

Beware of Following Someone Other Than Jesus
Pastor Larry Kroon
Wasilla Bible Church
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It was one of those exchanges that kinda sticks out in your mind, stays with ya, a little scene in your life that kinda comes back to ya every once in a while. And it was just a...kinda one of those odd little times. I was at a...I had been in the pastorate for maybe fifteen-twenty years, I forget what it was. And I was at a meeting with a group of other leaders, and we were working on a board for a mission agency. And we were outside on a break, and this one man came up to me—a gentleman, a retired church leader that was from back East. And he was chatting with me; just a really neat, godly man, and I was enjoyin' the conversation, and I had a high regard for him. And he looked at me and he says, "Well, how do you like the pastorate?" And I just responded on reflex; I says, "It's fun!" And he gave me the oddest look back, and he said, "In all my years, I've never heard a pastor say that."

But it is fun! I mean it, it really is. I enjoy congregational life, through all the ups and downs and twists and turns, I just love it. I mean, there's somethin' about a Friday morning like last Friday morning, when I've had a late night and it's kinda early and I'm in the office, and I'm just kinda settlin' in. And there's a letter that had just arrived. And I pick it up, and I start reading it. And it's an individual describin' the Lord's answer to prayer that he and his wife had...a situation that they were in, and he can come up at our January 4th service and prayed and taken one of those little verse card prayer cards we had. And the Lord had just tremendously answered his prayer. And he sent this page-and-a-half letter to me, describing how God had answered his prayer. And you just read it, and just...*oh, I love this!*

Or there's walking through the church yesterday morning, and we got a group of like sixth graders downstairs. And they're working with puppets, and they're putting together a puppet play and drama that they're gonna give to the little kids in Grow Zone and the Fishing Crew today. And they're laughing and they're having a great time. And you walk through and you see these little kids just havin' a blast with these puppets. And you're saying "This is fun! I love it!"

Or you get a phone call from Rob Sande, and he tells you that, "Guess what! Little Jordan Michelle Sande has just been born!" She eight feet long...no, eight pounds six ounces, or something. And he's all excited!

And then there's the fun times like you're at a potluck Friday night and you discover that Amanda Bacon and Rachel Kroon are goin' head-to-head against each other in the women's triathlon on Mothers Day. Ok? And Amanda says that Rachel is too sweet and nice, that she's not competitive enough; she...you know, she's is not gonna... This is the word on the street, this is Amanda says Rachel doesn't have what it takes. Rachel's response is 'Ok, Amanda...she may be tough, but she swims like a rock.' Ok? And then you find out that we've got other ladies doin' this, too, and you discover like you got some that are really not competitive. You got Pam Smith and Sarah Novak. And it isn't that they're tryin' to beat anybody, or win anything; it's that Steve Novak...this is, again, the word on the street...that Steve Novak is offering Sarah a romantic getaway to Fairbanks if she finishes the race. Ok? And not to be outdone, not to be outdone, Tom Smith is offering Pam Smith a brand-new BMW Mini Cooper if she finishes. That's the word on the street, ok? That's the word on the street—I'm putting it out there. It's on the street right now. ☺ Ok? I mean, I just love it! I enjoy congregational life.

But you know, there's a serious side to it. And sometimes we've gotta talk about that. And that's what we have to talk about today. So there's a serious side to congregational life; and under the laughter, and under the fun and everything else, it's always there. It's the ever-present danger that you will start to follow somebody other than Jesus; the ever-present danger that somebody else will become more central to you, more important to you, than Jesus; that somebody else's warning will be the ones that you pay attention to; that somebody else's promises will be the promises you pursue; that somebody else will be more time-consuming for you; that somebody else's wisdom is what you will listen to. There's the ever-present danger that you may start to follow somebody other than Jesus.

You say, "Wait a minute! I've been a Christian for fifteen-twenty years."

There's the ever-present danger that you may start to follow somebody other than Jesus. And it is my responsibility to guard against that.

