

Love the Church

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 February 2019

Preacher: Mark Bates

[0 : 0 0] with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 20. Acts chapter 20, we'll be looking at verses 28 to 32. Acts chapter 20, 28 to 32, and here the Apostle Paul is meeting with the elders of the church at Ephesus, and he's been spending a great deal of time with them, and now he's leaving them, and probably will not see them again. And so here are his words to those elders, and this is the very word of God. Pay careful attention to yourself and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and if among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert. Remember that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. 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. This is God's holy word. Let's pray. Our Father, we do thank you for your word. And now, O Lord, as we look at it, we pray that you would, again, we pray, open our eyes to see your glory, open our ears to receive your word, open our hearts to love what you teach, and to follow you full of faith. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. You may be seated. Before we look at the text, I just want to give a personal word of thank you. Just thank you for allowing me to be here and to be with you. I moved here about 11 years ago. And how many of you were at Cheyenne Mountain 11 years ago? A few. I have prayed for your church, and it has been a delight to watch what God has done at this church. It is a remarkable story of God's grace, how God wants this church to have a vibrant witness. Those of you who are not, let them share with you the stories of all that they have been through, because God has providentially cared for this church. And when you called Matthew Capone as your pastor, those of us who know Matthew, we're very excited about that. And Matthew and I have been getting to know each other a little bit, getting together for breakfast, and he's asked me about different things. And so what I've told him, he goes, here's what I did, and that did not work out well, so don't do that. That's the general tenor of many of our conversations, that he can learn from my mistakes. And, you know, he's a very wise young man, and I'm really, I'm very thrilled that you have called him as your pastor.

Well, one morning I was at a local coffee shop waiting for some people, and they were a little bit late, and so I struck up a conversation with a man who turned out to be the owner of the coffee shop, and talked about the joys of coffee, which I love, and what it's like to run a shop. And then he asked me, he goes, well, what do you do? And I said, well, I'm a pastor of a church. And he goes, oh, that's neat. He goes, I'm a Christian, but I'm just not into the church thing. My wife goes to church, but I'm just not into that. In fact, he went on to say, you know, basically, I'm just part of the whole body of Christ. And this man represents a growing number of people in our society who call themselves Christians. They call themselves Christians, but they describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious. Or they say they're Christians, but they're not into organized religion.

religion. And there's some understandable reasons why they're not into organized religion. That the church has had scandal after scandal after scandal. And it's not just those other churches.

Our own little tribe of Presbyterian churches has had our own share of scandals over the years. And you can understand why people might say, you know, I'm just going to be me and Jesus, and that's all I need, and I don't need this church thing. And we understand that. Now, others fail to affiliate with the church because they don't really see a need. Because after all, you know, you don't have to go to church to worship God, right? I mean, you can worship God in your home. You can worship God in the mountains. You can worship God in nature. Or you can even just stay home. And you can worship church online. Your iPhone has a church service right there. In fact, you can download a sermon you like and get your own music playlist, and you'll like all the songs.

You'll never complain about the music in church again. And so it's kind of an ideal setup. And the other thing that was just great about that is you don't have to deal with any of the annoying people. I mean, it's just you. And so there's not going to be anybody there who's going to kind of rub you the wrong way and irritate you. And so you're just part of that big, invisible church. Now, let's be honest. Some of that sounds kind of attractive. Some of that doesn't sound all bad. But here, Paul's speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus. And we see here the importance of the church. Not this big, invisible thing that you can't touch. There is such a thing as an invisible church. But the great theologian John Murray said that term causes more confusion than it's worth.

[5 : 06] Because then we begin to think that the church is truly invisible without realizing it's always particular. And that the church is always represented in a local body of believers with living, breathing human beings with whom you must rub elbows. So let's begin by looking at the importance of the local church. As I mentioned, Paul spent seven to eight years with these people.

