

TAKE HEED TO YOURSELVES AND TO THE FLOCK

Peter Hay, prepared for word ministry, Sunday 6 December, 2020

Transcription of recording, slightly edited

Today, we will move to the fourth session of discussion regarding the letter that has been written to us concerning our fellowship as a church. In this session, we will consider Paul's instructions to the presbytery of the church to 'take heed' to themselves. Act 20:28.

Taking heed as overseers of the flock of God

He said that this was fundamental to their capacity to care for the flock among whom God had made them overseers.

In the last session, we talked about how God makes, or establishes, a person as an overseer in the church.

Now we will look at what it means for them to take heed to themselves so that they are able to do this work effectively.

Paul gave this instruction to the elders of the Ephesian church at the end of his third missionary journey. He was on his way down to Jerusalem and said, 'Chains await me.'

He called for all of the elders of the Ephesian church to come to him because he wanted to leave them with some instructions for the care of the church in Asia. This was halfway through his discourse to them.

He said, 'For I have not shunned to *declare* to you *the whole counsel of God*.' Act 20:27.

How awesome would it have been to hear that; to sit and listen to him minister during the couple of years that he was there.

'Therefore ...' Act 20:28.

We will lean on the word 'therefore'. He had declared the word to them, and the word was establishing the ground of fellowship. He was saying, 'Because I have declared that to you, *therefore* you are to take heed to yourselves.'

Another way of saying it is: 'Because of this word and the fellowship that it establishes,

you are to take heed to yourselves in relation to it.'

Overseers exemplify the culture of God according to His counsel, His fellowship

'I have declared to you the whole counsel of God.' Act 20:27.

'The counsel of God' refers to the fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - how They live, the nature of Their life, and what it should 'look like' in terms of the body.

He said, 'You are to take heed to yourselves in relation to that'. Another way of saying it is, 'You are to exemplify that culture'.

Presbyters take heed to yourselves

'Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock.'

Overseers are to exemplify this culture; to teach it, and to engage everyone who is part of the flock in that culture.

'Among which the Holy Spirit [the One who sets us apart for this work] has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

'For I know this, that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock.

'Also, from among yourselves, men will *rise up* [this sounds like leaven] speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

'Therefore, watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.' Act 20:28-31.

This is a strong admonition from Paul, and it applies to every presbytery of every lampstand church: 'presbyters, take heed to yourselves'.

Walk in the light, in first love - a fellowship of giving and receiving

So we are to take heed to ourselves in relation to this word *by walking in the light of the word with one another*.

And to 'walk in the light' of the word with one another is what it means to be in 'first love'.

Paul said, 'I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore, take heed to yourselves.'

Jesus noted, somewhat sadly, in His letter to the Ephesians, 'You have fallen from first love'.

First love is a tangible and practical relationship with one another which is based in *offering*.

First love is not a 'fuzzy love feeling' for one another; an affection.

There is to be affection, but first love is a *work*.

It is evident in *how* we interact with one another; not our feelings for one another.

First love is a tangible and practical *relationship* with one another that is based in *offering*.

It is *a fellowship of giving and receiving*, where those who are committed to first love *entreat* the word and fellowship of their brethren, and *give themselves* to know and care for their brethren in like manner.

The nature and expression of first love

The apostle Paul described the nature and expression of first love in his letter to the Corinthians.

'Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.' 1Co 13:1.

It is impressive to have the tongue of an angel but, without love, it is merely 'noise'. It will not achieve an effect.

'Angel' does not refer only to the tongue of the heavenly angels; it can also be the tongue of an *aggelos*, a presbyter.

'Though I have the tongue of men and presbyters, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And

though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.' 1Co 13:1-2.

'I am nothing' could sound like being 'forgotten', as though we do not even exist to God.

'And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love it profits me nothing.' 1Co 13:3.

'Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, it is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.' 1Co 13:4-7.

Love suffers long and is kind

We have read that passage many times but, practically, what does it 'look like'?

What does it mean for love to 'suffer long and to be kind'?

Firstly, it describes a person who is joined to the sufferings of Christ. They have resolved the issue of being conformed to His death and the fellowship of His sufferings.

It is amazing that that resolution is the first expression of love.

It is being joined to the sufferings of Christ, and giving out of *weakness* - the weakness of fellowship in the sufferings of Christ - not out of its abundance. That is *kindness*; it is not benevolence.