I'm not alone in that responsibility. There's a team of leaders God has brought together in this church that share that responsibility. But I have to own it personally and individually. There is the ever-present danger that you may follow somebody other than Jesus, and it is my responsibility to guard against that.

That's serious stuff, and we need to talk about it today, and we need to talk about it in a way that you sense the seriousness of it, but you sense it with confidence. So I'm gonna take you into the scriptures. We're gonna go to Acts 20. This is where we are in our study in the book of Acts. And we're gonna see a very powerful, serious scene in the gospel of Acts.

You know, we're a church that reads the Bible a lot. I mean, that's just the way we do things. We read the Bible a lot. And every passage you go through and you read together has a different feel to it. I had a group that was reading on Wednesday night, our men's group. And we were reading through, and it was kind of...I don't want to say it was a slog, because it wasn't...it wasn't, you know. But it was a long passage of scripture that there wasn't a whole lot of excitement to. But you read it. We went through it because there was information that was important to gather and to gain. And that was that kind of reading, ok? We're gonna get the information we need and add it to our information base, our knowledge base.

And then there was a sequence of studies that I went to that was very interesting, because Thursday night then I was with another group and it was very engaging. I mean, it was the type of thing that it spoke to an issue that you had a lot of questions about, and we worked through that passage and were interactive over it, and sayin' "Aha!" over different things that were related to it. And then Friday night I was with another group doing a Bible reading, and that group—it was deeply personal, everything from laughter to tears.

So every time you go into a passage of scripture it'll have a different feel to it. And over the past year, the one reading that stands out most in my mind, that was so serious and sobering, and the type of thing that when we were done reading we just sat there and looked at each other for a moment, was early on a Saturday morning when the elders read through this passage together. The leaders of the church read this passage. It's written and it covers, and it speaks to, what Paul said to a group of church leaders.

Let me set the stage for you just a moment. The Apostle Paul had left Antioch in Syria on a journey. He had done a couple of these trips before. This is his third, and actually his last, major journey through the area. He goes to a city, a central city, called Ephesus, and he spends almost three years there helping a church get started; getting it started, getting it in place. He taught 'em; he appointed their leaders; he got 'em ready to go as a church. And then something within him...we're told that he

...purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia...

There was something that the Spirit of God just seemed to be prompting him to go further to the west, go over to Macedonia and Achaia (or Italy...I mean, excuse me, or Greece) and visit the churches there, and then go back to Jerusalem. And then even, it goes on, it says maybe even eventually Rome. So he feels like 'I'm done with Ephesus; I need to keep moving.' And that's what he does. He goes across the Aegean Sea, and he works his way down the east...I mean, excuse me, the west...coast of the Aegean Sea, comes all the way down to Corinth. And then he turns around there; he spends about three months there, he turns around and he goes north to the northern part and crosses once again, and he's headed back to Jerusalem now. It's a fairly long journey.

And he stops at a little place called Miletus. And it's about thirty miles from Ephesus. And we're told in the text that he didn't want to go to Ephesus, to the church there, because it would slow him down too much. He would end up getting' caught up and who knows how long he'd been there...three years...he might be there another three years. And he wanted to keep the trip moving. So instead he stops at this waypoint, Miletus, and he sends...we're told...he sends for the elders from the church of Ephesus and he invites them down. He wants to talk to 'em. And that's gonna be our text. That's what we're gonna read through. A little bit of a reading here; I'm gonna encourage you to follow along with me. I'm not gonna put it up on the overhead. I'm just gonna read through it and encourage you to follow along. We're told that, verse 17, that

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and he called to him the elders of the church,

...the leaders of that congregation, the ones he had appointed there to watch over the congregation.

And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia,"

...that area we now call Turkey...

"...how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;"

...the Jews were resistant to starting the church in that area. And he says

"...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God..."

...of turning away from whatever direction you were going, and going towards God...

