital growing relationship with God’s word.

You cannot be built up spiritually by a love for God that is not shaped and guided by His word. Nor can you be built up spiritually by a knowledge, even a deep and comprehensive knowledge of God’s word that is not shaped and guided by love for God.

So, leaders need to keep on entrusting or committing themselves to God and His word and also entrusting or committing the church to God and His word, leading the church to enter into and continue in this process. Leading by teaching and example.

This is pictured so well in Paul’s charges to Timothy.

“Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” (1 Timothy 4:13-16)

“The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

Why must church leaders be alert? Because the church needs to be built up in God and His word.

A fourth reason for church leaders to be constantly alert is because they and all the church need to be guarded from false teaching and false teachers. I could stop and camp here for a couple of weeks ... at least. Not because it is a personal hobby horse, but because today the majority of people both outside and inside the church do not believe in certain, unchanging truth. Because taking a stand for the core, essential truths of the gospel is increasingly viewed, even in the church, as politically incorrect and arrogant.

As a result, the church—the people Christ values so highly that He purchased them with His own blood—is increasingly susceptible to false teaching and false teachers. I am not talking about different interpretations of difficult passages or non-essential doctrine. I am referring to the core, essential truths of the gospel, without which we cannot be saved.

The church needs to be guarded from false teaching and false teachers. Every believer has a responsibility here. But leaders, as those who *oversee* the church, have a special responsibility. Go back to verse 29. Paul said,

“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”
(29-30)

Paul speaks directly and forcefully here. He doesn't use general or vague language so as to not offend. He sounds the alarm. One of the greatest dangers and worst disasters for a Palestinian shepherd would be to have a pack of wolves get into his flock.

Paul tells us the savage wolves which ravage the flock, or the church, come from two directions. From outside the flock—from outside the church. And from inside. Yes, even from within the church. So, just as the shepherd must guard and protect his sheep, so leaders need to guard and protect the church.

Wouldn't it be nice if all false teachers and teachings were color coded, or came with warning labels? They don't. They never have. They never will. In his second letter to the church at Corinth Paul warned them about “false apostles [and] deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.” And, “No wonder,” he continued, “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” So, he said, don't be surprised, don't be caught off guard (cf. 11:13-15). The short letter of Jude speaks of false teachers who “crept in unnoticed” (4).

We need alert leaders because we need to be guarded from false teaching and teachers. We need alert leaders who expose the light of God's truth and also the darkness of falsehood.

Finally, we need alert leaders because our leaders need to guard their own hearts and ministries. Let's go to verse 33 where we see Paul instructing by example.

“I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

(33-35)

Paul's motives were pure, his priorities on target, his actions above reproach—that is, not shameful nor disgraceful.

Leaders have the same fallen human nature that all other believers have. Leaders also are subject to the temptations and attacks from Satan's forces. In fact, they are a prime target. We don't need a litany of names to remind us that when Christian leaders do not guard their hearts and ministries, the devastation can be great.

We can go back to Paul's words to Timothy,

- “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching.” (1 Timothy 4:16)
- “Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them....” (1 Timothy 4:15).

There is no immunization against getting off track with values, priorities, with thoughts, words and actions. Our leaders need to be on guard for themselves. They need to continually...

- take up, to put on the full armor of God;
- to stand firm in truth, righteousness and the shield of faith;
- to be prepared with the gospel, the helmet of salvation and sword of God's word.

And all of us need to be supporting, praying for and encouraging each of our leaders.

Conclusion.

The Church Must Have Alert Leadership.

I am very thankful for each one of the leaders in our church. They are faithful men of faith. They need our ongoing support by prayer, encouragement, fellowship and working together.

There are many different models for successful leadership. Most, if not all, of them stress vision as a key component. One writer describes three key elements of vision:

- Having a significant purpose.
- Having a clear picture of the future, the end result.
- Having clear values.

When we talk about clear vision in the church, we often turn to the book of Proverbs, 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained ...” [other versions: *run wild*; or, KJV, *perish*]. That’s where the quote usually stops. But that’s only half of the sentence. The full statement is, “Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, but happy is he who keeps the law.”

What we need to have clear vision on leadership and everything else is to know and obey God as He has revealed Himself and His truth in His word, the Bible. We need His vision, not our own, His purposes and values, not our own.

As you spend time with God now,

- Thank Him that He loved you, and every believer so much that He died to purchase you with His blood.
- Thank Him that He has 20/20 vision on everything.
- Thank Him that He graciously shares that vision with us through His word and as the Holy Spirit guides us.
- Thank Him for the leaders He has chosen for Knox Church.
- Deepen your resolve to play your part so that our leaders, and all of us, will build and guard this church for the glory of Jesus Christ.

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