

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The results of a computerized survey indicate the following: the perfect minister preaches exactly fifteen minutes. He condemns sins but never upsets anyone. He works from 8:00 AM until midnight and is also a janitor. He makes \$50 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives about \$50 weekly to the poor. He is 28 years old and has preached for 30 years. He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of his time with senior citizens.

The perfect minister smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes 15 calls daily on congregation families, shut-ins and the hospitalized, and is always in his office when needed. How blessed you all are that you don't have to worry about all that, because you already have the perfect pastor. *(Pause to pose for photos.)*

Okay, okay, I don't really mean me. I know this may come as a shock to some of you, but I'm not really perfect... Okay, maybe it wasn't a shock at all. But do you know what the word pastor literally means? It means shepherd. Today is that Sunday in the church year that we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. And you really do have the perfect pastor—the perfect shepherd.

A call committee once met to determine what kind of qualities they should seek in their next pastor. After listening to everyone speak, the congregational president commented that with all the things the members wanted from the next guy, "It looks like we're going to have to call Jesus as our next pastor." Of course, he meant it in jest. But the truth is, you already have Jesus as your pastor. He bought you with his blood. And he guards you with his shepherds. He's the Good Shepherd who still cares for the flock.

I'm sure that was the same relationship Paul had pictured in his mind as he spoke the words of our sermon text this morning. He was speaking to some leaders from the church in Ephesus. He was passing through a neighboring city on his way back to Jerusalem, and Paul really thought this would be the last time he would see them.

These men were his dear friends, part of the church in Ephesus which Paul had spent a good chunk of his ministry at, 3 years, much of that time training these very men to be the leaders of the congregation. He definitely had a special place in his heart not just for them, but for all the Ephesian Christians.

And so, with the opportunity to address his friends, Paul showed that loving concern, with this, his final plea to these elders. Hear his encouragement again, "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. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!"

Do you know who Paul is primarily talking to here? I'll give you one guess. He's talking to overseers. He's talking to shepherds. He's talking to me.

You see, an overseer, someone watching over others. Made that way by the Holy Spirit...the call, how I came here, the Holy Spirit has called me to serve you, to watch over your souls. A shepherd, to lead and feed the flock, to feed you, the sheep with the nourishing Word of God. That's actually where the term pastor comes from. It's the Latin word for shepherd.

Paul's talking to me, to every pastor. Do you hear the two warnings Paul addresses to overseers, to pastors here? Watch yourself. Watch the flock.

Do you notice how Paul's first word of caution is to the individual? Your pastor needs to take care of himself first, take care of his own soul first. And really, the same encouragement is for every believer, for all the sheep, not just the shepherd. Do you understand the logic behind that encouragement? It's not being selfish. But make sure your house is in order first. Make sure your faith life is healthy first.

It's a reasonable request. So, how well are each of you doing? This is serious! The wolves are out there. The devil, the world, our flesh, they often don't come at you one by one. No, they come at you in numbers. They hunt in a pack. All three of them, team up on you, circle around you. And they are eager to get you...and kill you.

Nothing can be worse than that. So again, how are you doing? I can tell you where I've failed. The times where I've rushed through my daily Bible Reading, not meditating on what I've read, really no benefit to me, just so I can get to the rest of my work.

The nights I've gone to bed, missing out on the precious opportunity to grow in my relationship with God and my relationship with my wife by neglecting devotions and prayers, but then harp on you to be faithful in your devotional lives.

And for you? Maybe the weakness is apathy. That really can be your worst enemy. Being indifferent, thinking your faith is fine, that "I don't have to worry about myself. I don't have to read my Bible, I already know it all...or at least the basics, enough to get by...I don't have to watch and curb my actions. God can and has forgiven them all...I don't have to filter what comes out of my mouth. People will just look past my words and take them in the kindest possible way."

Apathy is dangerous. Neglecting God's Word is dangerous. Not living your faith is dangerous. Those are the scents these wolves feed on. They use them to bring us down. No, first, take care of your own soul. Thus the need to stay in the Word, to always be growing, to be prepared for these wolves because something worse than death is threatening every single one of you.