It is the kindness that comes out of the fellowship of Christ's offering and sufferings.

That is a bit of a change to the way that we think.

Love is not envious

Love 'does not envy.' Most people would say, 'I'm not envious of anyone.'

What is envy?

Envy is based in *comparison*. So, 'is not envious' means that they do not compare themselves, or judge themselves, against others. That is the basis of envy.

When we compare ourselves as to how we are doing or how others are doing, that is envy.

That is not the love of God, because the love of God does not judge that way.

The love of God compels us to judge only one way - that if Christ died for all, then we are dead with Him. 2Co 5:14.

And we now live for Him, and for those who also are dead with Him.

This is getting rid of envy. It is getting rid of comparison.

Love does not parade itself

What about 'parading' ourselves?

I think this is classic, because we all look at that and think, 'I don't walk around "with tickets on myself", parading myself, "beating my chest".'

That is not what 'parading ourselves' actually means.

When we think of those who parade themselves, we think of those who demand to be seen, but we need to look at what 'parading' fundamentally means.

The person who parades themselves is *not obedient* to anyone. The reason that they are parading themselves is because they are not under authority.

It is not all about 'chest beating' and 'ticket holding'; it is actually about whether a person is *under authority* or not.

The person who parades themselves is not obedient to anyone; they get on 'quietly'. This is interesting, because we usually think of those who parade themselves as being the people who are most vocal.

In fact, the one who parades themselves the most is the one who gets on quietly with their work and initiatives without the understanding that they need to lay them

down in a fellowship to receive them back as obedience.

We will consider in our coming session how this operates so that our offering is not the revelation of ourselves but, rather, is given to us as obedience to reveal another.

Even though I will be *doing* the work or even though I might have an initiative, the focus is that it is *laid down*.

Do you see that a person who is parading themselves is not obedient? They have not received obedience; they are going about, doing whatever they think they should.

That is what it means to 'parade'.

Love is not puffed up

We often think of a person who is 'puffed up' as someone who is proud. Their chest is a bit 'puffed out'.

However, we have been learning in this season that, when Paul referred to not being puffed up, he meant that they were dealing with *leaven*.

So, a person who is demonstrating love is searching for leaven in their lives and households, in the light of fellowship with their brethren.

Someone who does not love does not look for leaven. They are puffed up because they say they have no sin.

Now, obviously, no-one goes around saying that they have no sin.

The evidence that we say we have no sin is that we do not deal with the leaven in our life, in the light of the word.

'In the light of the word' actually means 'in *fellowship*'; we have fellowship with one another.

So, being 'puffed up' means that we do not think that we need to receive reflection from another on our lives so that we can put off initiatives or attitudes or behaviour that we can otherwise not see.

That is the delusion of leaven. We *think* we see, but we can *see only in the light of a lamp*.

Love is not rude

What about a 'rude' person? Paul said, 'Does not behave rudely.'

We often think of a rude person as someone who is nasty, has a nasty sort of demeanour or disposition or is unkind.

But a rude person is one who ignores the word and direction of the Lord as it is ministered by their brethren.

Rudeness is the complete inability to receive or to acknowledge another.

Love does not seek its own

'Seeking their own' means that they are focused on the place of their initiative, rather than desiring the capacity of the Spirit to lay down their life to reveal another. They think that love is to give what *they* have.

In this regard, King David said, 'Of Your own we have given You.' 1Ch 29:14.

We do not give what is sourced in ourselves - that would be 'seeking our own'. It is the ability to *reveal another*.

Love thinks no evil

What about a person who 'thinks no evil'?

This is part of love. It means that a person who thinks no evil is having their mind transformed through fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ.

They have the mind of Christ, which was demonstrated through obedience to the Father.

And my question to us all is, 'Do we see love as obedience to the authority of Christ in the church?'

It is very easy to try, or to attempt, to 'tick off' these elements of love and to give ourselves 'a good mark'.

As soon as we do that, however, we have left first love, because first love is our nature and conduct, *relationally*.

First love in the presbytery

So what will this activity of love be, practically, in the presbytery?

Remember, we are understanding what 'take heed to yourselves' means. It means to *live in first love*; and first love is suffering long and is kind, not envious, etc.

Inviting reflection from others - the initiative and obedience of faith

The only way that we can arrive at this context of taking heed to ourselves is when we are committed to opening our hearts and houses to receive adjustment from our brethren in relation to ministry, to our marriages and to our families.

