

Shepherding God's Flock with Integrity

Acts 20:17-37

I've never met the Apostle Paul, but I feel like I know him pretty well. I've read all of his writings numerous times, and I am especially familiar with those portions of his writings that are autobiographical, since they are so instructive for a person in my position. In those autobiographical portions Paul is extremely transparent, and so it's not that difficult to mentally construct a personality profile of Paul. It's not hard to know what made him tick, to identify his passions, priorities, personality traits, convictions, calling, motives, methods of reasoning, and philosophy of ministry.

I'm telling you this because it wasn't long after I moved to Pratum that I began to tell my family and friends back home in California, "Hey, there's a guy in leadership at this church who's just like the Apostle Paul." By the way, that was not just a first impression. I still have that opinion more than twenty years later.

Today we are honoring Pastor Dan Tuggy, who has been serving as an elder at Emmanuel Bible Church for 25 years or more, and has been a staff pastor for more than ten. Dan is stepping out of a pastoral staff role but he is not retiring from ministry. He will continue to serve as a shepherd at EBC as long as the Lord allows.

There is a marvelous passage in Acts 20 that is commonly referred to as Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. It marked the end of his direct, personal ministry to the church at Ephesus, though he still served the Lord for several years in other places. We are going to look at this passage because it gives us a blueprint for effective pastoral ministry, and it also exemplifies Dan's ministry to our church.

Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and wanted to get there before an important festival. Since he didn't have time to stop in Ephesus on his way, he called for the elders of the church to meet him in Miletus. Paul had served as a pastor in Ephesus for three years, and so he knew these men well. They were colleagues and partners in ministry, but they were also dear friends (you'll see that come out in the text). In this address Paul provides us with insight into what made him do what he did, what kept him going, and what his life and ministry were all about—insights that are highly instructive for those of us who have also been entrusted with the care of souls.

We read in **verses 17-18**. *¹⁷ From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸ 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.*

In this passage, Paul is giving an account of his ministry; he's providing the basis for his trustworthiness as a spiritual leader. Why should he be trusted? Why should people listen to his words and take them to heart?

He could have flashed his badge that proved he was a genuine Apostle. He could have shown them a lengthy list of his credentials. He could have sent letters of reference from the spiritual VIP's in Jerusalem. He could have done a number of things that would have impressed them with just how important he was and how privileged they were to have ever met him. But he didn't.

Instead, he refreshed their memories; he simply reminded them of the way he conducted himself in their presence, and that alone was sufficient to prove the authenticity of his message and the integrity of his character.

What was that conduct? Look at **verse 19**. *“I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews” (20:19).*

When Paul said, *“I served the Lord with great humility”* it means that when he showed up in Ephesus he didn’t have the attitude, “Hey everybody, look at me. I’m a genuine Apostle with a capital ‘A’; I’m God’s gift to you people, so listen up, because you are very fortunate to have me.”

No, Paul was not the least bit full of himself. He wasn’t condescending, even though he was an apostle, hand-picked by Jesus himself to be his ambassador; even though he was *the* most influential person in the world at this time; even though God *had* used him to do astonishing things; even though he had an impressive list of accomplishments on his resume.

I would suggest to you that Paul was genuinely humble for one simple reason. He saw himself for who he *really* was. To say it another way, he had an accurate, truthful view of himself.

Paul’s spiritual eyes had been opened to see the Lord in his brilliant splendor, his incomparable majesty, and his blazing holiness. And Paul also saw *himself* in relation to the Lord, and in comparison to the Lord Paul was a microscopic particle of dirt. In comparison to the Lord Paul was not the least bit impressive, and there was nothing about him or in him about which he could boast; there was nothing that he had ever done that was worthy of any real honor and glory. Which is why Paul would say, “I am what I am by the grace of God”; and about his apostleship, “I am less than the least of all the apostles”. He also called himself the “chief of sinners”.

