

Godly Shepherds

1 Peter 5:1-5

October 4, 2015
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Before we get into the Scripture today, let me give you an update on my daughter Madeline. So many of you have expressed concern and prayers. Thank you so much for your love. I shared last week that tests confirmed a reflux issue between her bladder and kidney. It is sever. We met with a specialist in Indy this past Tuesday. He confirmed the issue. There is a reparatory surgery. His counsel was to wait. *OK, like a few months?* No, he said, "Let's continue to monitor it and there is a chance it will self-resolve. If she gets to age three without healing, we can look at the surgery." This was much different news from what we expected. We went to the appointment with bags packed in case he said, "*We have to do this today.*" So we are encouraged that hopefully the medicine will keep the infections at bay and statistics say it's about 40% chance that her body will heal over time. Of course, there is a God and we believe in prayer. Thank you so much for your outpouring of love and prayers. We appreciate our church family so very much.

Let's get into God's Word by simply reading what the Holy Spirit inspired Peter to write in chapter 5 of the letter we call 1 Peter.

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." (1 Peter 5:1-4 ESV)

Peter transitions to a new subject—leadership. Church leadership. The character and conduct of church leaders, which he calls "elders."

"So I exhort the elders among you...." You might think, *Oh, he's talking to the senior citizens. You know, the elderly.* The word is used at times to describe those of more mature age. However, that's not what he has in mind here. Peter is talking about a leadership role, an office in the church.

Elders in the New Testament Church

Very quickly and early, the church identified and established leaders in local churches. This begins with the apostles in the Jerusalem church. There arose a problem described in Acts 6 with caring for widows in the church. They identified a group of godly men who could take on that responsibility, likely the prototypes for the office of deacon in the church. By the time Paul writes 1 Timothy, being a deacon was also an official role in church leadership. The deacons lead in the serving ministries of the church. In a value system where Jesus said, the greatest shall be the servant of all, to deacon in the church is a high and holy role. Here at Bethel we are profoundly blessed by our deacons.

But Peter is talking about elders. Where do they show up in the story? We find elders giving leadership in the Antioch church in Acts 11. By Acts 15 there were established elders over the church at Jerusalem with whom the apostles collaborated to resolve a doctrinal issue.

Paul and Barnabas retrace their missionary journey, "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." (Acts 14:23)

Paul writes to Titus, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you." (Titus 1:5)

Elders (plural) in every town (singular). A plurality of shared leadership. Why? The same reason that in the Tour de France bike race they race as teams. Certain bikers are good on the flats, others in climbs, others in strategy. Together they are better. No one person has all the shepherding insight or skills needed to lead the church. But a plurality of godly men leading and working together in harmony brings much more to the table.

An elder is a recognized and authorized leader and shepherd in the church whose responsibility is to lead, feed, and oversee the church. The importance in this role is not the elder himself, but the value and worth of overseeing God's people. This reminds me of a scene in *Downton Abbey* where Lord Grantham, earl of the estate, is talking with his next in line about the castle and estate of *Downton Abbey*:

Lord Grantham: You do not love the place yet.

Matthew Crawley: Well, obviously, it's...

Lord Grantham: No, you don't love it. You see a million bricks that may crumble; a thousand gutters and pipes that may block and leak, and stone that will crack in the frost.

Matthew Crawley: But you don't?

Lord Grantham: I see my life's work.¹

You might think, *Oh, the elders are like Lord Grantham*. No, the elders are like Matthew. The Lord of the church is Jesus. The people of the church are like the leaky pipes and cracking stone. Elders are caretakers, stewards, and servants of the house. It is not our life's work but Christ's that makes serving the church and the Lord of the church so very special and sacred. Peter calls him the chief Shepherd. (1 Peter 5:4)

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed." (1 Peter 5:1)

Remember old Peter? Peter the disciple? That Peter would never have written this sentence. Peter doesn't call himself, Peter the amazing apostle or Peter the first bishop of the church. He says, *I'm Peter, just a fellow elder with you*. He puts himself on their level and gives them an example of servant leadership. It is another glimpse into the humility which God has produced out of Peter's pride and failure.

