

Paying Careful Attention

August 9, 2016

In Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian leaders in Acts 20, he calls the leaders to remember his example and his ministry. He outlines what is ahead for him in ministry and then he spends some moments exhorting them to specific action to take on behalf of the congregation they serve.

His first direct admonition and exhortation is this: ***“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock...”*** (Acts 20:28, ESV).

Practically, may I make a confession? When first engaging ministry when I was 24 years old, I was only consumed with one question – “What does the church want me to do now?” For the next 25 years, I would spend my time, my education, my focus and my study trying to determine what the church needed to do to grow, to mature, to be protected doctrinally and morally. I spend all of my years paying careful attention to the people I led and the congregations I served.

In the last three years of ministry, I came to learn the lesson of Paul's admonition. I could not carefully pay attention to others unless I was first self-aware – knowing myself, my motivations, my character and approach. I must first give attention to my relationship to God and nurture my own Christian character.

I realized, perhaps way too late, that I must also give careful and devoted attention to myself so that I might be the person that God wanted me to become.

During the last couple of years in pastoral ministry, I began to do just that. And one of the things that I came to realize quickly was this: our current church culture (at least in the churches I have been aware of) this attention to self-discipline, self-awareness and self-examination is not greatly valued and in fact, it is deeply despised.

There were times when things were neglected in “professional ministry” so that I could focus on becoming the man that God wanted me to be – and those moments were greeted with criticism and attack. There were moments when I was consumed with my own spiritual condition and wrestling with God Almighty – and people would complain that I was not spending adequate time in the church office.

We live in a world where introspection and self-reflection is not greatly prized, even in the church. Yet if pastor's are going to adequately lead, they must be devoted followers of Christ, learning from him and learning about themselves. It will take time, attention and priority for pastor's to become the people that they are intended to be.

I remember years ago, I was mowing my front lawn (which was a task I hated to do). I was engaging in some personal counseling and I was angry with the issues I was having to face and struggling with the self-awareness. As I mowed, I remember my frustration and saying to God, “All this work is not making me a better pastor!” And as clearly as I would hear you over a cup of coffee, I heard God whisper to my heart:

“I am not trying to make you a better pastor. I am working on making you a better man.”

Now, a decade and half later, I still here that same whisper – God is interested in me becoming a better man – and in order to do so, I must give attention to myself and my relationship with Him.

The same is true for you – God is whispering to you, “I don’t want you to perform better...I want to work in you to be better!”

Blessings to you as you follow Paul’s admonition to give attention to yourselves!