He has discipled these leaders. He has watched them grow. Probably about three of those seven to eight years in that region has been here at Ephesus. And now he is leaving. And if you read the whole account here, he's leaving with tears. I mean, this is a very sad goodbye. But he has to go. And he leaves them what some would call his last will and testament. Now the elders to whom he's speaking are not self-appointed leaders. These aren't people who said, I should be in charge here. As you read the book of Acts and you read Paul's other letters, we find that there's an orderly process for recognizing leaders in the church. They've been appointed by the apostles. And then from now on, what we've seen is those who've been appointed by the apostles lay hands on the next generation and the next generation the next generation. So when Matthew was ordained here a while back, the hands that were laid on him were laid on by somebody who else had hands laid on by them. And you can trace it all the way back to the apostles. It's an amazing thing. Same is true for all of your elders here in this church.

The laying on of hands goes all the way back. And so they've been properly ordained in the church. More importantly, verse 28, Paul says that the Holy Spirit is the one who's made these men elders.

In other words, the church is simply recognizing what God's Spirit has already done. So the men who are elders have been appointed by God for the care of the local church. And Paul tells them this is not going to be easy. This is going to be a very difficult task. He says, threats will come to the church both from outside and from within. And so they have to be watchful. And without these watchful godly leaders, the church will not survive. The church will not make it. Christians are not to be lone wolves going at it alone. Paul says instead, we're not lone wolves. Rather, we are a flock gathered together, guided and guarded by God's appointed shepherds. And so to be a Christian then means you're part of a church. And not just the church, but a church, a local church with elders and pastors and those who others who profess the same faith. There's no such thing as a freelance Christian or a Christian without portfolio. Biblically speaking, being part of the universal church means being part of the local church. The two are inseparable. In fact, we see this in the commands that God gives to us. In Hebrews chapter 13 verse 17, the writer of Hebrews tells us, actually God tells us through the writer of Hebrews, he says, obey your leaders and submit to them for they are keeping watch over your souls and those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning for that would be of no advantage to you. Now notice that this idea of obeying your leaders and doing it with joy and not with grumbling is not a suggestion. Paul's not saying this is a good idea.

This is a biblical command, something we are called by God to do. And we're explicitly told that we're to gather together and to live under the authority of those whom God has appointed overseers. And so as members of the church, what that means for us, and by the way, those are pastors and elders, we've taken vows as part of the church as well. It means that sometimes that things may not be happening the way you think are necessarily best. Has that ever happened to you in a church experience? I'm the pastor of a church. That happens all the time in the church in my experience. So what do you do? Well, there are proper ways to deal with that. You go to your leaders. You speak to them. How do we typically handle problems in the church? How do we typically handle them? Do we go to the leaders? No, what we'll do is we'll go to everybody else. And we'll go to everybody else and we'll call it discernment.

[9 : 18] I'm just being discerning about what's going on here. There's a biblical word for it. It's called gossip. And it's called stirring up dissension. And so what we're called to do then is not to stir up dissension. We're called then to follow our leaders as God has ordained them in their proper place.

So to be a Christian means you're not only connected to Christ, but you're connected to Christ's people. And you're under his God-ordained authority structure. But here's the problem.

If you're part of the local church, you better come in with your eyes wide open because the next point is the church is a mess. The church is a mess. And we see this with Paul speaking to them.

He says Paul gathers these leaders together and he charges them as overseers of the flock. And he tells them it's not going to be easy. And he warns them, notice this, that false teachers will arise in the church. That means there's going to be false doctrine that's going to be taught in the church. And he's saying to guard against that. In fact, he even warns them that some of these errors will come from other elders. And not only is there going to be doctrinal conflict, there's going to be personal conflict. Paul later writes a letter to the same church, the church at Ephesus. And in his letter, he warns them against anger, bitterness, selfishness, and tearing people down. He then tells them that in the church they need to forgive one another. Now what's presupposed in the command that you're to forgive one another? You're going to be sinned against. You're not going to say forgive one another because nothing's ever going to go wrong. But he's assuming you will be sinned against in the church. Someone is going to offend you. Oftentimes when new people come to a church,

