



I want you to imagine for a minute being given one last opportunity to speak to your children. Even if you don't have children, you can imagine what that might feel like. You know your time is up and you have one last chance to gather them and speak to them. What would you say? Beyond the obvious, "I love you! I'll miss you!" what would you say to them? What would you want them to know and do?

If you can put yourself in that place for a moment you can feel something of what the Apostle Paul felt as he gathered with the Ephesian elders on the shores of Miletus. In Acts 20 Paul was on his way to Jerusalem. He was in a hurry and he didn't have time for a long stopover in Ephesus. He'd already spent close to three years there and left a thriving church and many friends. He hadn't been there for awhile and must have felt torn. He wanted to see them, but he also felt God calling him to move on. So Paul decided to do the next best thing to making a visit. He sent a messenger from Miletus to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to come and meet with him one last time. Somehow Paul felt in his gut this would be his last chance to ever speak to them.

And so, starting in Acts 20:18 Paul addresses these elders one last time. He bares his soul to these men and he leaves us with a gold mine of truth about genuine Christian leadership. I don't have to tell you how important leadership is. There's a ton of books out there on leadership. Next year we'll all try to assess the leadership qualities of several Presidential candidates. All of us have to lead in some way, at some time. But what about spiritual leadership? What does it take to be a leader of God's people? Follow along as we listen to the entire speech.

When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. 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. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me;

my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

"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 any of you. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. 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. 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.

"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. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. 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, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him (Acts 20:18–37).

As I read this, what comes to mind is the word character. The foundation of leadership is character, not charisma. You don't need a certain personality to be a great leader. It's not even about talent. What you must have is character. I want to pull out of Paul's address some things fundamental to Christian leadership. What Paul says to these men about character can be divided into two categories. The first is Paul's example of character and the second is Paul's challenge to be people of character.

Paul Set an Example of Character in Leadership

Let's look first at Paul's example of character. He says a lot about his own ministry to the Ephesians. While in Ephesus they had ample opportunity to watch and see how he carried out his ministry. It's clear he's setting himself up as an example for them. Personal example is the most powerful way to communicate truth. We know this as parents, don't we? Truth is caught rather

than taught. Our kids see what we are and that communicates more powerfully than what we say. What use is it to tell them to read their Bibles if they don't see us doing it? Why tell them to clean up their mouth if they don't see us doing it? They see what we are. And what's true in parenting is true in spiritual leadership. Paul knew that and so he reminds them of the example he set.

Leadership must be relational

First of all, he reminds them leadership must be relational. Leadership isn't done at arm's length. I love how he says in v. 18, *"you know how I lived the whole time I was with you."* He lived with them; he worked with them; he worshipped with them. He's disarmingly transparent. He says in v. 19 you saw how *"I served the Lord with great humility and with tears in the midst of severe testing."* There's vulnerability. "I didn't always have it all together. You saw me cry. You saw me hurting." And the result of his transparency and vulnerability was intimacy. That's why when Paul is done talking they all just fall apart. They're weeping, embracing and kissing. They're crushed they may never see him again.

There's a common notion in leadership circles that great leaders will kind of keep their distance; that you shouldn't get too close to the people you lead. That may be true in business, but it's not true in ministry. In ministry, friendship is a high commodity. Much of ministry involves hanging out with people. Jesus modeled that. He had a huge job to do and only a few years to do it. Yet he spent a lot of time hanging out with folks at parties and weddings, fishing with them and eating with them. We tend to dismiss those things as trivial compared to the real ministry, like counseling or teaching. Jesus was into friend-making, and out of that friend-making he was soul-making.

Think of the person who's had the greatest impact on your life. That person isn't the one who gave you the most information. More likely it's someone who spent time with you, who loved you, cared for you and believed in you. That's true in my life. I think of Ray Stedman. When I think of Ray, my memories aren't of sermons but the time I spent in his house, conversations on planes, playing chess, listening to his corny jokes. That's relational leadership.

Leadership is centered on the Word

When that kind of relationship is established, it makes your teaching much more powerful. The second thing Paul exemplified in his character was commitment to God's Word. He was amazingly thorough in that. He was thorough in **what** he taught. He says he didn't shrink from *"preaching anything that would be helpful"* (v. 20). He taught them to *"turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus"* (v. 21). He *"testified to the good news of God's grace"* (v. 24). He says, *"I have gone about about preaching the kingdom"* (v. 25). And he *"hasn't hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God"* (v. 27). He was also

thorough in **who** he taught. He says he *"declared to both Jews and Greeks"* (v. 21). He wanted to teach everything to everybody. And he was thorough in **where** he taught. He taught *"publicly and from house to house"* (v. 20). Besides his public teaching in the school of Tyrannus he met with people in homes and taught them. Charles Spurgeon said preaching is like throwing a bucket of water at a row of bottles. Some of the water goes in some of the bottles. But by talking to people personally in homes, you can top off each bottle.