Did you hear that? To take heed to ourselves is not to look at ourselves and think, 'I am making a judgement about whether I am in the way of not.'

We take heed to ourselves by *inviting* that reflection into our lives.

Remember that Paul was addressing the *overseers*. And not many overseers have been willing to open their hearts and houses to this kind of fellowship. Of course, this has resulted in shipwreck for many.

Leadership couples who are committed to first love open their hearts and houses to receive adjustment from their brethren in relation to their ministry. They are not the source of their own ministry.

They do not seek their own; they are able to receive in relation to their marriages and their families.

This active commitment - the *initiative* to *invite* it - is with the couple.

This active commitment to meeting and receiving one another is the action of washing one another's feet.

In this regard, Jesus said to His disciples who became the apostles, 'You must do this to one another. If you do not, you have no part with Me. You are not part of the fellowship.' Joh 13:8.

In this fellowship, they are able to hear from one another and to receive clarity regarding their sanctification.

The collegial mindset; not under authority

Now, this first love fellowship does not exist - a person is not connected in first love - when leadership couples interact with one another as 'work colleagues'.

If we invite reflection in relation to our ministry, we do not treat that person who is coming into our house as a 'colleague'.

Rather, we esteem them as being *the word of Christ* to us.

When leadership couples view their place in the presbytery as being work with other colleagues, they will not find this washing action. Under this fallen mode of engagement, their lives, marriages and families remain 'off limits' to others.

Now, people may say, 'I would be happy for someone', or 'I am comfortable for someone, to talk to me about my ministry or my marriage or my family', but they may not *entreat* it.

It is one thing to be 'happy' for it to happen; it is another to actually demonstrate *faith* - because *you* are to take heed to yourself.

And you take heed to yourself by inviting that into your house, not by giving yourself a 'good mark' or a 'bad mark' on the basis of your knowledge of good and evil.

It is not enough to say, 'I'm happy for someone to do it.'

To take heed to yourself is an *initiative* and *obedience of faith*. It is to *invite* it into your house.

The collegial mindset - in great darkness

Under this fallen mode of engagement - the 'collegial' mindset - people do not invite input into their marriages, families or ministry, because that is 'off limits'.

Often, this is because of the flawed presumption that their ministry viability depends on the presentation of a suitable image.

They think that for them to minister in the church, they actually have to have a good presentation, when the reality is that it is

tense at home, and the kids are 'messy'. There might be difficulties on a number of fronts.

However, instead of inviting the grace of God into the house, they maintain the veneer, because they believe that the veneer is consistent with the ministry position they hold.

That is a certain trajectory to death; it will not go well!

Now, as soon as we do that, we are 'parading ourselves'.

We are not under authority. We have made ourselves to be the source and the standard that we think others should measure themselves against.

So, as soon as we do that, we are parading ourselves, puffed up, rude, seeking our own, and we do not even know it.

We have good intentions, and our motivations are good, but if they are not in the light, they are *darkness*.

That is obvious, but when we are in darkness, we do not believe that we are! Jesus said that this is 'a great darkness'.

Relationship between the fellowship of presbytery and light

This is an amazing passage in relation to our understanding of the relationship between the fellowship of presbytery and lamp light in a context.

'The lamp of the body is the eye.' Mat 6:22.

This does not refer to only our natural body; it refers to the body of Christ.

The lamp of the body is the eye; it is the capacity to *see*.

'If therefore your eye is good [or, that lamp fellowship is in the light; it is first love; it is in one Spirit] your whole body will be full of light.'

The context of the body of Christ in which you are serving will be full of light, even though the mess of your life is evident, but changing. That is where the light is shining.

‘But if your eye is bad [dull, or sick], your whole body will be full of darkness.’

We have recently spoken about ‘putting a lamp under a sickbed’. It means that our ministry is limited by our own lameness.

And our own lameness can only be healed when we walk in the light of the word with our brethren. That is where the blood is effective.

‘But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness [because you believe in your own good work]?’

You believe that you are exemplifying the culture but, because you are *disconnected from fellowship*, everything that you do is perverse; it is darkness.

Christian leaders, or presbyters, must take heed to themselves in this manner that we have described, by inviting fellowship with their fellow presbyters; by giving and receiving.

Open fellowship and friendship

This is basic; we do not get together to ‘interrogate’ one another in relation to our families, marriages, etc. First and foremost, it is *friendship*.