I'm sure you've had this happen here in Athens at our church, they'll come and they go, oh, I love this church. It's so different from my other church. I'm so glad to be gone there. And I'm thinking, oh boy. Oh boy. Because, you know, if I have not offended you yet, that only means we don't know each other. That is all that that means. To know me is to be offended by me almost. And so hopefully most of the time, not always, most of the time not intentionally. But it's, you know, we can see this in the church. And so you look at the church and we see what happens, that the mark of the church is not sinlessness. That is not a mark of the church. The mark of the church here that Paul is talking about is grace. Not sinlessness, but grace. The difference between the world and the church is not that you'll be offended by one and not by the other. The difference between the world and the church is in the church there's grace, there's forgiveness. We forgive one another for what they do to us because Christ has forgiven us. And so the church actually gets to be a place where you get to practice forgiveness. If you want to learn about the grace of God, you learn it in the church. First through the proclamation of grace in the word, but then you learn it through the practicing of grace with one another. Because you are going to sin against one another. You are going to be offended by one another. And so what we're to do is we're to be a model of grace. And even pastors and elders, elders, obviously, are broken people themselves. And yet even though they're broken, they are called to be God's ordained means of caring for the messy church. Elders are sinners. They offend people. They make mistakes. Elders are also godly men who've been set apart by the Holy Spirit for the care of his church. And without elders, imperfect though they may be, the flock is unprotected and will come to ruin. And so Paul, you know, Paul's not naive about elders. He's not thinking these guys have arrived and that they're going to do everything perfectly. He knows what he's dealing with. Paul understands original sin. He understands human depravity. He understands the men he's put in charge. And yet he still says these things that we're to honor those who are in authority over us. So the messiness of the church can make you want to run away. And trust me, I understand that. I've been in the church my whole life. I get that. But there's a reason why we stay. Some say, why bother with the church? Why bother with the messiness? And Paul answers that in verse 28 with the glory of the local church. The glory of the local church. How do you determine how much something is worth? Let's say your house. And you love your house.

[13 : 57] And so you think it should be worth, say, \$300,000. But nobody offers you \$300,000. They offer you \$250,000. What's your house worth? \$250,000. Let's say your Aunt Edna painted this beautiful painting that you love and you've been kept in your attic. And to you, this is a priceless treasure. And you put it up on eBay. And the highest bid you get is five bucks. What is Aunt Edna's painting worth? Now, it's worth a lot more to you. But on the open market, it's five bucks. What's the church worth? You see what it's worth by what someone is willing to pay for it. And what does Paul say the church is worth here in our passage?

The worth of the church is the blood of Christ. God purchased the church with his own blood. The church is precious to Jesus and therefore ought to be precious to us. If I say, what's the most corrupt church in the New Testament, what do you say? I vote for Corinthians, right? I mean, they are, I mean, you're talking about a church that's pretty messed up. They have divisions, cliques, false teachings, lawsuits, drunkenness, flagrant sexual immorality. I mean, it's just like the catalog of the seven deadly sins all in one place as Paul writes his letter to them. And it's a notoriously corrupt church. Yet listen to how Paul describes that church when he writes them that letter. He says that they are, quote, sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, that is holy ones, together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. He even says that he gives thanks for them because of the grace of God that was given to them. Again, Paul is not naive. He's writing about all their problems, and yet he looks at the church, even though he knows they're messed up, and he thanks them because he does not see them as they are currently living, but he sees them as the radiant bride of Christ. He sees the beauty and the glory of the church. See, we see the church with all of its stains. Jesus sees the church in all of her beauty. Because of the loving sacrifice of Jesus for his bride, the church, this messed up body of Christ with messed up people and messed up pastors and messed up elders, is holy without blemish, clothed, and glorious splendor. Jesus loves the church.

And if you love Jesus, you're going to love what he loves. I mean, I think about this way as a parent. What if somebody were to say to me, Mark, I really like you, but I can't stand your children. Well, you don't like me. You don't like my children. First of all, you'd love my children.

Me, the one you might have trouble with. But you think, no, you can't. No, if you're going to love me, you've got to love my children. You can't take one without the other. And if you're going to love Jesus, you have to love his bride. And so Jesus loves his bride. Now, why is this important?

And why, for the elders, why is it important for them to know? Why is it important for us to know? Because the messiness of the church will cloud our judgment to the value of the church. And our constant temptation will be to assess the church by worldly means rather than gospel means.

[17 : 18] Because as you interact and live among the people of the church, you're going to be tempted not to esteem them highly. They will sin against you. They're going to get on your nerves. Anybody here ever have anybody in the church get on their nerves? Okay, you don't have to raise your hands. It's okay.

