



# 2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: February 12<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup>

Sermon: February 12<sup>th</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
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January 13

**Ezekiel 3:16-21; Acts 18:5-6, 21:26-27**

What did the apostle mean in verse 26 of our passage from Sunday when he declared that he was “innocent of the blood of all men?” Earlier in Acts 18 he had previously stated, “...Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean’” (vv.5-6). Obviously, there was a responsibility that he felt was his in regard to sharing the truth of God’s Word with them. Once he had done that, he was not responsible for their reactions or responses to the Truth. From where did this conviction come?

Paul would certainly have been keenly knowledgeable of the Old Testament writings. There is no doubt that he would know what the prophet Ezekiel had written pertaining to the responsibility of the “man of God” in Ezekiel 3. There it says, “Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn the wicked...if you do not, his blood I will require at your hand” (vv.16-21). You see church family, we have an obligation to tell others the truth in an attempt to rescue them from the consequences of their ungodliness and rebellion towards God. Ezekiel writes further in that passage that if you are faithful to warn another person on impending doom because of their sin, even if they do not “get right” with God, their blood is not on your hands (vv. 19b, 21).

Friends, we have been entrusted with the treasure of God’s Word and the truth of the gospel. It is imperative that we share it with others. There is a deadly disease (sin) that has infected every person in the human race, except Jesus Christ, and there is only one cure. Because we have been given the knowledge of His Word, we are held responsible to tell others. Luke wrote, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (Luke 12:48).

You see, part of what may make this feel a little too heavy or excessive in the way of consequence on the one who fails to tell the truth to others, is that we may take too lightly God’s plan for getting the gospel and His Truth to people. God has chosen to utilize us, His children, in the process of making His name and ways known. We are the messengers, the heralds, of the good news. Jesus gave the disciples the great commission before He ascended back to heaven. That commission was to take the Truth to all peoples of the world. I think of a simple analogy here. The mail carrier is paid to get the mail from the post office to your mailbox. If the mail doesn’t arrive, the “blood” is on the carrier’s hands. We have the mail, and we are responsible for getting to the people.

I hope this makes sense to you. Think with me a bit more. God, our almighty Creator, has summoned us to a task. The task happens to be to tell others the truth. We are to speak gently, boldly, patiently, and confidently on behalf of the One who has sent us. Paul writes that we are “ambassadors for Christ as though God were making an appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20). Friend, God, not some little peon, has called us to a mission. We have no right to throw off His assignment as if He were not Lord of our lives. The blood is on our hands because we failed to attempt to tell a lost soul about the Savior who could save them. Now, if they reject Him, that is their problem. If we choose not to even tell them, it becomes ours. Their lostness condition is sad, but our disobedience is the root of the blood that covers our hands if we remain forever silent.

February 14

**Jeremiah 3:14-15, 10:21, 23:1-8; Acts 20:28**

Paul leaves the elders with a strong admonition to “shepherd” the “sheep” of the church well. He warns them of the dangers lurking both inside and outside of the church and their need to be alert and on guard. The responsibility is laid upon their shoulders as overseers of the church of God. It is God’s church (v.28) and He created the office of the “overseer” to protect, guard, and guide her. It is both a great responsibility and a great privilege to do so. Today I want to write to highlight the importance of the office of the elder in the local church.

Why did the nation of Israel wander away from God and forget his great works of redemption in the past? The prophet Jeremiah says because their priests, rulers, and prophets had been negligent (Jeremiah 2:8). The word for “priests” and the “rulers” who were to shepherd the people wandered from and ignored the Lord and the Law, leaving them lost, confused, and vulnerable to the evils of this world. The shepherds were partly to blame for the apostasy of the people and for the defilement of the land by their transgression of the law. The same thing holds true today. There was a time of God’s judgment that fell upon the people and the land, but God was not finished with His people.