So you can see Paul taught everything to everybody, everywhere he could! This ought to mark leadership in the church today. You may wonder why we're so into teaching the Bible here. You come to church and you listen to someone teach straight from the Bible; you go to your small group and you discuss the Bible together. Why? It's not just about information; we really believe the Bible is God's living Word and it's powerful and it changes us. So we read it, study it, meditate on it, memorize it, preach it and even pray it.

Leadership must not be self-centered

The third thing Paul's example teaches us is leadership mustn't be self-centered. Notice verses 22–24. He's on his way to Jerusalem. He's compelled to go even though he doesn't know exactly what will happen to him there. The one thing he does know is "prison and hardships are facing me." Well, that sounds like a lot of fun. "Gee, I think I'll go there." Who in their right mind would go somewhere knowing it will mean nothing but pain? I think of the title of a best-selling book that came out years ago on the Christian life, *Your Best Life Now*. My goodness, Paul must have missed that one. He ought to read that. He'd never go to Jerusalem with that book tucked under his arm! I think his best life now would be to stay in Ephesus. He could settle down, have a family, teach at the University of Tyrannus. Why keep pushing ahead, Paul, when you know it means trouble?

Paul tells us in v. 24, *"I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."* He says, "It's not about me or what I want. It's not about my comfort or my dreams for a better life. It's about finishing the work Jesus gave me to do." Christian leadership isn't self-centered but Christ-centered. It's centered on doing his will.

We know not everyone is a Paul. These very elders he was addressing weren't called to **leave** Ephesus, but to **stay** and lead the church. Sometimes faithful Christian leadership means going, but at other times it means staying. Each of us have from the Lord a course to follow and a race to run. If you want to lead well you have to make it your highest priority to finish the race; complete the task he's given to you.

I think about this a lot. I've been doing the same thing for almost four decades. At times it's tempting for me to think, "Well, I've

put in my time. It won't be long before I can stop working so hard." I mean, honestly, this preaching thing gets old. I get tired of listening to myself. And, you know, I love the Bay Area but why would anyone want to stay around here for the long haul? But then I get a gentle nudge in my spirit, "This isn't all about what you want. It's not about your comfort and dreams. It's about following Jesus to the end."

Someone asked an old saint why he kept at it so hard. "Why do you keep waking up so early to pray? Why do you keep sharing your faith? Why do you keep serving in your church? You've put in your time. You're 80 years old. You deserve a break." He just said, "Shall I not run with all my might, having now seen the finish line?" That's Paul's mindset, and it should be ours.

Leadership must be free from greed

The fourth thing Paul's example teaches us about leadership is it's to be free from greed. Paul says in v. 33, "*I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.*" Can you imagine saying that? I've seen a gold watch or two I wouldn't mind wearing. I see a few new cars out in the parking lot I'd like to drive home. I see Rob Hall wearing those skinny jeans and I want a pair of those! It's hard not to covet! And Paul had every right to expect they'd provide for him materially. The Bible says, "*Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain, and the worker deserves his wages*" (1 Tim. 5:18). But instead of letting them support him he supported himself and his coworkers. There are a lot of leaders today who are lazy. This is a problem for a lot of pastors. He says, "these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions." Paul wasn't lazy. He was a tentmaker. He supported himself and helped others.

Years ago here at CPC Jeff Farrar and I were the only pastors on paid staff. The church was going through a tough time financially and the money just wasn't there to pay the bills on top of our salary. Jeff and I decided to look for part-time jobs and do what we could to keep the ministry going. He was going to drive a truck; I was going to wait tables. We knew the ministry would suffer but we also believed it was temporary. It turned out we didn't have to do it but it was a good wake up call for me. Do I do this just because I'm paid to do it, or would I do anyway?

If you're going to lead anyone they have to know it's not all about what you're getting from it. They have to see you're willing to sacrifice; you believe in what you're doing so much you'd do it without the money or the perks or the attention; it's about what the Lord called you to do. I think of our own elders. Many of them have served as elders for over 20 years and given so much of their lives and asked for nothing in return. I think of folks who take time off work to go on a missions trip. No one pays them. That's selfless leadership.

Leadership must be dependent on God

The fifth thing Paul exemplifies about Christian leadership is dependence on God. We see this as they kneel together on the beach and pray. I'm confident this was a habit for Paul and these elders when they met together in Ephesus. Prayer is the expression of our own dependence on God. But I also see this dependence in what he says in v. 32. He says, "*And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace...*" It sounds strange but Paul shows his dependence on God by leaving them; by saying, "Listen, my job with you is done. I'm now giving you to God. He'll take care of you. His word will build you up and make you strong."