My friends, this is precisely why Paul could say to the Ephesian elders, *“I served the Lord with great humility” (20:18)*. It was not an act. It was not a persona. It was an attitude that came from a truthful, accurate understanding of who he was. And that humility is what gave him God’s stamp of approval and made his ministry effective among the Ephesians.

You don’t have to be too long in Dan’s presence to become aware of his formidable intellect. He’s one of the smartest men I know, and he’s one of the best theologians I know. But that’s not nearly the most impressive thing about Dan. He is genuinely humble, and for the same reason as Paul. He understands who he is before God. And, just like Paul, that humility is most pronounced when his character is questioned and his motives are misinterpreted, something that inevitably happens to a person in leadership.

That humility, I believe, is the foundation of Dan’s integrity, and effective ministry requires utmost integrity.

But there is something else about Paul in verse 19 that is also true of Dan that I don’t want to pass over. *“I served the Lord with great humility and with tears.”* Why would Paul make reference to his tears? Was he a worrier? Was he on the verge of cracking up because of the opposition he had to endure?

No, these were tears shed on behalf of those to whom Paul was ministering—people in the church who were hurting in some way or were going through some dark night of the soul. He shed tears for people who *had* been walking in the light, but were drifting back into the

darkness; people whose love for Jesus had grown cold; people who were being led astray by false teachers; people who were willfully living in sin and refusing to part with it, people who were so deceived that they didn't even see that what they were doing was sin; people who were stuck; people who were indifferent to spiritual things.

Paul shed tears for unbelievers who did not see their need for Jesus Christ, or who rejected Him as God's provision for their salvation. He shed tears for his own countrymen who thought that being religious or doing good works was the way to find God's favor.

And do you know why he shed tears for all these people? Because he genuinely loved them. He loved them deeply. He said to the Thessalonian church, *"We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us"* (1 Thess. 2:8).

If, when you think of the Apostle Paul, you think of him as a stern theologian, or a hell-fire preacher, or an intimidating apostle, then you've misunderstood Paul and misread the New Testament. Paul was a tender-hearted man who loved deeply. He was a man who was motivated to do what he did by love—he was *compelled* by the love of Christ and *propelled* by his love for people.

It's exactly the same with Dan Tuggy. I've seen him shed tears far more times than I can count over the people in our church who are struggling, or hurting, or walking in the darkness, or living in willful sin. I've seen a tenderness in Dan that is just as pronounced as Tom Aman's or Greg Hoffman's tenderness, often expressed in tears, because he loves so deeply.

Love is an essential ingredient of integrity. And effective ministry requires utmost integrity.

Look now at **verses 20-24**. ²⁰ *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.* ²² *"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.* ²³ *I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.* ²⁴ *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

I suppose someone could read this statement and conclude that Paul was a type A, driven kind of person. But I would submit to you that's Paul's passion, his singular focus, and his sense of urgency was *not* a personality trait. It was the result of a conviction about the Lord's call upon his life. He knew that Jesus had given him a very specific assignment—to preach the gospel. And he was *preoccupied* with that assignment and determined to let nothing distract him from fulfilling that assignment. He said, in 1 Corinthians, *"I am compelled to preach the gospel. Woe be unto me if I do not preach the gospel"* (9:16).

Dan has the same attitude. Even before he became a full-time staff member. God called him to be an elder in the church, and there were many times when he owned a construction business when he would be called upon, in the middle of the day, to deal with a matter from the church. And I never once saw him hesitate. His priority and his passion has always been to be faithful to the assignment God has given him to do. Faithfulness is an essential ingredient of integrity. And effective ministry requires utmost integrity.

Look now at **verses 25-27**. ²⁵ *"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.* ²⁶ *Therefore, I declare to you today that I*

am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ *For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*

What's going on here? This seems, at first glance, to be an odd sequence of statements. First, Paul says in verse 25, "This is the last time we'll ever see each other." This news was like a bomb for his dear friends from Ephesus! We find out later in the passage that this statement caused these elders great sorrow. Yet Paul's follow-up statement in verse 26 seems anything *but* tender. It seems so blunt—a bit defensive, even. It almost sounds as if Paul is using the language of an attorney to prove his integrity.

