

Under-Shepherds

1 Peter 5:1-5

Now given that we are in the process of looking for new elders, this passage is timely as Peter turns his attention to the leaders, the elders in the various churches he's writing to. He's beginning to draw the letter to a close and he has covered so much ground already. He's spoken to wives and husbands and servants. He's spoken to all of us about our attitude to government. He's majored on suffering, and taught us how we can suffer well. He's gloried in Christ and His cross and what he has done for us in the cross. But now, as he prepares to sign off, Peter turns his attention to the elders in the church. And he begins by describing himself.

Peter: a fellow elder

5:1 So, I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ.

Just think how Peter could have described himself, how he could have pulled rank over these small church leaders. Here is a man who has been used by God to see multitudes of Jews and Gentiles turn to Christ across the Roman world, and he could have bragged on that. He could have said: I, Peter, one of the Lord Jesus' chosen apostles, member of Christ's inner circle of three, witness of Christ's miracles, of His resurrection, of His ascension, of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, I Peter the apostle exhort you elders.

But he doesn't. Peter knows precisely who he is and he describes himself as a fellow elder: men, I'm no different from you, he says. I know the kind of things you struggle with, I understand the joys and the heartaches of caring for God's people. I know the mountaintops and the valleys you know. I struggle with the same things you struggle with. I'm a fellow elder.

And of all the things he could have claimed to be a witness of Peter stakes his plea to them on what? On being a witness of Christ's sufferings. And everyone knew what sort of witness Peter had been to Christ's sufferings. Yes, he had seen the cost Jesus paid of having his own family think he was crazy. Yes, he had seen the crowd who once hailed Jesus as king, turn on him and call for his blood. Yes, he had been a witness to how the Jewish leaders viciously rejected Jesus. But as Christ's sufferings reached their peak, Peter's record grew far more flakey. As Jesus sweated it out in the garden of Gethsemane asking the Father on his knees that if it were possible may he not drink the cup of His wrath, Peter slept. As Jesus was beaten and interrogated by the religious authorities, Peter denied three times he knew anything about Him. And if he was there at all he would have watched at a distance as Jesus had nails driven through his hands and feet into the wood of the cross, and was hung up to die. I am a witness of his sufferings, Peter says.

And Peter knows that the only reason that he, the man who denied Christ, could write this letter and be considered a leader in the church in any way, is precisely because of those sufferings. That at the cross, Christ bore Peter's sin, taking upon Himself Peter's failure and desertion, and every other sin Peter had ever committed, and that in exchange for Christ taking Peter's sin, Peter might receive the undeserved grace and favour and forgiveness of God. A man who had so badly

screwed up was rescued from the scrap heap of life and given wonderful hope and a future. That's why Peter opens this paragraph with 'So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder – as a man just like you- and a witness of the sufferings of Christ – those sufferings that have purchased my life.'

And if, like Peter, you know, painfully know, your failure, you don't have to stay stuck there. Like Peter you can also know the restoring grace of God. But that can only come as you respond to Jesus' call to repent and admit your need of Him and put your trust in Him, rather than thinking you can sort it out yourself, and receive the forgiveness he obtained for you through his sufferings,. And if you will do that, it's not just forgiveness you receive, but His Spirit which empowers you to live the life He calls you to. And then, what you find is that by the strange but wonderful mercy of God, your failure rather than spelling your end, becomes the very doorway through which you can step into future hope.

But you don't need to have had some crisis failure to know that. The grace of God – his love, his mercy, his forgiveness and the joy of his salvation, His Holy Spirit, are daily available to any of us who will come to Christ and put our trust in Him, the One who suffered in our place.

So, having made it clear that he is one of them, Peter makes his charge to the elders:

The Elders: One Charge: Shepherd the flock of God

v1-2 again: 'So I exhort the elders among you... : Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.'

Last week we saw how Peter has just told these Christians not to be surprised when they face suffering for Christ's sake, not to quit when judgment begins at the house of God. And knowing that suffering goes with the turf, that this is a normal part of the Christian life Peter says to the elders, 'so', 'therefore', 'given you and your people are going to go through times of trial, shepherd them, pastor them. Be their shepherd'.

Now cast your minds back to when Peter was restored by Jesus. What was Jesus' charge to Peter? John 21:15 'Feed my lambs'. John 21:16 'Tend –shepherd, pastor-my sheep'. John 21:17 'Feed my sheep.' Peter had been there when Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd, who would lay his life down for the sheep; Peter had stood there first broken and then amazed as Jesus restored him and called him to shepherd the fledgling church, and now Peter, this elder statesman of the church, passes it on to the next generation: Men, shepherd the flock of God that's among you.

And Peter's description – which he got from Jesus- of what it means to lead God's people, to shepherd them, is just full of truth. Think, what does a shepherd do? As someone else has said, the job of a shepherd is to feed the sheep and shoot the wolves. That's the job of the shepherd.