Not This, but That - *The Character and Conduct of an Elder*

As we come to Peter's exhortation to elders, please don't think, *I'm not an elder. I'll never be an elder. This has no relevance for me*. The qualifications for church leadership are the best sketches of what a mature Christian looks like in Scripture. We all should aspire to the character qualities listed here even if we are never officially an elder.

¹ *Downton Abbey*, Season 1, Episode 2 (2010)

Shepherd the flock!

"*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.*" (1 Peter 5:2)

There is so much here that is important. First, in these two verses are the three words used in Scripture for this role in the church. Elder. Bishop. Pastor.

The Greek word for elder is *presbuteros*, used by the Presbyterians. Overseer is *episkopos* used by the Episcopalians. The word for shepherd here is where we get the noun form of "pastor." Elder. Overseer. Pastor.

Elder – office
Overseer – responsibility
Shepherd – function

These words are used interchangeably for the same role of leadership in the church. How do elders shepherd? By leading, feeding, and overseeing the flock. All three are critical and the whole church needs to understand their role.

The grammar here tells us this is an imperative command. Peter is shouting now. *Elders, shepherd the church! Don't be derelict! Don't be lazy! Don't be passive!* Shepherds are to lead, feed, and oversee the church. When they are negligent, who pays the price? The flock does. Christian, you do. Your spiritual health is at stake in the quality of shepherding provided by the leaders. Therefore, we should want the best spiritual shepherds we can get.

As Madeline's health issues evolved, we realized we needed a specialist for her issue. Did we just look up at random someone in the yellow pages? No. I called my friend Dr. Jim Williams, who teaches the kidney at IU Medical School. I asked him who the top doctor in this field is. We asked our pediatrician for her recommendations. They both said the same guy. When we confirmed this doctor was in our health plan network, it was a done deal. We wanted the best doctor for her we could possibly find. The more skilled and experienced the doctor, the better for her physical health.

When it comes to spiritual health in the church, the more godly, the more spiritually mature, the more biblically grounded, the more pastorally skilled, the more tender and loving, the better it is for the spiritual health and vitality of the sheep.

Finally in this verse, the church is called, the flock of *God*. Why is that important? It's easy for shepherds to think, *this is my flock*. It's easy for sheep to say, *this is our flock*. "A church that could be ours would be only a false church. So the sheep are not ours for us to use or misuse as we like. If we lose one, we lose another's property, not our own; and He is not indifferent to what becomes of His flock."² (C.E.B. Cranfield)

The church is God's church. It's not the pastor's church. It's not the church's church. I remember many years ago we were contemplating a pretty big change in our church. Someone who was not for it said to me, "*We were here when you came; we will be here when you leave. This is our church.*" Really? Last time I checked the church was bought with the precious blood of Jesus. He redeemed the church. It's God's church. Not mine. Not yours. His.

² C.E.B. Cranfield, *The First Epistle of Peter*, p. 243.

Peter describes quality shepherds with a series of three “not this, but that” descriptions. John Calvin offers a great summary. *“In exhorting pastors to their duty, [Peter] points out three vices especially which are often to be found, namely sloth, desire for gain, and lust for power.”*³

Not Duty but Delight

“...not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you.” (1 Peter 5:2)

Willing. God is not honored by half-hearted leadership, begrudging leadership, joyless leadership, somebody-has-to-do-it leadership. The psalmist says it clearly, *“Serve the LORD with gladness!”* (Psalm 100:2) Paul writes, *“If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.”* (1 Timothy 3:1)

There are times when I don’t spring out of bed in the dead of winter to preach the 8:15 service. There are times when going into the difficult meeting, I’m not singing the *Hallelujah Chorus*. But overall, church leadership is an awesome privilege and I wouldn’t want to do anything else. I was with a local pastor this week and he said it well, “There isn’t anything I would rather do.” That ought to be the heart of every elder. Willing. Eager. Enthusiastic about the church and the gospel and the people.