"...with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

He says, 'I went everywhere, talking to everyone about everything they needed to hear with respect to God, with respect to Jesus Christ.'

He had been criticized after he left. And there were people who went around and said that Paul really wasn't doin' his job, he wasn't doin' his work, he wasn't effective. And so there's a bit of defensiveness here. And he's coming back and says, 'You guys saw me. For three years I stayed on task here. I stayed on task for God.' And then he goes on and he says things are gonna be different now, though. He says,

"And now, behold, bound in my spirit..."

In other words, the Spirit of God had just impelled him; he felt like he had to keep movin' to that Jerusalem appointment, as it were. He says

"Behold, bound in spirit, I'm on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what's gonna happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me."

He says, 'Everywhere I go the Spirit of God, through my fellow believers as I stop by, they're tellin' me "Paul, it's gonna be tough where you're goin'. They're gonna put you in jail.'" He says, 'Everywhere I go I hear how it's gonna be so difficult when I get to Jerusalem.' But he says, verse 24,

"I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course..."

'...I may go the whole direct...full course that God has given me...'

"...and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."

He says, 'I've been called to give witness to Jesus, and I'm gonna do it right to the end.' Now he says

"Behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face."

In other words, he says to this group of church leaders that he had spent three years with, that he had led to the Lord Jesus Christ, that he had taught, that he had appointed and everything else, he says, 'Guys, this is it. It's our last time together. I'm not gonna see you again.'

"Therefore..."

Now he has what's called a 'farewell statement.' He says,

"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."

He says, 'Listen, I solemnly testify that I've told you everything you need to know. No one can hold me accountable and say that I did not teach what God wanted taught. I've done my duty.'

Having said that, he speaks to them as to what their duty now is. He says, 'I've done my duty. And I'm gone, and you're not gonna see me again. Here's what you are called to do.' He says,

"Be on your guard for yourselves and for all the flock, the church that you are shepherding, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that," he says, "after my departure,"

'after I'm gone here,' he says,

"...savage wolves will come in among you..."

He uses that word picture, that metaphor. The church is like a flock, and he says that 'there's gonna be savage wolves that come in among you, and they're not gonna spare the flock. They're gonna rip it to shreds,' he says.

"And from among your own selves..."

...among the people of that church...

"...men will arise, speaking perverse things," 'twisted things', "to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore," he says, "be on the alert, remembering..."

He says, 'Be on the alert, be always ready.' And if you wanna know what that looks like, he says,

"...remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one of you with tears."

And then he says,

"I now 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."

Then he has a last note he wants to add, and it's very important to him; and I think it's important to hear him on it. Pretty much his charge to the elders is done; his assignment to them is done. They now know their duty. But he comes back and he says, 'Listen...'

"I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes."

'I did not do this for money.' In fact, he says,

"You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me."

He had about nine men traveling with him. And what Paul did was work as a tentmaker in Ephesus and provided for them and himself. And he says, in doing this, he says, 'I showed you...'

"In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and you must remember the words of our Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

That's the last words he gave those leaders. 'Always remember it's more blessed to give than to receive.' Having said that, we're told that, verse 36,

...he knelt down and he prayed with them all. And they began...

This is a powerful, emotional scene in Acts.

And they began to weep aloud and they embraced Paul; they repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

That's the text; that's the scene; that's the situation. The centerpiece of it, the focus, kind of the center of gravity in there, is the call to vigilance that you read right there in the middle when he says to those elders, he says, 'Listen, be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock. Be on watch!' He repeats that instruction; it's the major directive he gives them. He says, 'My duty was to get this started. Your duty...your duty as shepherds, who are there to tend and to feed the flock, is you need to be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock.' And then he comes back down in verse 31; he says, "*Therefore be on the alert.*" 'Be constantly vigilant. And if you wonder what constant vigilance looks like,' he says, 'remember that night and day for three years I never stopped admonishing you.' In other words, 'I never stopped instructing you, warning you, cautioning you, directing you, and,' he says, 'to each one of you I would even do it with tears.' He says, 'That's your duty.'