He feeds the sheep, he cares for them, he leads them to pasture. And the role of elders in the church is to feed and nurture and nourish the church. Not with grass, you'll be glad to hear, but the word of God. That's why, when Paul sets out the criteria for elders in 1 Timothy 3 he says an elder must be able to teach. Doesn't mean he's got to preach, but it means he's a man from whom others can learn, so the sheep can grow fat, and healthy rather than thin and scrawny.

But there's more to feeding and nurturing than just grass. The shepherd cares for his sheep. And sometimes that means protecting them from themselves. Some years ago we stayed as a family on a sheep farm for a holiday, and we got talking to the farmer. He used to be a banker and had given it up to become a sheep farmer, and he told us that a major part of his job was spent trying to stop the sheep from killing themselves. They would roll into ditches, or get out onto the roads, or get their heads stuck in fences, or fall into rivers. And he spent his time rescuing his sheep from themselves. Now most of the time, you and I, we're not that stupid. But sometimes, just sometimes, we are. And Peter says to the elders: shepherd the flock: feed them from the word of God and, when necessary, protect them from themselves. And there might be times when you think I or one of the other elders is being too firm with you. And you think we're coming on a bit strong over some issue in your life, and you don't like it. Well, maybe, just maybe you're in a ditch, or your head's stuck in a fence and all this pulling and tugging is because we care about you and we're trying to save you from yourself.

But the second job of the shepherd after feeding and caring for the sheep is to shoot the wolves. Now, for those of you who did history at school and are sat there thinking 'I'm sure they didn't have guns back then' you're right. But feed the sheep and shoot the wolves is a lot more snappy than feed the sheep and fight the wolves with sticks and swords and scare them off with fire! The point is the shepherd's job isn't simply to feed the sheep and protect them from themselves. The shepherd knows that there are predators out there after the sheep and the Bible calls them wolves. They're false teachers. And without becoming hairsplitting Pharisees, the job of the elders is to protect the flock from anything or anyone that deviates from the word of God and promotes wrong thinking or wrong living.

You see Peter says 'shepherd the flock of God'. It's not the elders' flock – my church, my little kingdom, it's not the sheep's flock –as if whatever the majority want goes, it's not the world's flock as if we just go along with what ever society out there thinks. It's God's flock. And the church exists to make much of God, to glorify and brag about Jesus. And the elders, the shepherds, the pastors are simply under-shepherds of Jesus who Peter says in v4 is the Chief Shepherd. He's over everything, it's all about Him, it's not a platform or vehicle for anyone else's philosophies or good ideas. It's His church and what He says, in His word, goes. There's no other foundation on which to build or lead the church.

So, there may be times when you think, 'hey Martin, aren't you being a bit narrow?' Well, may be, but if we are it's because we're trying to guard the flock. Or the time might come when you think 'Isn't the way you're handling this person a bit harsh?' Well, it's always going to be our desire to act in love and gentleness,

but sometimes you have to fight to shield the flock. That's what it means to be a shepherd. It's not all fluffy white lambs. Sometimes you have to take out the wolves.

And because of the responsibilities involved Peter spells out three dangers, three traps that elders in a church like our own can fall into.

The Elders: three dangers

And these three sins that elders are especially prone to work just as well, or badly, for anyone in any position of service or ministry in the church, or for that matter, in positions of authority in the work place.

V2-3: 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.

Compulsion

The first trap elders, or anyone else for that matter, can fall into is to serve under compulsion. To do it with a wrong attitude, with a bad spirit, because you've got to. Maybe things started well, but the joy of serving has long gone. Now you do it because you have to. And the tragedy of that is that it soon starts to show. You get grumpy about things, your heart isn't really in it, and others notice that. And grudging service, like grudging financial giving, is never appreciated by God. God loves cheerful givers Paul tells us.

And Peter's answer to that trap is to serve 'willingly, as God would have you'. Literally, 'willingly, according to God.' Do it God's way, not the way of the world. Modern culture says 'it's my rights that count, if it's not working for me, I'm not going to do it.' No, Peter says, do it the way God would have you, willingly, freely, out of thankfulness for what God has done for you, out of love for those he has put under your care; out of imitation of Jesus Christ, who came as a servant to serve.

Money.

The second trap is money. Don't shepherd the flock for shameful gain, for what you can get out of it. Don't use the church Peter says as a means to line your pockets. And I think the combination of money and the gospel can be deadly. The power of the gospel is killed when money becomes central, or its tentacles start infiltrating in what we do or why we do it. I don't think it's any surprise that Jesus called money Mammon. He personified money as this powerful entity, this idolatrous god-like thing that wants our hearts. And those in church leadership are absolutely not exempt from its power to entice and beguile. You don't have to look long before you can find examples of pastors, who seem to have been overtaken by it.

And Peter's antidote to that is to serve and shepherd eagerly. You're not doing it because of your pay-check, or the kickbacks you get. You're doing it with an eager heart knowing that your reward isn't in this life, it's not financial, it's up

ahead. It's the unfading crown of glory, the reward that everyone of us – not just elders- but all of us should be running towards: the commendation of Jesus: well done, my good and faithful servant.

