**Priorities in Ministry** (Acts 20: 17-38)

For Paul the future was very uncertain and humanly speaking very bleak indeed. ***" … the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."*** Paul knew that he would not see the Ephesian elders again. This was his last opportunity for ministry in what is now Turkey.

I would like you to notice three things about Paul:

- He was quite unmoved by the things that threatened his life and comfort. (v. 24)
- He was deeply moved by anything that threatened the welfare of the "flock". (v. 31)
- His top priority was to spend time with the leaders of the believers in the Ephesian church. He gives these overseers of the believers in Ephesus four instructions – you must care for them, guard them, feed them and lead them.

**1. Guard them by your spiritual alertness**

The Lord Jesus has called us to spiritual leadership – all of us in different measures. So one of our tasks is to evaluate and guard the believers committed to our care. Paul says, ***"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers …"*** (v. 28)

So do we take stock of ourselves? Do we welcome criticism? Most of us have blind spots about our own character, mannerisms, habits etc. It would be good if we invited frank comments, suggestions and criticism from our team members, but more importantly from national believers and especially national leaders. Then we should receive the comments as said in love, evaluate them and make the necessary corrections.

We each need to consider what our own particular responsibility is. ***"Be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.***" (v. 31)

The word "watch" is used in the New Testament in three areas:

- in connection with **prayer**
- in connection with the **second coming of the Lord Jesus**
- in connection with the **pastoral care of the flock**

Watching involves three things

- an awareness of what is happening
- spiritual discernment concerning its significance
- a readiness to take appropriate action

So we ought to be informed, discerning and to actively participate in the great conflict.

In Phil. 1:9 and Col. 1:9 Paul's prayer was for discernment. Heb. 5:14 suggests this was a matter of training for it speaks of, ***"The mature who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil"***. This discernment will come to us when we recognise our need and claim the promise of James 1:5.

For an example, "Brother John has again missed the prayer meeting." We should notice such things! We ask why? But John gives us a lame excuse. Clearly something is wrong, but what? We need discernment. We go to his home – usually the best place to discover trouble. Is this why Paul taught publicly **and** "from house-to-house"? He got to know whole families personally and taught them the relevant Biblical truths. Do we do this? A shepherd who is "watching" won't be taken by surprise

when the devil attacks because the shepherd will be aware of his tactics, methods and movements. ***"We are not ignorant of his devices."*** (2 Cor. 2:11)

We are reminded in Heb. 13:17 that true 'shepherds' are***, "Those who watch for your souls – tireless in their concern for you."*** (NEB) We need to watch with care and concentration. ***"Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about seeking whom he may devour."*** (1 Pet. 5:8)

Paul tells them, ***"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock."*** (v. 29) There would be no mercy! They would be out for their own ends! But they were not only to be on guard concerning external attacks. ***"Also from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them."*** (v. 30) In 2 Cor. 11:26 we read of ***"the perils of false brethren".***

What should we do? Paul says "watch" and protect the sheep from over-emphasis of some truth or perversion of the truth or withholding of the truth. We must give the truth – the whole truth – the whole counsel of God.

**2. Feed them by your doctrinal loyalty**

We can't feed the flock adequately if we are not faithful and obedient to God's Word. Paul set a good example here. He says, ***"Serving the Lord with all humility of mind".*** (v. 19) Paul was still a humble disciple, still learning, but a faithful steward of what he received. He says***, "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you"***. (1 Cor. 11:23) See also 1 Tim. 4:13-16 and 2 Tim. 2:15.

Paul says, ***"I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."*** So Paul was faithful in feeding the flock of God. He wanted the Ephesian elders to do as he had done and continue to give the believers the whole counsel of God. See also 1 Pet. 5:1-4 and John 21 – ***"Feed my lambs"***.

**3. Lead them by your practical example**

In the New Testament leaders are examples of lowly service. (Luke 22:24-27) The Lord Jesus reversed the whole concept of leadership as it was understood by everyone else. Leaders in ministry must be those who serve and work alongside others. In Roman galleys the leader was the man with the whip who made the slaves work and beat a drum to set the pace. Here in Cambridge, on the River Cam, we have scores of rowing "eights" run by the various colleges. In an "eight" you have eight oarsmen and the leader is the stroke. He/she sits in front of the crew and sets the pace by working and seeing to it that his/her oar enters the water a split second before the rest of the crew. To make the boat go faster, it is he/she who must work harder in order to lead the others. In Philips translation 1 Pet. 5:1-4 puts it this way, ***"Now may I, and myself an elder, say a word to you my fellow elders? I speak as one who actually saw Christ suffer and as one who will share with you the glories that are to be unfolded. Shepherd your flock of God, looking after them not because you feel compelled to, but willingly, as God would wish. Never do this work thinking of your personal gain but with true compassion. You should not aim at being dictators, but examples of Christian living in the eyes of the flock committed to your charge. And then when the Chief Shepherd reveals Himself, you will receive that crown of glory which cannot fade."***

So Paul was able to challenge the Ephesian elders to follow his own personal example. Here are some characteristics of that example:

- It was a **continuous** example, ***"You yourselves know how I lived among you all the time from the first day that I set foot in Asia."*** (Acts 20:18)
- He was an example to others **in his service**, ***"Serving the Lord"***. (v. 19) The leader is the one who serves.

- It was an example of **humility**, ***"Serving the Lord with all humility"***. (v. 19) Humility is not underestimating oneself, but forgetting oneself. Paul was closely following in the steps of his master the Lord Jesus.
- It was an example of **suffering**, ***"Many tears and trials"***. (v. 19) See also 2 Tim. 2:12.
- It was an example of **self-giving**, ***"… I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable … and teaching you in public and from house-to-house."*** (v. 20)
- It was an example of **courage**, ***" … none of these things move me"***. Compare 1 Jn. 4:18)
- It was an example of **self-denial**, ***"… neither do I count my life dear to myself."*** Compare Lk. 9:23.
- It was an example of **faithfulness** (v. 26). Paul had discharged his responsibility faithfully.
- It was an example of **earnestness** – ***"with tears"*** (v. 31). Spurgeon said, "**Winners of souls must be weepers for souls**".
- It was an example of the **right sense of independence**. (v. 33)
- It was an example of **hard work*, "These hands have ministered to my necessities <u>and</u> to those who were with me."*** (v. 34) This enabled Paul to get alongside people literally and at their level.
- It was an example of **generosity** to others in need. (v. 34-35). Remember, ***"It is more blessed to give than to receive".***
- It was an example of **worship**, ***"He knelt down and prayed with them all"***. Paul's attitude to his master, the Lord Jesus, is expressed in this act of giving and it was a convincing witness to the Lordship of Christ in his life.
- It was an example of **love**, ***" … being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again."*** (v. 38)

From the above it is obvious that Paul was a man of love. No more powerful testimony of Paul's love for the believers at Ephesus could be found than this indirect reference at his parting from them. These factors must be at the heart of our ministry.