Reason as to why is given in between there. The reason is sandwiched in between those two statements, and the why is this: he says that 'I know that after my departure, when I leave...' and Paul has seen this over and over as he's started churches and moved on, he says, "*I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.*" And he's using this as a metaphor. He says 'There's gonna be people that come into your church and they're gonna rip you to shreds.' And he says it's not even just the fact that they'll come in from the outside and penetrate from the outside; he says, '...and even from among your own selves...there will be people among your congregation, right now, who will rise up and they will begin to speak twisted things, things that aren't correct in doctrine with respect to God, to Jesus, and our relationship to them. There are gonna be people that come up and teach, and preach, perverse things, and they will do so to draw the disciples after them.' He says that is going to happen. People are gonna come from the outside and they are gonna try and influence you, and they are gonna try and get you to follow them. And there's others that are gonna come from even within. They may have even grown up in that church, and they are going to, at some point, rise up and try to get people to follow them.

This is serious stuff. Remember what he said the church is? Talkin' about that church of Ephesus, which is like us and every other church that God has raised up—a group of people that God has called together and He has raised up some leaders over them. And he says that's God's flock, bought with His own blood. There's only one person a church should ever follow, and His name is Jesus. You have to understand.

We can get excited about this building, and the financial campaign we went [through], and how the Lord enabled us to pay for it, or the time that we've been goin' and how our debt load is so minimal. We can get excited about that. Listen—that is nothing to the fact that Jesus Christ paid for *you* with His blood; for this flock, with all its ups and downs and twists and turns—He bought us! What intrigues me is that's the concern that Paul has with the church at Ephesus. That's his concern. The last time He was in Ephesus there was twenty-five thousand (25,000) people in the stadium, chanting against the church because they were so committed to the pagan goddess of that territory. And he is not, as he passes by, leaving them...he is not concerned about the riots. He is not concerned about the pagan temple. He is not concerned about the people that are gonna say, 'You guys are idiots!' Who he's concerned about are the people that are gonna come into the church and would lead them away from Jesus to follow themselves. That's his concern.

And it happens. It's constant. I remember early in my pastorate, the first time that I ever taught this passage, the first time that I ever taught it. I taught it in the church, and we're at a small luncheon. Back then the community was smaller, and there was a smaller group of pastors, and we would meet for breakfast once a month. And we were havin' breakfast, and it was the idea that every month a different pastor would share a little devotional. And I had studied this passage, and I was a young pastor, and boy, I was gonna tell 'em about this passage. We sat over breakfast, and I'll never forget it. I could go right to the same table and sit in the same spot, I'm sure, right now. And I sat there and I shared with this group of about seven of us pastors from the community, and I'm reading through this passage, and I'm kinda sayin' 'Boy, we've got a challenge ahead of us.' And I'll never forget one of those pastors lookin' at us and sayin', "That is the Apostle Paul at his absolute worst, and if I was teaching that passage I would teach the absolute opposite of what he said." That pastor was a pastor the local newspaper had writing articles every other week. And in essence what he's sayin'—'I tell people, "Follow me, not Christ's apostle." We need to be a lot freer thinkers than that text.'

The other thing that hit me early were the TV evangelists. They've kind of become not as dominant any more. I don't know why; they're off in their little cable section or something. But back then it was overwhelming. And people would come in and they'd be quoting the latest TV preacher they had heard; and some of those guys were good, and some of them were absolutely horrendously awful! Building little kingdoms around themselves and taking people away from Jesus.