In response, God promised to give his people new shepherds. In Jeremiah 3 it is written, “Return O faithless sons...then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:14-15). Let’s see what is new about these new shepherds and their value for the sheep of God’s pasture, the local church. First of all, note that they are gifts from God who share God’s heartfelt concern for his sheep. This heartfelt concern works itself out in a carefulness to feed his sheep on the knowledge and understanding of God and His law rather than their own knowledge, or the knowledge of the pagan gods and practices of their Canaanite neighbors. Knowledge and understanding of God, his Word, and his ways are nourishing and sustaining for the sheep.

I found this humorous but sadly true in God’s Word. Shepherds who do not rely on God’s Word, on the other hand, are just plain stupid. Jeremiah 10:21 says, “For the shepherds have become stupid and have not sought the LORD; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered.” In the verses of chapter 10 leading up to this condemnation, Jeremiah contrasts the impotence of idols and the stupidity of their worshippers with the living creator God. The wise men of the pagan nations are stupid and foolish (Jer. 10:8) and “every man is stupid, devoid of knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols” (Jer. 10:14). Then in verse 21, he says the shepherds of Israel are just as stupid as the pagan “wise men” because they have ignored the Word of the living God and begun to worship idols. They’ve become just like what they’ve worshipped. Instead of beholding God and become godly, they’ve looked at the pagan idols of the culture around them and become stupid. God says, “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture” (Jer. 23:1).

A good shepherd is to *nourish* rather than destroy them, so that they can be fruitful and multiply. They will *gather* them together rather than scattering them. They will *keep track* and *account* for each one of them (“nor will any be missing”). God will *keep them secure* in the flock rather than exposing them to danger. Paul was laying out for the elders in Ephesus how vitally important was the task to which God had called them and to which he was now leaving them.

February 15

**John 17:17; Acts 20:32**

Dear ones, it has taken me far too long, but it seems to be that I understand more now that God is faithful to be with you when I am not. He is faithful to guide you, protect you, provide for your needs when I am clueless and helpless to do so. This matters because it is the source of great peace for a shepherd who loves his flock. You see, as I consider the time of departure that had come for Paul, his companions, and the “sheep” whom he loved in Ephesus, I find great solace in the reason why he could get back on the ship and set sail in obedience to our Father.

In verse 32 of our text from Sunday, Paul simply says, “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” (Acts 20:32). He found peace in his own heart because He understood that God is the One who will remain there with them long after he is gone from them. It was God whom they needed constantly each and every day. As I wrote earlier in the week, we are thankful for the good shepherds that God has put in our lives to preach and teach, to guide and guard, and to encourage and exhort. Part of His perfect plan has been to organize the church in such a way that together we grow into the fullness of Christ as mature and knowledgeable sons and daughters of our King.

Paul said that he commended them to the “word of His grace.” Then he goes on to write as those this “grace” is literally able to work in them. I want you to keep in mind that Paul is entrusting the “sheep” to the oversight of the elders, but who will care for the elders? Notice that he did not say that I commit you to a board of trustees, or a denomination or convention. He says, “to the word of His grace.” Oh, how my heart leaped as I thought about the Good Shepherd leading me beside still waters and green pastures. Of course, it is true that all of us, not just the overseers, have Jesus as our Good Shepherd and should experience His loving care for our souls. But the pastors have extra responsibilities in caring for the sheep.

The beauty of God’s design for the church and for shepherds and sheep is that before the pastor feeds the sheep with the word of God’s grace, he has first fed on it himself in preparation, in study, and in prayer. When Paul refers to the word of grace building up and giving them the inheritance, he is talking about the sustaining power of the word that secures their future in the kingdom of God. He writes, “among all who are sanctified.” In other words, Paul says that the word of God’s grace is able to continue to change and to fill their hearts as the Holy Spirit applies the Word to their own hearts and gives them the joy, the peace, and the assurance that He is with them and we keep them firm until the end.