It is willingness to be open, honest and real with one another; to be able to receive one another; to refresh one another through testimony and life.

That is what we are looking for. That is what love ‘looks like’.

Men who rise up speaking perverse things

Unless Christian leaders, or presbyters, take heed to themselves in this manner, they will inevitably fall from the four elements of Christ’s communion, or *agape* fellowship, which He called ‘first love’.

Paul said, ‘They will rise up and speak perverse [or leavened] things’. This is an amazing principle.

If a presbytery of a lampstand church is not committed to walking in first love, and to

taking heed to themselves through this kind of open fellowship and friendship with one another – remember, we are ‘friends of Christ’ if we do His commandments – they have not only fallen from first love.

Paul said that these men will then rise up and begin to speak perverse things, unintentionally. They do not even know that they are doing it.

They will think that they are speaking the same thing as the word that is being laid down in the context of the presbytery, but it will be completely different!

And they will draw disciples to themselves.

We see from the book of Revelation that once there is a loss of first love, it gives rise to all kinds of perverse doctrines; and this is what happened.

‘They will rise up and speak perverse [or leavened] things.’

Jesus addressed this in the book to the seven churches, in Revelation. He noted that ‘the synagogue of Satan’ gains traction in the church. It is a ‘synagogue’; it is an alternative communion table.

And it gives rise to ‘the doctrine of Balaam’, ‘the doctrine of the Nicolaitans’, and ‘the doctrine of Jezebel’. Rev2:14,15,20.

Fallen from first love to collegiality

It is amazing that Paul called the Ephesian elders, the overseers, to himself, warning them, ‘I have given you the whole counsel of God; therefore take heed to yourselves.’

And then the first letter that Jesus wrote to the church was to the presbytery of the Ephesian church. They had not taken heed to themselves!

How do we know that? It was because they had *fallen from first love*.

‘To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, “These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: “I know your works, your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil ... and have

found them liars; and you have persevered".
Rev 2:1-3.

This sounds like having your body 'burned', doesn't it?

'And have patience, and have laboured for My name's sake and have not become weary.'

That sounds like 'speaking with the tongue of men and angels, having the gift of prophecy, understanding all mysteries, all knowledge, having all faith, bestowing my goods to the poor, giving my body to be burned.' 1Co 13.

Jesus said to this church, 'I've seen you do all these things.'

'Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.' Rev 2:4.

All of their works counted for nothing because they had not taken heed to themselves.

'Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent.'
Rev 2:5.

That is an extraordinary statement! They had done great works; but He was not going to shut the lampstand down; He was going to give it to another presbytery because of this loss of first love and its practices.

There was no problem with the activities, labour, patience or spiritual gifts of the Ephesian presbyters; however, they had become 'colleagues'.

They were work colleagues who were empowered by association with the presbytery to minister in the church as they saw fit.

It is obvious that they did not know each other and did not care for one another, because Jesus said to them, 'You have lost your first love.'

So, they had fallen from all of the ways that we are to love and care for one another.

In other words, they showed no kindness; were envious through comparison; were invested in their own initiatives or parading

themselves; were puffed up with leaven because they were not removing it in the light of the word; they were rude; they were seeking their own.

Their ministry was ineffective because it was not from the foundation of Spirit and truth.

Granted to eat of the Tree of Life if we return to first love

Significantly, because their fellowship was not love from a pure heart, they were *not* eating from the Tree of Life.

This is an amazing principle. Because they were not operating in first love, it meant that they were not being the 'bread' and the 'cup' to one another. They were not living in sincerity and truth; they were not 'pouring out' to stir up love and good works in their brethren.

Jesus said, 'You are not eating from the Tree of Life here', because they were not being *obedient*.

How do we know this? We know because Jesus said to them that if they overcame the corruption of relating to one another in any other way than first love, He would grant to them to eat from the Tree of Life.

They had fallen from first love. Their fellowship was other than open and easy fellowship with one another where offering and care for one another is foundational, and so they had no access to the Tree of Life.

He said that if they would return to first love, He would give them access to the Tree of Life. They would be that fruit to one another.

'He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give to eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.' Rev 2:7.

That is heavenly places. That is where first love is. It is *spiritual* fellowship, not a fleshly, collegial committee.

Instead of eating the fruit of the Tree of Life, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil had unwittingly become their food and the source of their ministry.

This should be frightening to people. They were completely ignorant, because of all the activity that they were doing.