Probably the most persistent and biggest challenge to deal with is the Christian book industry. You realize Christians are readers. And as a result, Christians are a goldmine for publishers. That's why the secular publishers have started to buy up Christian publishing houses—it's a lucrative market! And there are some fantastic, life-changing books out there. But there are some that are absolutely horrendous. They come under the label of 'Spiritual' and 'Christian.' I remember watching, and it just tore my heart, watching for months as one of the number one best sellers for months after month after month after month was a book written by an individual who had grown up in the church, who had gone to the best seminaries, the best evangelical college, and he had come out and now he was teaching and writing a book explaining how the New Testament cannot be trusted! From among us—somebody's sayin' 'Follow me, 'cause you think Jesus really said that stuff? He didn't.'

I remember a guy in a Bible study, once. I kept wonderin'—he kept sayin' stuff, and I'd be thinkin', 'Where did he get that?' And it just...you know...he kept sayin' 'this is what it was.' And I kept sayin', 'What in the world...?' And finally I pulled him aside and said, "Where are you getting' your information?" And he goes, "Oh, this really great book! It was a novel about the disciple John." And I go, "Listen, that's fiction! That's a novel! Why didn't you read the gospel of John?" "It's too hard to read."

We chuckle. That's a pretty standard response when I encourage people to read the Bible. 'Give me the Cliff Notes.' Or a comic book. Or a fast-paced novel.

Probably the most difficult one, I still don't know how to get on top of that one, is the internet. Lost a family some time ago from our church, under the influence of an internet site. It was a site that argued there is only one perfect Bible, and it's the King James Version. I take not only issue with that position; I take issue with the way that internet site presented that position, and basically condemning anyone that doesn't accept that position. I remember lookin' at that web site with Joel. And Joel made a comment to me. It was probably the strongest statement I've ever heard out of Joel, our worship pastor. Lookin' at that web site, he says, "This is evil." He's right. That web site—it's worse than a pornography web site. At least when a Christian looks at a pornography web site, there'll be a pang of conscience. The Christian look at that web site, wanting to do what's right, and he all of a sudden realizes, 'All these other translations are bad! There's only one good—King James!' And he reads inaccurate history, inaccurate argumentation. He reads condemnation of good believers! That is evil of the worst sort! It happens.

Yeah, church is fun. But it's serious, because this is God's flock, paid for by the blood of Jesus. And it is the greatest of evils when people rise up and call the disciples to follow them, other than our Lord, our King, the One who died for us, Jesus. This is serious. In fact, it's so serious it's overwhelming to me. That may be why I like to joke so much, is when I look at the serious stuff it overwhelms me. It's helpful that we've got a team of people that are involved in that with us as a church, but I'm still a little overwhelmed by it.

It reminds me of sitting with my wife just after our newborn had been born. And we were in our home. Her mother had been with us and helped us for our first couple weeks as new parents. And then we had taken her to the airport, put her on the airplane, and she left. And I'll never forget the moment we sat in that living room, and I looked across the living room at Marlene, she looked across and looked at me, and she began to bawl. And I felt totally helpless because I didn't know what to do.

When I read this passage I can feel that way. I'm not the Apostle Paul. I can't match the internet; I can't match the publishing houses. And I feel like Christians ever since that first century have looked at pastors and leaders like the elders of Ephesus and others, and just said, 'Ooh, sure wish we had Paul.'

Paul closes this, and this is where I find all the confidence for me and for us. He says to that group of elders, he says, "*I now commend you to God.*" 'I now put you in His hands.' And then he goes on with another beautiful statement. He says, 'I put you...not only do I commend you to God,' "*I commend you also to the word of His grace.*" 'I put you in His word. I put you under it, that word,' which he goes on to say, "*...which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance of all the saints among all those who are sanctified.*" In other words, that word which can see us through to the end.

It's a powerful statement. It isn't about me, and it isn't about you. This is about God's flock, and He and His word will see us through. My only challenge is to make sure you stay in the word of His grace as He enables us to do that. We can't hole up in a corner, shut off the radios, never read another book, and do not go on the internet. We can't take that attitude. We are called to engage our culture and be out there. We do not have to be afraid. We have to be serious, but we do not have to be afraid. God is with us, and we have His word of grace that can sustain us.

I ask you to stand with me.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]