The word of grace works in our lives like a great coach. Imagine if a coach said to his athlete, “I can assure you that I will lead you to a victory in the playoffs.” We would all assume that he means I will grow you and develop you through practice, training, conditioning, and study which will lead to the victory that I am able to help you attain. The word of grace works in a similar way. God molds, shapes, trains, and sanctifies us by His grace. It is by His Word that we are sanctified and brought to enjoy and love the Father and His ways (John 17:17). It is His grace that covers and strengthens the leaders for shepherding the flock. We are all cared for dear family. His faithfulness to me makes it easy to entrust you to His loving care too.

February 16

**John 10:1-14**

A clear contrast exists in Paul's writing between the good shepherd that is described in Acts 20:17-24 and the "wolf" that is described in verses 28-30. You will find that the good pastor loves and leads his people tenderly by the power of the Spirit and the preaching of the full counsel of God's Word. The "wolf" on the other hand, will not spare the flock and will use them for his own personal gain all the while that they are devoured by ungodly leadership and poor teaching and use of God's Word. Jesus contrasts the heart of a poor shepherd with that of the Good Shepherd in John 10.

In the gospel of John chapter 10, John writes that there are some "shepherds" who will enter into the fold, an apparent leader, not as a called man of God with the intention of stealing from, using, and taking advantage of the people. In contrast, Jesus describes the good shepherd as one who will go ahead of the sheep so as to make sure the path is clear and safe. Upon his recognition that all is well, he will then call the sheep to safety. They know his voice because of the obvious relationship that exists between them, and they follow.

John writes further that a false teacher or fraud shepherd will be one who has not developed relationships with the people; hence, they do not recognize his voice when he calls. His intent is to kill, steal, and destroy whereas the good shepherd's desire is to lead the sheep to safe pastureland where all they need is provided in a safe environment. John records Jesus saying that a wolf in the disguise of a pastor will treat them as if he were only a hired hand and not a lover of their souls. The good shepherd, Jesus says, will be willing to lay down his life for his sheep while the charlatan will leave the sheep to fend for themselves whenever danger arises. Jesus clearly teaches that the "hired hand" leaves them because he is not genuinely concerned about their wellbeing.

When I stop and think of the damage done to so many Christians at the hands of poor shepherds, I am saddened and angered. I want you to ponder the fact that there are two extreme methods of pastoring that equally kill, steal, and destroy the vitality and witness of too many of God's people. The one that we most likely think of when thinking of "bad" pastors are the ones who are domineering and lead in a dictatorial manner. They tend to use the pulpit to brow beat the people whenever their authority or direction is challenged. They demand far too much "respect" because of the office of pastor. Granted, the office of the pastor should be respected, but just because a man has the title does not make him the real deal. This pastor will be the one who rather than leading and loving the challenging sheep, he tends to shoot them instead. By the way, those whom he labels as "challenging," most likely simply questioned a decision or disagreed with his approach.

There is another pastor that would fall into the category of bad shepherd and that is the weak, passive, tolerant, spineless character. He is equally destructive to God's people by failing to preach the full counsel of God. Remember that Paul said he did not shrink back from giving them all of God's Word for their profit and spiritual growth. He was a man of conviction and led from that place. The bad pastor will be one who does not stand up to wolves trying to snatch the sheep, who will not love the sheep through hard times, and who will not hold fast to the Word of God regardless of the costs. A good shepherd knows that truth rightly applied is a deep and godly act of love. To refrain or withhold that truth is not love and serves to destroy people rather than build them up. Praise God for the shepherd and develop wisdom and knowledge to recognize those who are not.

January 17

**Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:108**

Surely through the years of our journey together, we have talked about the need for spiritual qualifications in filling positions of leadership in the local church. Paul admonishes the elders of the church in Ephesus to “be on guard.” Based on our text from Sunday and the point to ponder that we read yesterday, it is obvious that Paul considers it a certainty that false teachers and wolves are going to try to find ways to attack the church once he is gone. He describes the characteristics of the good shepherd; the relationship and model that he and the Ephesian believers enjoyed. He also details many of the characteristics that would be present in and indicative of a false shepherd who comes in with hidden and devilish motives.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:16 and 20 that we would know a tree by its fruit. I will write this briefly as a side note, but consider how foolish is the unbiblical teaching that we must “never judge.” We must absolutely be able to look at the fruit of a person’s life and make a clear judgment as to whether a behavior or action is sin or not. Why bother knowing a tree by its fruit if you then are not supposed to make decisions based on what you have judged to be true?