There comes a time when leaders really do have to get out of the way and let God take over. Sometimes God's presence can be better experienced by our absence. If leaders aren't willing to do that people will become more dependent on them than on God, and that's not a good thing. No Christian leader is indispensable. No leader can take the place of God. And no church should think of a leader in that way.

So Paul was an example of character, not charisma. He was relational. He was centered on God's Word. He wasn't self-centered. He was free from greed. He was dependent on God. But Paul doesn't just point to himself. He also challenges these men to pursue character and he tells them how to do it.

Paul's Challenge for Character in Leadership

The leader must guard himself

The challenge doesn't come until v. 28, "*Keep watch over yourselves and for all the flock...*" Notice what he says to be on guard or to keep watch over first—your own self. Before we keep watch over the flock we must keep watch over our own souls. So many leaders have crashed because they failed to do this. The realities of watching over the souls of others can become so difficult and absorbing you can easily neglect yourself.

Why is this so crucial? If we don't watch over our own souls we won't have anything to offer of real value to others. All ministry flows out of our walk with God and if our walk is weak it'll show up. It's also true as you strive to keep watch over others you have a target on your back, and the enemy will regularly take pot shots at you to bring you down. If you don't keep watch over your own soul you're easy prey. Paul says to these men down in v. 30, "*Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*" Imagine saying that! "A few of you are wolves in sheep's clothing."

Believe it or not, the greatest enemy of ministry can be ministry. Every leader must learn there are times you have to say "no" to the needs of others in order to say "yes" to the needs of your own soul. Someone said, "You concern yourself with the depth of your life, and let God concern himself with the breadth of your ministry."

The leader must guard the flock

With that in mind the second part of this charge is to keep watch over the flock. Here's the call to shepherd the flock. It's really not a very flattering figure of speech. Most of us know little about sheep and the realities of shepherding. Sheep aren't at all the clean and cuddly creatures they're made out to be. They're dirty and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, worms and ticks. They're also stupid, wayward and stubborn. The fact we're called sheep in the Bible should humble us.

There are several things Paul says to motivate these elders to keep at the hard work of shepherding. He says the Holy Spirit made you overseers of the sheep. It's not an optional deal. It's not a voluntary draft. He made you an overseer. Then he tells them how valuable these sheep are to God. He says, "Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood." That's how valuable his sheep are. How can you neglect those for whom Christ bled? And then to motivate them further he says, "Know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock." One of the things about sheep is they're helpless and vulnerable. Without the keen eye and the firm hand of the shepherd they're sitting ducks.

Savage wolves are false teachers. They "distort the truth." He's talking about bad doctrine; bad theology. Leaders don't just accept all ideas as valid. So some view them as narrow minded. But then there are others who'd like them to be **more** narrow minded, but they won't go down that road either. They won't hyper focus on pet doctrines and separate believers from one another. They believe "the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things."

The antidote to savage wolves is what Paul says he did in v. 31, "***So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.***" Sometimes leaders have to say the hard things and warn people, but it helps when they say it with tears. I heard of a church which fired their pastor and hired a new one. Someone asked why they got rid of the old one. A spokesman said, "Because he kept telling the people they were going to hell." Someone asked, "What does the new pastor say?" "Oh, he keeps telling them they're going to hell,

too." "Well, what's the difference?" he was asked. He said, "The difference is when the first one said it, he sounded as if he were glad about it. But when the second one says it, he has tears in his eyes." That's the difference Paul is talking about; warning not with harshness, but with a deep concern and care.

The foundation of leadership is character, not charisma. This is a process for all of us. Like a baseball game, the story of our character isn't over until it's over. Character isn't a possession we have once and for all. Character is a calling; it's a journey that often involves two steps forward and one step back. So let me ask you today a few questions to help you grow in your own leadership journey. Which of these leadership qualities are you doing well in? Which do you need to work on?

- Is your leadership relational or do you try to lead from a safe distance?
- Is your leadership centered on God's Word or the opinions of man?
- Is your leadership self-centered or Christ-centered?
- Are you free from greed, working hard to meet not just your own needs but the needs of others?
- Are you dependent on God or your own abilities?
- Are you keeping watch over your own soul or are you neglecting it?
- Are you guarding your flock, as those bought with the blood of Christ?

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer could almost hear the stomping of the Gestapo boots to take him away and execute him, he wondered on paper what kind of people the church was going to need most when the last bomb had exploded and the last person was killed. He said this: "What the church will need, what our century will need, are not people of genius, not brilliant tacticians or strategists, but simple, straightforward, honest men and women." Not charisma, but character.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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