A lampstand removed unless there is repentance

It is amazing that all of that activity, as Jesus said, was a ministry of the knowledge of good and evil; and for that He was going to take the lampstand from them.

Their ministry was not the light of the word from the fellowship of one Spirit.

This means that the communion tables for which they were responsible were not sanctified as the Lord's table.

Jesus threatened to take the fellowship of the church away from them because of their collegiality. It was undermining the rest of the flock's participation in the fellowship of Christ's body.

Take heed and repent

'Remember therefore from where you have fallen'. Rev 2:5.

I suspect that, when He said, 'Remember', He was saying, 'Remember what Paul said to you; who outlined to you *the whole counsel of God* and said, "Therefore, take heed to yourselves, in relation to that".'

'Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent.'

It has to begin with *repentance*, doesn't it? Repentance is the acknowledgement that our way has *not* been in first love.

It is because either we have not invited that fellowship into our house or we have been so consumed with our own ministry and have not realised that our work, our *first work*, is the fellowship of the presbytery.

'Remember therefore from where you have fallen. Repent and do the first works or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.'

Christ's warning to Ephesus applies to *every presbytery*.

Commitment to fellowship in Spirit and truth

If presbyters do not take heed to themselves in fellowship with one another, they will be little more than empowered, professional clergy. They will be unable to shepherd the flock that God has set them among.

This is straightforward – we need to take heed to ourselves; we need to be committed to this fellowship.

Those who are part of the presbytery need to take time to meet and interact with one another in this easy, simple, open and truthful way.

This is Spirit and truth.

SAVAGE WOLVES; MEN SPEAKING PERVERSE THINGS

Paul said that if those in the presbytery do not take heed to themselves, two things happen.

One is that *savage wolves* come among the flock.

The second is that *men rise up* and speak *perverse things*, and draw others away to themselves.

I. Savage wolves who come among the flock

So, what are 'wolves'?

We have spoken a little about wolves over the last sessions. Now we will have a look at it in more detail.

Wolves are the symbol of people who seek to gain access to the fellowship of the church in order to *feed their appetite* for *relevance* and *power*.

They 'feed' on others and find their own sense of identity and empowerment in the loyalty of others to them. They 'feed' on it.

The amazing thing is that wolves can either arise from the fellowship of believers or they can come into the church from outside.

Wolves who arise from within the church

We know this from the Scriptures of course, and we will first consider those wolves who rise up in the church.

The Lord, through the prophet Ezekiel, said that *the princes* had become wolves in Judah.

These were the *children* of the rulers of the covenant nation.

'Her princes in her midst [in the midst of Judah] are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain.' Eze 22:27.

The 'princes' were the children of the rulers of the nation but, in our context, we are not saying that they are the children of presbyters or leaders, although they may be.

The 'princes' are those who have grown up in the church.

This does not specifically refer to leaders' children. It refers to anyone who grows up with the 'silver spoon' of the inheritance that belongs to the 'firstborn', in their mouth.

So, my generation has grown up in the church. We are the princes, in that regard.

When we grow up in the church and are not established in the culture of offering, we then live by an alternative culture that *seeks* prominence or *presumes* upon prominence in the church on the basis of history or of our knowledge for example, *drawing people* to our position.

As a result, we receive *dishonest gain*.

This 'gain' is the capital, the *cultural capital*, of a position based on the loyalty of others to us.

That is the *wolfish* behaviour that the Lord addressed through Ezekiel.

Now, I'm not saying that all of our generation are wolfish. But this happens if we don't give attention to the word and turn from our fleshly activities and attitudes and behaviours to the culture of offering.

Choosing what God reveals to us about our fleshly responses

The point is that, even though we are born of God, we have to *choose* that which the Lord is revealing to us.

And we have to put off the flesh, because that is part of the circumcision of Christ that enables us to function properly.

If we don't give attention to this process, this dynamic within us leads to the wolfish way of operating and living.

Wolves look like sheep

Jesus spoke of wolves, and He said, 'Outwardly, they look like sheep.' This is an absolutely amazing principle.

He said that they even have the word of prophecy in their mouth. However, this word is *not* the testimony of Jesus, and their work is *not* one of offering.

He said that, generally, they are prickly people.

Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said, 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.' Mat 7:15.

So, they are coming and, on the outside, they look like just one of the sheep. But He said, 'These are false prophets'. It is amazing, isn't it?