We are called to be on guard because there are obvious impacts on the health of a congregation as a result of the type of teaching and pastoral leadership the people will experience. The devil is the father of lies (John 8:44) and desires to kill, steal from, and destroy the people of God (John 10:10a). When a congregation of so called believers, who represent the church and the name of Jesus in a community, are unhealthy, ungodly, and who are in fact misrepresenting the kingdom of God and His people, grave damage is done to our efforts to lead others to faith in Jesus. We must be on guard because eternity hangs in the balance for many who need to see Jesus and His Light in this dark world. The church is the means by which God has chosen to make Himself known and His plan of redemption to the world. We are on mission and the King has given us the marching orders by which and how we are to conduct His business. This is no game that we are playing and must be fought well by well-trained disciples.

Church family, we want you to know that godly, pastoral leadership looks like and it is our prayer that you are experiencing it although we ourselves are imperfect men too. We also know that we will not always be your pastors. It is our heartfelt desire that you will also be able to recognize and avoid ungodly and harmful, pastoral leadership. A man who is not called of God or who does not lead in accordance with what Paul is telling us in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts must not be a man that you allow in the pulpit or that you sit under to be taught and led. There is too much at stake to think this is a light matter with menial consequences. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Paul wrote to Timothy the list of qualifications that a godly pastor must possess. This is not to be intolerant, narrow, antiquated, or mean. These qualifications are there to help us rightly judge the fruit of the man’s life who we are considering to shepherd God’s people. We are not to fill the pulpit of the Lord’s church by popularity contests, charisma, good looks, or charm. The man of God who steps into the pulpit must be called, equipped by God, molded by the Word and ways of God, and fit the bill as it is given in 1 Tim. 3:1-8. Part of the call to “be on guard” includes looking for these qualifications and other Christlike characteristics that indicate a man has the heart of God and will bravely and tenderly lead the flock as a good shepherd. To be on guard means that we must know what to look for in a man who would fill the roll of a pastor to God’s people.

February 18

**Acts 20:27; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 4:2**

Paul reminds the elders in Ephesus for the purpose of teaching them to do the same, *“That he did not shrink back from declaring to them the whole purpose of God”* (Acts 20:27 NASB). The ESV Bible uses the phrase, *“...the full counsel of God”* which I prefer in this case. What Paul, rather God, is teaching us is that we must be faithful to preach and teach all of the Bible. Paul stated that he did not “shrink back” or cower from preaching the text that would have been hard to hear or receive by the listeners. Paul made the decision on what to preach and teach not based on what he thought the people wanted to hear but what he knew they needed to hear. Now read this: they needed to hear “the full counsel of God,” which meant all of it.

A good shepherd to God’s people will be one who is convinced of the benefit and value of the Bible applied to every person’s life. He is also convicted that he must preach and teach all of it. A good shepherd, like the apostle Paul, knows 2 Timothy 3:16-17 which says, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man (person) of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Dear ones, if we take this to heart and truly believe what these verses say, then we must see the value and importance that all of it (the full counsel) be taught from the pulpit. I wrote yesterday that the “sheep” as well as the “elders” must be on guard. What attribute that you must demand from the man who fills the pulpit is that he preach the entire word of God.

As an addition to yesterday’s point to ponder, I want you to consider how wrong it is for a man to preach only the passages that he likes, tickles his congregant’s ears, keeps him out of trouble, or serves his own personal agenda of bashing certain people from the pulpit. We all know of pastor’s who are guilty of such negligence and abuse. So, Paul speaks to that by reminding the elders to preach all of the Bible just as he did among them. By the way, this is one reason the Pastor Aaron and I preach verse by verse through books of the Bible. This keeps us from avoiding the hard passages and assures us that we will eventually give you the full counsel of God’s Word. We, no one else, do not have the right to skip parts of God’s Word because we think it is hard to preach and or hard to hear.

