

Shepherd the Flock—1 Peter 5

Peter's conclusion in chapter 5 of his first letter is an address to two groups within the church---elders and younger men under their care. These mature leaders (elders) are to lead, teach, and admonish the younger, less knowledgeable, and less experienced Christians. This follows Peter's pattern of exhortation concerning interaction with unbelieving outsiders in 1 Peter 4:12-19 followed by advice about life within the church. We find then that we have two relationships as both edifiers of the church, and evangelists to those outside the church.

Peter addresses the elders of the different churches in Asia Minor in 1 Peter 5:1, "I exhort the elders among you as your fellow elder". Peter also stresses his qualifications to lead them by saying he is a witness of the life of Christ, and a partaker in the coming glory that will be revealed when Jesus comes back. Peter's authority as an eyewitness was enhanced by the fact he had even seen Jesus in His glorified state at the Transfiguration on the mountain. Only Peter, James and John had been witnesses of that awesome event recorded in Matt. 17.

Peter's command or exhortation to the leaders of the churches in v.2 is a simple "shepherd the flock of God". They were to exercise "oversight" not under compulsion, but voluntarily, meaning to have enthusiasm for the job as if serving Christ Himself instead of just feeling like it is another responsibility forced on you. They were not obligated, but should feel like it was an opportunity to serve Christ. In addition, they should not take the job out of a desire for money, or worse, a chance to pilfer funds for themselves as Judas had according to John 12:6. Ministry is not a business, yet according to 1 Timothy 5:17-18, they are worthy of pay.

The Office of Elder and its Qualifications

It is interesting that Peter uses three different words for this leadership office in the church. First, "elders" has the connotation of wise mature believers. Then "shepherd" is the image of a leader and teacher, and finally "overseer" leaves the impression of authority. The Greek word for elder is presbuterion which is the word we get Presbyterian from, the Greek for shepherd is poimen also translated pastor, and the Greek word for overseer is episkopos which is also translated bishop.

The qualifications for the office of elder/overseer/shepherd are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. It is exactly what you would expect in the way of men who are above reproach, respectable, uncontentious, free from the love of money, not a new convert, and have a good reputation; but there is one expectation that most churches miss or ignore. Both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9 say that elders must have the gift of teaching. They have to be able to "exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict". Paul told Timothy that the elders who worked hard at preaching and teaching deserved "double honor" in 1 Tim.5:17.

In 1 Peter 5:3-4, Peter told his audience that elders should not try to “lord” it over those allotted to their charge. They should not act like bosses or generals, but instead they were to be servant leaders who were humbly carrying out an important job for the Lord. In the business world, leaders and executives dominate the workers and demand obedience, but in the church they were to follow Jesus’ teaching to His disciples in passages like John 13:14, “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” Again in Mark 9:35, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.” Often the disciples would come to Jesus asking if they could be in charge in the kingdom, and Jesus would always say, “You know that the rulers lord it over people, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant” (Matt.20:25-26).

Crowns in Heaven

The consistent image used throughout the New Testament for rewards in heaven is used by Peter in 1 Peter 5:4. Instead of serving as an elder for money or power, we should look to our reward as being a heavenly one, and Peter makes it clear that these heavenly rewards are like “unfading crowns of glory”. The word in Greek translated crowns, is the laurel wreath placed on the winner’s head at the athletic games. Today they place medals around the winner’s necks, but then they put these “crowns” on their heads. This image is transferred to believers in many passages like Phil.4:1 where Paul anticipates a crown for leading people to Christ, and 1 Thes.2:19 views a crown for discipleship. James 1:2 speaks of a crown for enduring trials and suffering. It is clear from Revelation 4:10 that these rewards are still according to the grace of God. The idea that anyone could earn God’s favor is negated by this scene in heaven where the leaders of the church fall down before the throne of God and cast their crowns before the throne saying that all glory and honor belong to God.

Shepherd My Sheep

The lesson of joyfully serving as servant leaders for the pure purpose of loving Christ and glorifying God, was learned the hard way by Peter. In the Gospel accounts like Matthew 26:31-35, Jesus told His disciples that they would all fall away on the night of His arrest. Peter pridefully answered that the others might fall, but he never would. Jesus predicted that “before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times”. Still Peter argued that “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You”. These were famous last words because after the arrest, a servant girl accused Peter of being one of Jesus’ followers, and Peter replied that he did not know what she was talking about. Then a few moments later he said, “I do not know the man.” Then a third time others asked him and again for the third time Peter denied Jesus, and immediately a cock crowed. In Luke’s account of Luke 22:61, Jesus turned at that very moment, and from a distance caught Peter’s eye, and Peter remembered. He was so ashamed that it says “he went out and wept bitterly”. The proud man of boasting that he would behave better than his peers and never fail, was crushed. After the resurrection, you can imagine Peter’s new humility, and no doubt he wondered whether he could be restored to Christ’s favor such that he would receive a

position of authority. Jesus would restore Peter to leadership at a dramatic scene on the shores of the Sea of Galilee found in John 21:15-19.

In Matt.28:7, Jesus instructed them to meet Him in Galilee after the resurrection. After appearing to them in Jerusalem, they went to the Sea of Galilee. As they waited for Jesus, they were fishing when Jesus appeared to them on the shore. Peter got so excited he dove into the water and swam to shore. They ate breakfast, and Jesus then asked Peter basically the same thing three times. I don't think it was a coincidence that Peter had denied Christ three times so Jesus has him affirm his love for Jesus three times in John 21:15-19. These three questions and Peter's three affirmative answers not only restore Peter, but also convey the theme of his role as a servant leader. Clearly the motivation in tending the lambs and shepherding the flock is love for Jesus.

In the original language, two different words for love are used in this passage. The Greek word "phileo" conveys a deep affection and a warm brotherly love. The word "agape" is used for a godly love that is unconditional and sacrificial. Jesus' first two questions of "do you love me?" use agape, but Peter answers with phileo. The third time, Jesus descends to Peter's level by using phileo as if to ask, "Do you even love Me as a brother?" Peter's bravado has been destroyed, and he is too humble now to hazard an answer that he loves unconditionally and sacrificially. Peter now knows that only Jesus knows Peter's heart, so Peter appeals to Jesus in v.17, "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you." I think it interesting that the image for evangelism and discipleship that Jesus used was "tend My lambs", "Shepherd My sheep", and "Tend My sheep." Jesus views the unsaved world as sheep without a shepherd wandering aimlessly in search of what they need. Some of them are deemed as "My sheep" by Jesus, and it is the apostles job to go out and round them up and lead them to pasture. Then they will be tended, fed, and watered. The motivation for Peter to do this is only his love for Jesus. Before the crucifixion, Peter wanted to be the top dog, and rule in the kingdom, but now it is about humble servant leadership out of an abiding love for Christ. Now Peter is ready to serve. Then in John 21:18-19, Jesus gave him a commission and tells him of the price he will pay—pain, deprivation, and a martyr's death.

Therefore, in 1 Peter 5:1-4, as Peter drew near to the end of his fruitful ministry, he was writing his disciples to do the same. As Peter had experienced great opposition and spiritual warfare, he knew that they also needed to be ready for the adversary. He warned both the leaders and the church that they needed to be alert in 1 Peter 5:8. The adversary of God and all who believe is on the prowl like a "roaring lion" seeking unsuspecting souls to devour, but if we are alert and ready, we can resist him by remaining "firm in the faith". We will all endure trials and tribulations, but we look forward with our eyes on the prize when God will Himself "perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

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