You would think, and we have made this comment previously, that false prophets would have a prophetic demeanour or some sort of projection, but He said that they actually look like sheep. Underneath this clothing, they are *ravenous wolves*.

Known by our fruit

'You will know them by their fruits [the fruit is their speech, their conversation and conduct]. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?' Mat 7:16.

The grape is the fruit of the vine, which is the ability to pour out on another. That is to be 'the cup' to one another.

Jesus explained that if a person is actually a thorn bush, it is *evident* that they are a thorn bush because they are *prickly* and antagonistic, rather than pouring out and revealing another.

Then He asked if men gather 'figs from thistles. 'Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.' Mat 7:17.

This is an important point! The fruit is not what we say it is. No-one walks around saying, 'I am a thistle', do they?

Everyone is, hopefully, committed to being 'the grape' and 'the fig' to one another.

So, the fruit is not what we say it is; the fruit is what *others partake* of.

We need some reflection from others to know whether what we *think* is the fruit that we minister is actually prickly, and is all of our good ideas and our strong motives about the way things should happen.

That is not the fruit of the grape or the fruit of the fig. It is *prickles* and *thorn bushes*.

When that is our demeanour, we *believe in our rightness*.

Wolves who cleave to shepherds with deceit

How do wolves work? Wolves operate by *targeting shepherds*.

I had always thought that they targeted the sheep first but, actually, they *cleave* to shepherds with *deceit*. That is why they look like sheep. Their speech seems to sound like what everyone else is saying.

So, wolves operate by targeting shepherds who are vulnerable because they are *not watching or taking heed to themselves* in the fellowship of first love.

Paul said, 'Ravenous wolves will come among you if you don't take heed to yourself.'

If a shepherd - a person who *should* be shepherding - is not *taking heed to themselves*, which means that they are not properly established in open fellowship in the light with their presbyters, they will be vulnerable to the *deceitful cleaving* of those who are *wolfish* among us. In fact, they will target them.

These wolfish people often have a *strong presence*; usually, they are 'big personalities'. This strong presence may overwhelm the one who is supposed to be guarding the flock so that they cease from addressing the flock as they should or from addressing the one whose

influence within the church undermines offering.

So, a person who should be a shepherd or overseer, either because they have put their lamp under a basket, which means that they are measuring the word, or their lamp is under a bed because of their lameness or weakness, is not connected to the fellowship of the presbytery, and they are vulnerable.

Then those who speak with the voice of a wolf, so as to *overwhelm* others, become more prominent than the ones who should be speaking.

And, instead of being able to stand up and say, 'No, this is the direction of the Lord because this is what Christ is saying through His hand', they flee! They *draw back* and allow the wolfish person to have *prominence* within the congregation.

They *flee* from their post, demonstrating that they have been a *hireling*. This means that they have just been doing it for the cash. They have assumed a position because they want to receive the tithe. They have not laid down their life for the sheep.

Receiving admonition and correction 'after the first or second time'

Now, some people may have big personalities, but are not wolves. So, how do we know the difference between someone who 'fills the room', and someone who is *scattering the sheep* and assuming a place within the leadership of the church that doesn't belong to them?

A person demonstrates that they are *not* a wolf when they can *receive correction 'after the first or second admonition'*.

We took some time a couple of sessions ago to talk about when we have someone into our house, and they begin to speak something that is contrary. We may speak to them initially at that time and, through testimony, call them to fellowship. That is 'the first admonition'.

'The second admonition' is when we gather together again, call a friend to have fellowship with us and with them and, if they won't hear

it again, we 'tell it to the church'. That is the first and the second admonition.

Now, if a person will not hear the admonition of their brethren, then we know that they are other than the culture of the flock. It is straightforward.

So, we are not saying that people should not have big personalities. Rather, the point is that the demeanour of a 'sheep' is one of *hearing* the Shepherd's voice and of being *obedient*. And, if they will not hear the Shepherd's voice and *follow*, it means that they are a different type of 'animal'.

Wolves divide and scatter in order to feed off others

So, wolves in sheep's clothing seed division through deceit in order to *scatter the sheep*.

They bring *division* among the church in order to scatter the sheep, so that they can 'feed' on those who may be isolated or disenfranchised.

They operate by feeding. Obviously, they do not eat, for example, the elbows or knees of others! So, what do we mean by 'feeding on people'?

By 'feeding', we mean that they derive their sense of identity and viability from the *dependence* of those who are weak in faith, upon them.