Near the end of Paul’s life, he wrote a letter to Timothy in which he said these words at the end of it, “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:1-2). Paul tells Timothy that the time of his death has come (2 Tim. 4:6) and so with his final words to his dear son in the faith, he says, “Preach the Word – all of it.” He reminds him, and us, that regardless of the circumstances, “the season,” we are to give them all of it. The circumstances, or the direction the wind is blowing, should not determine what a faithful shepherd should say. God saw fit to give us the Bible and all that it contains for the purpose of training us to be godly, mature men and women.

Let us end this point to ponder with one more important truth that we should expect from a shepherd of God’s people. Back in Acts 20:19, Paul said, “Serving the Lord with all humility and with tears....” I want you to see that although we are to preach it all, we are to do so with strong conviction and passion coupled with humility and even tears that flow from a deep desire to see the sheep come to understand Jesus and love Him more. He taught them with strength and gentleness.



January 19

**Mark 10:45; Acts 20:34-35; 1 Timothy 5:18**

Remembering that Paul was speaking to the elders (pastors) of the church is important in this part of our text, but it certainly applies to all of us as children of God. Paul reminded the overseers that they must not use the ministry or the church for personal or selfish gain. A good pastor is going to be one who is looking to serve and sacrifice for the sheep rather than to take all that he can from them. Paul demonstrated through his ministry a love for the people and a willingness to assist the weak rather than be a burden to them. Paul uses his own example of serving in a bi-vocational manner to demonstrate sacrifice instead of selfishness in relation to serving the body of Christ. We live in a different day, but I always thought it would be awesome to be able to serve the church and not require a salary. I used to think of the days when, as I got older and in need of less compensation, I could reduce my salary each year, leaving more in the kitty for ministry. Maybe someday!

The principle here is not unique to Paul. He is merely following in the steps of Jesus who taught him, and us, to deny self, take up our crosses, and follow in obedience to all He taught us through word and deed. Jesus is the one who demonstrated sacrificial/servant leadership when He washed the disciples feet in John 13 and urged them to do the same towards others. He is the One who said, "I came to serve, not to be served, and to give my life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He demonstrated what it looks like to humble oneself when He left the glory of heaven and came to dwell on earth as a man, giving His very life that we might live (Phil. 5-11). So, when Paul says that a good shepherd is to sacrifice for his sheep and not take from them, he was simply following His Lord's examples and admonitions. The Kenneth Copelands and Benny Hinns of the world are absolute frauds and rotten examples of what it is to serve and sacrifice for people.

It is important at this point to provide some balance to this point to ponder. Paul was a wonderful example of pastoral leadership. He walked faithfully in the footsteps of Jesus and held to His teachings well. Before anyone jumps to the conclusion that a pastor should not get compensated, please add 1 Timothy 5:18 and 1 Cor. 9:9-14 to the discussion. Paul writes, "For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing, and the laborer is worthy of his wages.'" Clearly the teaching that a man should be able to make a living from ministry is in view here. Look back at verse 17 to see further how honorable and worthy is the work of a good elder among the people. In 1 Corinthians 9:9-14, we find that once again Paul is making it clear to the church in Corinth that a man should as he proclaims the gospel to "get his living from the gospel" (v.14).

Pastor Aaron and I are so thankful to serve in a church where we are loved and well provided for by the congregation. It is our desire to serve you well, not to squander what you entrust to us, and to do our best not to be a burden to you. We receive so very much from your hand, and we are encouraged and inspired to work hard and to feed you well in return. Your generosity towards us and our families makes it possible for us to focus our lives of serving you from the overflow of our time in study with the Lord. The point that Paul was making to the elders was that they are to love, to serve, to sacrifice for, to lead, to preach and teach, and to model what it looks like to live like Jesus to the people. They were to live their lives with the welfare of others as their focus not their own. They were to think more of others than themselves (Phil. 2:3-5) and to love and lead them tenderly as good parents would their own children.