Just me. Some people will offend your cultural sensibilities. Others are going to act in very unchristian ways, and you're going to be tempted to write them off. You're going to be tempted to say, they're not worth my time. They're not worth the investment. They're not worth the hassle.

And when this happens, what you have to realize is you have an idealized image of the church and not a biblical image of the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a helpful little booklet called Life Together. And in it, he said this, On innumerable occasions, a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image. That is, a wishful image of the dream of a perfect church.

And those who love their dream of Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community, even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. And those who dream of this idealized community then demand that these dreams be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter into the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another, and even God accordingly. And whatever does not go their way, they call a failure. You ever been guilty of that? You know who's most guilty of that often? Pastors. And particularly because pastors oftentimes call out to call the church to the vision of what calls it to be. And what can happen then is you begin to love your dream for how the church ought to be rather than loving the people that are actually there. And when that happens,

Bonhoeffer rightly says, you become a destroyer of the church. You become the cancer that kills it. The church, like any living organism, cannot be loved generally. You can't just have this general love for the church. You have to have a specific love for the specific church. And we're called to love the church. So by showing us the church is both messy and needy of the corrective leadership of elders, and yet also precious to God, so much so that he obtained her with his own blood, Paul reminds us that we are called to live lives in the messiness of community, and that our fellowship with one another is not based on works, but it's based on grace. The gospel is not only how we relate to Christ, but it's also the basis for how we relate to one another. That is, think about this.

[20 : 12] Fellowship with others is not based on their performance any more than your fellowship with Christ is based on your performance. Because if your fellowship with Christ is based on your performance, we're all up a creek. We're all lost. But the gospel is that our relationship with God is not based on our performance, but on Christ's performance. We are justified by grace alone.

Alone. Through faith alone. In Christ alone. And because we are made right with God through grace alone, and we relate to him by grace alone, the same is true for how we relate to one another's.

The gospel is not be good and perform well, and then God will accept you. The gospel is, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And so if you're a Christian, God does not relate to you on the basis of your performance, but the performance of Christ. And therefore, that's how we're to relate to one another. As Bonhoeffer again reminds us, our community consists solely in what Christ has done for both of us, not what we have done for one another. And here's where the church can be such a beautiful witness to the world. We tell the world about God's unconditional love.

Our world doesn't believe in unconditional love. They don't think it actually exists. But if we can tell them about God's unconditional love, and then we can show that unconditional love in the way that we love one another, suddenly our proclamation becomes believable. The world will begin to see as we love one another. These aren't my words, right? This is Jesus' words, right?

The world will know that you're mine by your love for one another. And when we love one another, and forgive one another, and bear with one another, then the church will begin to see that the gospel message we proclaim is true. So church, it's a beautiful thing. It's a messy thing, but it's Christ's bride. And so we are called to love it. Let's pray.

[22 : 15] Father, we do thank you just for your word, for the encouragement and exhortation it gives to us. And Father, we confess that many of us come to the church with that dream of the perfect church, and we begin to judge everyone by it. Oh, Lord, forgive us. Because if you were to treat us that way, who could stand before you? So, Lord, we pray that we would love the church as it is, even as you love us. And Lord, we do pray, though, that as the church, we would continue to grow more in holiness and grace, and to live in a way that conforms to your will. But Lord, we also pray that we would learn what it means to love one another, bear with one another, encourage one another, and forgive one another. And so, Lord, may the world know that we are yours by our love for one another. So, Father, I pray for this church. I pray this church, as they follow the lead of their elders, that they would be obedient to your command, a command that is as good for us as your church, that they would obey and submit, that they would do so willingly, that they would not make it hard for those who are leading them, but instead would seek to be an encouragement to them. We pray this particularly on this occasion as Matthew is being installed as the pastor here at this church.

May they give him the encouragement and support that he needs. May they be ones who are quick to forgive him, and particularly as he leads and at times will do things that some people may not like, as he works together with the other elders, and the elders together may do things that they do not like. But, oh, Lord, we pray. We pray, oh, Lord, that this church be marked by unity, by peace, by love, by adoration of you as well. And so, Lord, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.