Jesus described wolves in sheep's clothing, and the effect, or the work, of wolves in the congregation.

'I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling ...'

A hireling is someone who is paid to oversee. Overseership should be a *work of offering*, laying life down for the sheep. But this *hireling* is being paid as a position in the church.

'But a hireling, he who is not a shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.' Joh 10:11-12.

Recognising the wolf by being in one Spirit with the Lord and with our brethren

So, why is an overseer or elder – the shepherding person – oblivious to the activity of wolves when they fail to take heed to themselves? How do the wolves get 'traction'?

You would think that if you saw a wolf, you would beat it off. However, the point is that, if you don't *take heed to yourself*, you neither *see* them nor have the *weapons* to deal with them.

So, the overseer who does not take heed to themselves neither recognises the wolf nor possesses the weapons to war against them.

Many people would *say* that they can tell the difference between a sheep and a wolf. However, as soon as they say that, they are responding in a carnal way.

We *cannot* see this with our own sight. It cannot be seen with a natural perspective, a fleshly perspective.

The only way to see these things is *by the Spirit*. And we cannot be of the Spirit unless we are in one Spirit with the Lord and with our brethren.

Where there is disconnection from fellowship in one Spirit with the presbytery, it doesn't matter what you *say* you see, you do not see by the Spirit, because the Spirit is *not divided*. You cannot be 'of the Spirit' if you are disconnected from one Spirit with the presbytery.

Our capacity to distinguish between a sheep and a wolf in sheep's clothing is not inherent in us. It requires *spiritual* sight. This sight is only possible by those who are 'in the Spirit'. And to be 'in the Spirit' means to be one Spirit with the Lord and with our brethren.

To believe in our own capacity to see is to be *proud*. This is 'parading' ourselves or being 'puffed up', and we are denying the grace that God gives to the humble.

The humble are those whose sanctification is known and expressed in fellowship by offering.

Now, the weapons, or capacity, to deal with wolves or any other thing that comes in to try to assail the sheep, are also not inherent, or natural, to us.

A person who has the ability to interface with or to deal with wolves within the presbytery is not simply someone who is self-confident or who has a sufficiently big enough personality to confront them. If a person does that on the basis of their natural capacity, they are *fighting the flesh with the flesh*. It does not produce the righteousness of God.

So, the weapons, or the capacity, to deal with wolves is not inherent, or natural, to us. It is not having a big enough personality or self-confidence.

The weapons of our warfare are of the Spirit, in fellowship

The weapons of our warfare are *of the Spirit*.

Again, this requires us to be in the fellowship of one Spirit with our brethren, and particularly with those who have received ascension gift grace from Christ.

We do need to know where that ascension gift grace is within the presbytery and within the church, because *their word is the weapon*.

The classic example is King David. What did he do? How did he deal with that wolfish man, Goliath? He had five smooth stones. These represent the four ministry graces of Christ, which are summed up as the *shepherding capacity* for the church.

That is where the weapons are. They are found in the *fellowship* where those graces are operative. So that should be a relief to all of us!

Whether we have a strong disposition or a weak disposition is nothing. What is everything is *fellowship in one Spirit*. That is where *grace* is.

Calling sheep to the obedience of Christ

'For the weapons of our warfare are *not carnal* [not of the flesh] but mighty in God for *pulling down strongholds*, casting down *arguments* and *every high thing* that exalts itself against the knowledge of God.' 2Co 10:4-5.

'Arguing' sounds like being 'prickly', doesn't it? And 'high things exalting' is also prickly.

That is who Jesus said are wolves. He said, 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but are inwardly ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?' Mat 7:15-16.

They are the 'arguments' and the 'high things'.

'Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to *the obedience of Christ*.' 2Co 10:5.

That is the key!

Those in the presbytery don't go around 'beating up wolves'. Rather, they call those who are sheep to the *obedience of Christ*.

They *stand in their place* – they do not go around killing wolves. They *gather* sheep to themselves – those who will hear the Shepherd's voice.

And the wolves themselves disperse, because they can't get access to the sheep. That is spiritual.

'Spirituality' is not the ability to confront something – although sometimes we do need to be clear on matters.

The actual work of the Spirit that results in the 'casting down of arguments and every high thing that exalts itself' is *obedience*.

It is the *word of faith* which, if received, *enables* obedience. Paul said that we proclaim the word 'for the obedience of faith'.

It is 'bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ', and being ready to 'punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled'.