In my research I discovered that this was a common communication technique in the Roman world at this time when someone was giving a farewell address. But it was not so much a way to defend one's honor as it was a way of giving an account for one's actions. And that is precisely what Paul is doing in verse 26. He is saying, "In light of the fact that my ministry with you is concluding, in light of the fact that this is the last time we'll ever see each other on this earth, I want to give an account of what I did when I was with you in Ephesus."

He says, "I am innocent of the blood of all men". What does that mean?

Paul just got through telling the elders in verse 24 that he was dedicated to the proclamation of the gospel, the task the Lord Jesus had given to him. In verse 27 he says I am committed to proclaiming the whole gospel—not just the parts that are palatable, not just the parts that leave the audience feeling good. Paul preached the *whole* Gospel, which includes talking about sin and death and judgment and hell. Paul didn't shy away from those unpopular and controversial portions, even though they frequently got him in trouble. Paul preached the whole counsel of God, and did so with utmost care and diligence and thoroughness and excellence.

If Paul had been half-hearted or careless or sloppy in the way he performed his duties as an ambassador of Jesus Christ he *would* have been guilty of the blood of some men. Because some of the people that God intended to hear the life-saving, liberating message of the gospel through Paul would *not* have heard it, and would *not* have had an opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life.

One of the things I have appreciated so much about Dan is the utmost care, and diligence, and thoroughness, and excellence with which he does his ministry. For example, if someone comes to us with a theological question or a question about what the Bible says about a current issue, Dan would always take the time to write a thorough explanation and analysis of that issue that is firmly rooted in Scripture. Furthermore, Dan is very careful not to ride his own hobby horse, nor does he have pet passages of Scripture that he emphasizes to the exclusion of others. He is also very careful to preach and teach and emphasize *all* of Scripture. And those of you who have been through our ELLS class have seen how careful he is with the Scriptures.

Due diligence is an essential ingredient of integrity. And effective ministry requires utmost integrity.

Look now at **verses 28-31**. ²⁸ *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.* ²⁹ *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.* ³⁰ *Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to*

draw away disciples after them. ³¹ *So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

I don't know how Paul *knew* that savage wolves *would* come in and wreak havoc in the church. I don't know if the Lord revealed this to him, or if he knew, from his own experience in Ephesus, that there were wolves in sheep's clothing in that particular flock.

But this happens in churches all the time—people who rise up from within a congregation and promote some distorted or watered-down version of the truth, passing it off as God's revelation. They either add something to the pure gospel or take something away from it, and usually it sounds pretty good, it seems appealing, and it sounds reasonable.

It is the elders' responsibility to watch out for this. Remember, these are *God's* sheep, which He purchased with His own blood. They are precious to Him, and their health and strength is extremely important to Him.

Dan has always been vigilant about this. He has always listened with a discerning ear to things being taught or things that are written. It's an essential ingredient of integrity, and effective ministry requires utmost integrity.

Look at **verses 32-35**. ³² *“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.* ³³ *I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.* ³⁴ *You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.* ³⁵ *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.’”*

Paul is declaring three things about the way he conducted himself while in Ephesus. He said, “I was not greedy, I was not lazy, and I was not stingy”. To state it positively, “I was content with what I had, I worked hard so that I could pay my own expenses and not be a burden to anyone, and I was generous with those who had needs”. Why would Paul emphasize this?

I think it's because there is perhaps nothing that damages the credibility of a Christian leader more quickly and more permanently than suspicions of greed and laziness. And yet, in my experience, greed and laziness are two of the most common complaints directed toward pastors and evangelists. “He is in the ministry for the money”, we hear people say.