Power

The third trap is power: domineering over those in your charge; leading by intimidation; seeing leadership within the church as a status and then seeking to hold onto it by power. Those things are killers for church unity, for the good of the gospel and for the care of individual saints. God's people will tolerate it and give the benefit of the doubt to leaders out of loyalty for so long, but eventually when power becomes corrupt within a church it will come crashing down.

And Peter spells out where the authority and influence of the pastor-shepherds, the elders lies and it's not in domineering force. 'Be examples to the flock' Peter says. The authority of elders within a church is real, and Peter calls the churches to submit to that authority, but it's authority that comes from being an example to those you lead.

One of the men who profoundly influenced me was an international bible teacher called Campbell McAlpine. I heard him preach and teach, and was able to spend some time with him in private and I just thought he was wonderful. He was everything I wanted to be. Then I went away to university and joined a prayer group that prayed for Britain once a week. And the young lady who led the group was called Joy McAlpine and I asked her if she was any relation to Campbell McAlpine. She told me she was his daughter. So I proceeded to tell her how great I thought he was, what an excellent teacher, how I could sit and listen to him for hours. And she heard me out and then said 'o, he's better even than that, and he's my dad' and she said she had never heard him say anything critical against someone else. And that from his daughter. That's the sort of testimony you want: the power of example even in your own home. 'Your authority' Peter says, 'doesn't come from domineering over others, it comes from your example'.

But there's zero place for the crippling sin of leadership pride. When Paul was talking about his ministry, he asks the question in 2 Cor 2:17 'Who is sufficient for these things?' And the point he's making is 'I'm not'. I'm not sufficient for these things. It's not me, I don't have the power, its Christ. He could say that he worked harder than any of the other apostles and then follow it up immediately by saying, but it's not me working, but Christ's power working in me.

Compulsion, money and power. Three pressing dangers Peter sees for leaders. When Charles Spurgeon was asked the secret to his amazingly powerful and successful ministry he replied 'my people pray for me.' So, I want to ask you to pray for me and for the other elders that we avoid these sins and joyfully embrace their antidotes.

And then Peter turns his attention to those who aren't elders

The Crucial Need for Humility

V5: 'Likewise you who are younger, be subject to the elders'. Now, the joy of being young is you think you know it all. And despite the fact that you have next to no experience of life, and you're barely out of nappies/diapers, let alone ever changed one, you are the sole repository of divine truth and insight. And with that sure and certain knowledge comes just this ever so slight tendency to be headstrong. Now, I know that none of us were ever like that, and that none of you young people here would ever be like that, but Peter's friends weren't quite as holy as you, and Peter tells them, look, God has called the elders to lead the flock so you just pipe down, learn from them, submit to them and when you can drink from a cup without a lid on it, we'll listen to you.

But by making the contrast here between the elders and those who are younger Peter's probably got more in mind than simply younger in age. He's talking generally about those who aren't elders or who are not yet qualified to be elders. And Peter calls on the church to submit to its leaders. And he's not out on a limb there. In Hebrews 13:17 the writer says: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." And there are good reasons why a church should submit to and respect its leaders: leaders, that is, who are serving willingly, eagerly, not for dishonest gain, not domineering over the flock but setting an example to them. Firstly, if there isn't effective leadership which has the support of the people the church becomes less like a flock of sheep and more like a flock of headless chickens, running around in every which directions sqwarking, if headless chickens can sqwark. And secondly, the feeding, caring, protective tasks of the elders are made that much harder when there isn't that submission to their leadership. And thirdly, as the writer to the Hebrews says, it is no advantage to you if joy has gone out of the elders' dealings with you.

Now we're a young church, and to date we have been mercifully spared any degree of disunity. And we want to keep it that way. We've had people leave and to some degree that's inevitable. But I want to ask you that if you become aware of you talking against, or undermining the leadership here or in any church you are in in the future: stop talking to others about it, take it to God, then bring it to the elders and let's try and address issues in a way that feeds and nourishes and cares for the flock rather than destroys them. And the attitude that both leading and following is to be walked out in is one of humility, Peter says:

V5 again 'Clothe yourselves, all of you, -elders, non-elders- with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Mutual humility, considering others of more importance than yourself, following after Jesus who made himself nothing and took the very nature of a servant, is the only way leadership and followership in churches can work. The opposite of that is pride: whether domineering elders or unsubmissive church members. And Peter says, God opposes them. God continually opposes those who are proud. He's not going to let go something that is such an affront to the pattern of His Son. If Nate and I were to arm wrestle, there would be no competition. I'd win every time. But if you or I allow pride and lack of humility to get a foothold within

our relationships, we pit ourselves against God, we find him our opponent, opposing our proud hearts, and then there's only ever going to be one winner in that battle.

Instead, all of us, elders, ministry leaders, those of you who serve in whatever area or have yet to find an area of service, let us serve Christ and one another with joy, and in humility and where God sees attitudes modeled on Jesus, he promises grace. Let's do all we can to receive it.