Shepherds enabled by grace in fellowship

So, I think we are clear on our understanding of wolves. We know how to deal with them; we know what they look like.

Those who are shepherds, your only ability to be able to deal with them is found as you stand in fellowship as part of a presbytery. That is where grace is for that work, and that

will enable you to care for the flock among whom the Lord has made you an overseer.

2. Men who rise up, speaking perverse things

The second element that Paul addressed when we don't take heed to ourselves is that we will *rise up* and begin to speak perverse things, and will draw people away to ourselves. He said that this is inevitable. We will not be able to stop ourselves from doing it.

Taking heed in fellowship

We could think, 'Well, that sounds really bad; that sounds like someone who is a bit "full of themselves", having a crack.'

I'm telling you, it will be the ones who are the quietest, and who are getting on with their own work, who will draw people away. It has nothing to do with an overt appearance. It is to do with *connection*.

We take heed to ourselves *in fellowship*.

So, those in presbytery who do not take heed to themselves inevitably rise up, speak perverse things, and draw disciples to themselves. This is an amazing principle!

Drawing back from the light of fellowship - operating as a colleague

Paul addressed men who were not doing this deliberately or maliciously.

It is the *inevitable* consequence of *drawing back from the light of fellowship* to which they have been commended, by operating as a *colleague* in the presbytery.

If a person becomes *collegial*, they can do nothing other than begin to speak something perverse, because collegiality is at enmity with one Spirit. And the ministry of the word *by one Spirit* is other than the word that comes from someone who is collegial.

Those who do not take heed to themselves in fellowship *trust* in their own understanding and capacity to care for the flock. That is what it means to 'draw back'.

It is *trusting* in our own understanding and capacity to care for the flock, not realising or accepting that the capacity for care is in

fellowship, in first love - in the fellowship of the presbytery.

Unless we are joined to the fellowship that is established by the word, we will speak something perverse, simply because we are not receiving the word of truth. But we will *think* that what we are saying is the same as the word in the presbytery!

So, you can be sitting in the presbytery but not allowing access and reflection into your house and marriage and family.

It is not 'proximity to the presbytery' that matters; it is actually that word doing its work in your house so that you can proclaim the truth.

If you are not allowing the word to do that work in your house, you are *speaking something else*.

It is that simple and straightforward.

Speaking the truth on the ground of truth

It can only be the *truth* in you if it is doing its *true work* in you.

How do we know whether what we are speaking is the truth or is something perverse?

The only way to know that what we are speaking to the sheep is of the truth is to *lay down what we are speaking in the midst of the presbytery*

It is to *present ourselves*. Paul called this, 'laying it down on the ground of truth'.

'I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself [converse] in the house of God.'

This means how to *speak* the truth; how to speak so that it is not perverse - to speak strange things - and draw people away.

'I write to you so that you may know [we are to know] how we ought to conduct ourselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, *the pillar and ground of the truth*.' 1Ti 3:15.

We have to accept that what we think, is *not* the truth.

We have to *receive* what is being written or proclaimed by ascension gift graced overseers.

And, having received it, we have to come to *testify* to that on the ground of truth, demonstrating the conversation and conduct which is of godliness.

When this is not happening, our good works are dead works.

It is a perversion, and people who join us in the belief that we are in the truth are being drawn away from the light. That is most terrifying!

They will believe that we in the presbytery are in one Spirit, and they will associate themselves with us, but they will *not be connected to the administration of Christ!*

As we said, there is nothing malicious in this. It is simply the result of *disconnection*.

This is why the light of a lamp that is set in a local congregation becomes diminished.

One fellowship together – shepherds and sheep

I want to remind us all of the apostle Peter's exhortation to shepherds.

The reason why it is important for us all to receive this is because the very fellowship that should be exemplified in the presbytery is the *same fellowship* that we are all part of in the church.

Everything that I have said about these principles applies to us *all*, even though they are first addressed to those whom the Lord has called 'overseers.'

'Shepherd *the flock of God* which is *among you*.'

That is a beautiful way of saying it. It means that presbytery is a fellowship, and these ones are all connected to that same fellowship

'Serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.'
1Pe 5:2-4.

The presbytery is to be an example to the church of the very fellowship that every person is to participate in.

Their example is not some righteous or virtuous veneer. They need to be washed with the water and sprinkled with the blood as they walk in the light of the word and have fellowship with their brethren, in the same way as every person in the church.

By this means, the whole body is edified.