Maybe think of it this way. On an airplane, not I'll admit, I've started to just ignore some of these preliminary instructions the flight attendants give before takeoff, but can you think of what they tell you to do in case the cabin loses air pressure? The oxygen mask falls down in front of you, and you secure your own mask first.

The reason's not a selfish one, only caring about yourself. But honestly, how much assistance could you be to any other passengers if you were passed out in the middle of the aisle from a lack of oxygen? You'd be no help at all. We need to, I need to breath in the life-giving oxygen of God's Word every day.

That's Paul's first warning. And his second? Watch over the rest of the flock. Keep watch over others. It doesn't stop with your shepherd looking only after his own soul. You see, the job of the shepherd is not only to feed and lead the flock. He needs to guard and protect them as well. Your shepherd guards and protects you because there are spiritual dangers out there, in the world. You face them every day. And God's Word gives you the courage and the ammo to fight them.

But there can also be spiritual dangers inside this church as well. Isn't that what Paul talks about when he says, "Savage wolves will come in among you...even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples."

Not that I would accuse any of you of being wolves dressed in sheep's clothing. But if your pastor doesn't watch over the flock, feeding them soul food week after week, how easy would it be for you to cave in to the mounting pressures from your spiritual enemies? How easy would it be to be led astray by false teachings that "sound good" because, hey, you didn't know the truth? Wolves kill sheep. False teachers kill souls.

Shame on me for my shortcomings. Shame on me for my failures as your shepherd. And you could say the same about yourselves, as the sheep. Because of our sins, we deserve to be left to the wolves. Make no mistake. Satan would love to demolish us. The Bible even says, "Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a lion, looking for someone to devour."

But the Good Shepherd didn't abandon us wicked sheep. For the shortcomings of this shepherd, you have one who had no faults, no weaknesses, no sin. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, he was the perfect pastor. And what our perfect Pastor did? He laid down his life for his sheep. Paul says, "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

Did you hear that? God bought the church with his own blood. GOD bought the church, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death. Jesus paid the price by offering his perfect life and his precious blood on the cross, the cost to redeem us, to forgive all our sins. That's what our Good Shepherd did for us because every single one of us was the sheep that wandered away from the fold, from the rest of the flock, getting ourselves into trouble.

Your sin, my sin, demands the blood of God. But in his love, God eagerly gives that greatest cost, to forgive us!

That is what our Good Shepherd, that's what the perfect Pastor did for us. The life, death, and resurrection of our Savior, to save us from the wolves, the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature.

Isaiah says this about the Good Shepherd, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart..." That is what our perfect Pastor does. He tends to you. He carries you close to his heart, guarding and protecting you. You know how he does it today, don't you? Jesus guards you with his shepherds.

The apostle Paul was a great shepherd, a great example. His pastoral heart was patient, thus three years preaching, teaching, encouraging, building up the Christians in Ephesus. His pastoral heart was

patient, never ceasing to care for his sheep. His pastoral heart was earnest, working to feed, lead, guard, and protect his flock with everything he had, to the point of tears.

What love God showed the Ephesians to provide this pastoral care! And when Paul had to leave for Jerusalem, God provided other shepherds.

Today, the Good Shepherd loves you so much he doesn't leave you alone. He gives you shepherds. He gives you pastors. Now, not that I can sit here and boast in myself. Your shepherds you've had here are definitely not perfect like the Good Shepherd. They likely haven't lived up to Paul's example. I know I haven't. But they have fed you. They have led you. They have watched over your souls. One still does care for you. With tears. Maybe not yet 3 years. Maybe not always night and day. But cares about you nonetheless.

And this is your response: Trust in God. Commend your soul to him. You listen to your shepherd. Don't run away when he comes to bring admonition. Make every effort to come to worship that you might stay in the Word of grace. That alone can keep you safe from the wolves.

The Good Shepherd hasn't left you alone. He promises he'll never abandon us to the wolves. He promises to defend our souls. He promises to meet us in the Word. He promises shepherds to fight for us. To come to our aid when Satan seems to have the upper hand. To counsel us and comfort us, speaking the Word of Jesus. This pastor may not be perfect, but he's not the only one caring for you. The risen Savior still acts. He's the Perfect Pastor who Cares for you, his flock. And with him in control, the flock in great hands.