

# When Paul Talked to Elders

**Introduction.** “Leadership is influence,” wrote J. Oswald Sanders, “the ability of one person to influence others. One man can lead others only to the extent that he can influence them.”

That principle is powerfully illustrated in Paul’s charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28. Elders are the spiritual leaders in the church. And as such, their leadership matters. It’s often been said that “everything rises or falls with leadership.” The extent to which a church reaches its potential and fulfills its divine purpose is directly tied to its leaders. Growing churches must have good leaders.

John Maxwell emphasized the importance of good leaders when he wrote, “Leadership in any organization — whether in the local church or in some other Christian activity — is never just a job. It’s always a way of life, demanding a 24-hour-a-day commitment from those who would be leaders. The leader, in a sense, must always be on the job, deciding, directing, and developing the work that has been entrusted to him while at the same time encouraging those in the work.”

“A leader,” Maxwell says, “is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.” Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-35 can be outlined in four main movements: his past example, his present situation, his warnings and exhortations to the elders, and his farewell charge and prayerful commendation.

## ***I. Paul Recalls His Ministry Among Them (vv. 17-21)***

- A. He first reminds the elders of his own conduct in Ephesus: he served the Lord with humility, tears, and perseverance, and he taught them both publicly and house to house.
- B. He emphasizes that he didn’t hold back anything helpful, but proclaimed repentance toward God and faith in Jesus to both Jews and Greeks.
- C. Elders lead, elders hold accountable, but they also serve. Elders who don’t serve aren’t functioning in a godly way.

## ***II. Paul Explains His Current Path (vv. 22-27)***

- A. He then says he’s going to Jerusalem under the Spirit’s constraint, even though suffering and imprisonment await him.
- B. He isn’t primarily concerned with his own safety; rather, he wants to finish the ministry he received from the Lord and testify to the gospel of God’s grace (Acts 26:14-18; Romans 15:15-19, 25-27).

## ***III. Paul Warns and Exhorts the Elders (vv. 28-31)***

- A. Paul declares that he’s innocent of their blood because he hasn’t shrunk from declaring to them the whole counsel of God.
- B. He then gives the key pastoral charge: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock,” because the Holy Spirit has made them overseers to shepherd the church of God. He warns that fierce wolves will come in from outside and that false teachers will arise from within, so they must stay alert.
- C. This passage introduces several ideas about good shepherds:

1. Good shepherds carefully tend their sheep.
  - a) They feed, nurture, protect, govern, and pray for them. They keep the sheep from straying and work to restore those who have wandered away. They provide whatever's needed for their growth.
  - b) In Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9), we learn that men who would lead God's people must possess spiritual qualities that set them apart. Their character is above reproach. They have a good reputation with those outside the church. They lead well in their own families. They avoid habits that would impair their influence.
  - c) They have developed the ability to teach and lead, and they have demonstrated these qualities over time.
    - (1) Admonishing meant that they were correcting, warning, disciplining, and encouraging for the purpose of getting their listeners to do as Paul had been instructed (cp. 1 Thessalonians 5:12).
    - (2) The letters to Timothy, two of which were written to Ephesus about eight years after this message to the Ephesian elders was delivered, contain references to the fact that many have defected from the faith.
  - d) Every leader has to realize that there's a cost to leadership (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 18-20; 2 Timothy 2:15-18).
    - (1) In tending to and warning the sheep of certain unrighteousness dangers, you may drive them away. But if you're quiet, you may encourage the rest of the flock to commit ungodly actions.
    - (2) Do you remember when I said that in order to win the race you've got to be willing to lose it? This is an example of this fact in leadership.
    - (3) We love our people, and we want to shepherd them in the way of righteousness. But elders can't be afraid to discuss the dangers both publicly and privately.
  - e) When elders fail to shepherd and oversee the church, they fail not only the people — they fail the Holy Spirit who appointed them and the Lord who purchased the church with His own blood.
2. Elders are overseers.
  - a) This term means that they watch, superintend, and are guardians of the church. They're aware. They see what's happening among the people.
  - b) This isn't a role fulfilled from a distance or behind closed doors. It requires presence, involvement, and diligence. Implicit in the word is the responsibility to lead ("rule," Hebrews 13:7; "lead" (CSB), 1 Thessalonians 5:12).
3. Spiritual leaders are servant leaders.
  - a) They don't simply issue instructions; they're involved. Instead of telling others to "go," they say, "Let's go." They lead by example.
  - b) Their work is spiritually focused. It's not an office, but a relationship. It's not about policy, but people. People follow not because they have to, but because they want to. Someone has said that the church is the largest volunteer organization in the world. We can't force people to be here.

#### **IV. Paul Commends Them to God (vv. 32-35)**

- A. Finally, Paul entrusts them to God and to the Word of His grace, which can build them up and give them an inheritance among the sanctified. He points to his own example of working to support himself, refusing greed, and helping the weak, then closes by reminding them of Jesus' words: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."
- B. In this text, Paul points out that a good leader begins by taking heed to himself before leading others. He exercises self-discipline and restraint. He can honestly evaluate himself and recognize areas where he needs to grow.
- C. Because the biblical model of a spiritual leader includes the image of a shepherd, he knows his sheep because he's available to them. He's committed to them and has earned their trust. In this, he must be like Christ (John 10:14-16; 1 Peter 5:4).
- D. I believe this congregation has been blessed in its existence because it's been overseen by elders. The alternative is very difficult, and I know this because I've lived it. There's several reasons why churches don't have elders:
  - 1. Some churches don't want elders. Many Christians have seen or heard of situations in which either the elders were treated unfairly, or the elders treated the church unfairly. As a result of these abuses, some churches have decided that they would be better off without elders.
  - 2. Some churches are providing substitutions for the eldership. Many churches have become satisfied with allowing the affairs of the congregation to be run by the business meeting, or by various committees. This sort of church organization is viewed as an easy solution.
  - 3. Some men don't want to take on the responsibility. Instead of realizing the great need for elders and striving to reach the goal of becoming elders, these men decide that they'd rather someone else did the work. As a result, everyone's waiting around for someone else to take on the responsibility.
  - 4. Some men won't put in the effort to develop themselves. Among other qualifications, an elder must have a good knowledge of the Bible, be able to teach God's Word, live a life that is above reproach, and guide his family in the way of Jesus. All of that takes intentional effort; it's not impossible to do!
- E. Now that we're at the end of our lesson, I want to say that there are younger men among us who have the capacity to develop themselves inwardly and guide their families in righteousness so they can take up this noble calling. It's appropriate for this church to tell them and provide opportunities for them to develop along the way in this critical spiritual mission.

**Conclusion.** True leadership isn't measured by titles or recognition, but by the willingness to serve, listen, and walk humbly with God. For our leaders, may we lead with integrity, love without condition, and act with courage, remembering that the greatest leaders are those who reflect the mind of Christ in every step (Philippians 2:5).

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