You probably know that it was Paul's custom, when staying for an extended period of time in a city, to earn his own living by making tents so that he would not have to be dependent on anyone and so he could provide for his needs and the needs of his companions. In the first century there were a lot of traveling teachers and philosophers who went from city to city giving lectures and holding public forums, just like Paul. These philosophers and teachers supported themselves by either charging admission fees, by being financed by wealthy patrons, by begging, or by working at a trade.

Working at a trade was the least common option, for several reasons. Obviously, it required a lot of the time and energy, and left less time to teach. But working at a trade also called into question the credibility of the teacher. They reasoned, “If he is working doing manual labor, he must not be important and his message must not be important either.”

That happened to Paul in Corinth. Paul's credentials for being a legitimate apostle were called into question by some in the church. Obviously, it was a great honor to be an apostle.

An apostle had a great amount of authority and responsibility in the early church. An apostle was a *VIP*. *VIP*'s are usually treated special. One of the reasons some doubted Paul's apostolic authority is because he went out of his way *not* to be treated special. He stayed away from the red carpet, and he turned down the perks and privileges that came with his position.

He also insisted on paying his own way, and he did so by making tents, which is manual labor. Greeks in that day despised manual labor, because they associated it with slavery. No *free* man would *willingly* work with his hands, and anybody who *did* work with his hands was considered unintelligent and unimportant.

For this reason, some thought that Paul's manual labor weakened his authority and credibility, and cast doubt on his authenticity as a genuine apostle.

But there was something more important to Paul than what Greeks thought about him. It was the reputation of the Gospel itself. Paul didn't want anybody to think that he was profiting from God's free gift. If he was going to offer God's free gift of salvation, it was a matter of integrity for Paul to preach it free of charge.

I remember hearing about an ex NFL football player who became a follower of Jesus and began giving his testimony at stadium events around the country. Then I heard that he charged \$10,000 for each appearance. When I heard that I was troubled. I thought, "What are you doing charging money to tell the story of the free gift that Christ has given to you!" And then I thought, "I wonder how credible his testimony would be if the audience knew that he was getting paid \$10,000 to do this?"

We are ambassadors of Christ! We are not in the ministry to promote our own interests or pad our pocketbooks! We are certainly not in it to make a profit! We are in it so people can be introduced to Jesus, and so they will want to respond to Him. We are in it to show that Jesus is God's provision for everything we need.

Greed is incompatible with the Gospel. A sense of entitlement is incompatible with the Gospel. And I can say with confidence that Dan Tuggy could never be accused of either of those things. He has spent most of his adult life in ministry being a "tentmaker" like Paul, only the "tents" Dan made were more solid and enduring, I assure you. But even when he was being paid for ministry on staff at EBC, it is his attitude about money that proves what he is really like at the core of his being. He is extraordinarily dependent on the Lord to provide, and he is extremely generous with what the Lord does provide. And that speaks volumes.

Dependence on the Lord and generosity with one's resources are ingredients of integrity, and effective ministry requires utmost integrity.

Finally, look at **verses 36-38**. ³⁶ *When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.* ³⁷ *They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.* ³⁸ *What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:17-38).*

This response from the elders to Paul's farewell address says it all. He was deeply loved, deeply admired, and deeply respected. And that is how we feel about Dan. Thank you, Dan, for being a man of absolute integrity. It has made your ministry so very effective.

SHEPHERDING GOD'S FLOCK WITH INTEGRITY
ACTS 20:17-38

MAIN IDEA: EFFECTIVE MINISTRY REQUIRES UTMOST INTEGRITY

THE HUMBLE SHEPHERD (17-18)

THE THOROUGH (DILIGENT) SHEPHERD (20-21)

THE FOCUSED SHEPHERD (22-24)

THE RESPONSIBLE SHEPHERD (25-27)

THE VIGILANT SHEPHERD (28-31)

THE TRUSTWORTHY SHEPHERD (33-35)

THE LOVED SHEPHERD (36-38)