This applies to all of us. I think all of us should aspire to increasing levels of responsibility in the church. If you are a Sunday school teacher, have in your mind openness to greater opportunities to serve. Be willing. *Here I am Lord, send me*. If you are in a small group, what if an opportunity came to move into leadership? Shouldn’t we be willing and happy to serve the Lord Jesus? Elders and pastors especially should serve with a general tone of joy and gladness.

Not for shameful gain, but eagerly

Paul includes in both his lists of elder qualifications a similar requirement:

- *“Not a lover of money.”* (1 Timothy 3:3)
- *“Greedy for gain.”* (Titus 1:7)

The apostle Paul writes this into the qualifications, then later writes this, *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”* (1 Timothy 5:17) This and other verses teach legitimate financial compensation for elders and pastors. It is not the legitimate gain that Peter is warning about, it is the illegitimate gain AND the heart that loves and lives for money. When money’s the motive, something is fundamentally wrong.

We might think, *you mean the televangelist who preaches the prosperity-gospel and flies around in private jets?* It probably includes that. What Peter more likely has in mind is that normal guy who sees leadership in the church as a possible means to financial gain. He is a mercenary, where down in his heart, on the level of motivations, material gain is the real love. Not the Lord and not the church.

It’s one thing to make money; it’s another to serve it. This is especially dangerous as church leaders are typically handling church funds and are in charge of its appropriation. If

³ John Calvin as quoted by Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, p. 195.

a leader loves money and has access to it, now you have a formula for disaster and most of us have heard of church situations like that.

The elder or pastor has to check his heart. *Do I do what I do because of love for God or money? Love for people or money?*

There is another danger here: elders who fleece the flock. They work the church over to their advantage. I remember one well-respected pastor I know who was quietly taking personal loans from church members who trusted him. Then it all came out. Another pastor friend of mine swore that every December his senior pastor wore his most out-of-date clothing hoping to engender Christmas sympathy and gifts. That's called working it. It's the opposite of integrity.

A sign of a false teacher is that they love money. The Pharisees loved money. Judas betrayed Jesus for money.

I have found it to be an absolute truth that if you want to know where people's hearts are, look at their money. How they use it. How they give it or don't. Faithfulness with personal money is a sign of spiritual maturity in shepherds and sheep. *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Matthew 6:21) This has so proved itself true that we don't put in leadership here anyone who doesn't have demonstrable faithfulness in giving. It's written right into our constitution. I like it because it smokes out the pretenders.

Not Caesar but Jesus

"...not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:3)

A true shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. Jesus is the ultimate example. He didn't come to be served but to serve. He served us to the end of his life even giving his life for the church. Elsewhere he said this to the disciples:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." (Matthew 20:25-27)

Servant leadership. *Be an example.* Nobody but Jesus does this perfectly but the leaders of the church must embody a solid Christian example. Leading is a call to serve the church. This may seem glamorous to some. That just means they have never done it.

Why? Sheep are smelly. Sheep are unruly. Sheep bite their shepherds. Sheep whine, and complain. Yet through it all, the shepherd faithfully cares for them and bears with them. Why?

"And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." (1 Peter 5:4) Someday the head shepherd of the church will return. Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11). Then all the sheep bites and difficulties will fade. What won't fade is the crown of glory promised to those who serve his church well.

October is Pastor Appreciation Month. I'm not aware of elder appreciation month. Let's clump those together and lest you think this self-serving, I do not want anything. I mention

this because I want to make sure our elders and campus elders and ministry staff know how much you appreciate them. In fact, how about showing appreciation for anyone under whom you serve here? Small group leader. Ministry leader. Write them a note. Encourage them. Tell them the difference their leadership is making in your life. It is a high and holy task God has called them to.

Eternity will be one long servant leadership appreciation day. Those who serve well, will be wearing a crown of glory. It's a distinction given to someone who served the Chief Shepherd by caring for his flock. A crown will be given personally to us by the Chief Shepherd, who will say, *well done, good and faithful servant.*

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