

In the Land of our Sojourn: A Charge to Humble Shepherds

1 Peter 5:1-5

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on October 19, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Whenever you're studying the Bible, for the most part, what you're reading is universally directed to any reader regardless of who you are. But every so often you come across passages that are written for a specific group of people that not everyone can identify with.
 - ▶ We've already seen in chapter 3 how Scripture can directly address husbands and wives. So if you're not a husband or wife, you might think a sermon on that passage would have no relevance to you. You might be disinclined to pay attention. But then again, single people might still want to listen because they hope to become a husband or wife someday. So it's still worth hearing.

- ❖ **But now this morning we come to a passage that's directed specifically to church elders. And you might be thinking, "What does this have to do with me?"** I'm not an elder. I don't plan on being one. Or I don't even know what a church elder is. Most single people at least plan to become husbands and wives so they want to hear those passages preached. But most church members don't plan to be elders, so why do I want to hear a sermon on this passage?
 - ▶ That's what I was asking myself earlier this week. Besides the few brothers here who are serving or aspire to serve as church elders, how am I going to keep the rest of you from falling asleep or checking their email? *What does this passage have to do with every single person here?* I was stumped.

- ❖ Until I realized what the therefore is there for. And then it all came clear. If you look at chapter 5:1, depending on your translation, it might start with the word "so" or "therefore". That means whatever Peter introduces here in our text follows directly on the tail of what he wrote at the close of chapter 4.
 - ▶ There we saw him warning of a fiery trial that his Christian readers will go through (4:12). He was using a furnace metaphor. Just as craftsmen use a furnace to purify and to test the genuineness of a precious metal, God uses suffering for the sake of Christ as a means of both purifying and testing his people.
 - He warns in v17 that it's time for judgment (that is, this kind of suffering) to begin at the household of God. "Church, you're about to be thrown into the fiery furnace; *therefore*, I exhort the elders among you."

- ❖ **If a church hopes to come out on the other end of furnace stronger, healthier, more refined, more assured, then that church needs to have godly elders at the helm who are helping believers navigate through the fiery trials of Christian suffering.**
 - ▶ So let me ask you: *Do you care about the spiritual health of this church? Do you care about your own spiritual life or that of your family? Do you want to have what it takes to endure suffering and hardship for the sake of Christ and his gospel? Do you want to stand firm in the grace of God?*
 - Peter's answer is simple: You need elders. Godly men who are willing and able to shepherd the flock of God through whatever trials may come.

- ❖ **You may never be an elder. But you certainly need elders in your life and over your church.** And if you join a church like ours, then you'll certainly have a voice in determining who will serve as an elder of that church.
 - ▶ So knowing what an elder is, what an elder does, and what to look for in an elder is vitally important to you. When you sat down this morning, the importance and relevance of church elders may have never even crossed your mind. But now I hope you're starting to see why they matter, and why this morning's passage matters.
 - I've broken it down into four sections. First, we'll consider the elder's role. Second, the elder's heart. Third, the elder's reward. And fourth, the church member's responsibility.

Elders and Their Role

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the elders and their role. *Who are they and what do they do in the life of a church?* Depending on your church background, you might have different conceptions of what a church elder is.
 - ▶ **Some people have the impression that elders are called elders because they're elderly.** It's any older, godly, mature man in the church. Usually founding members or long-standing members. Perhaps they have a formal position and formal role, but if anything, it's mainly to assist the pastors in their work or to handle more administrative tasks in overseeing the church.
 - Which is why they're often chosen based on their vocational expertise and experience in running companies, managing finances, or supervising projects. Pastors, it's believed, are trained in seminary to oversee the spiritual side of running a church. While elders are trained in the secular workforce to oversee the administrative side.
- ❖ That's how it's done in many churches. But that doesn't mean it's how God wants it to be done according to his Word. But before we look at the Who concerning elders, let's first consider the How Many.

The Elders Plural

- ❖ **The first observation I want to make in our passage and in other relevant texts is that the NT norm in all of these early churches being planted is the presence of elders in the plural.** There is no evidence of a church being led by a singular elder. In every NT church, you would find a plurality of elders. A team of elders.
 - ▶ That's why Peter says he exhorts, "*the elders among you*". Titus is instructed by the Apostle Paul to remain in Crete to "*appoint elders (plural) in every town*" (Tit. 1:5). In Acts 14:23, we read of Paul and Barnabas going from city to city, preaching the gospel, making disciples, and appointing elders (plural) in every church.
 - **What that means is that no church in the NT was organized with a corporate model where one man stands at the top functioning like a chief executive.** There was no top dog calling all the shots. Rather, there was a consistent pattern of elders, as a team, leading individual churches.

- ❖ Now the idea of being led by a group of elders is obviously not a NT invention. **The first Christians were all Jewish and were all familiar with the way the twelve tribes of Israel were led by elders.** Each tribe had its own set of elders who, in their case, were usually chosen by virtue of age. The elders *were* the elderly.
 - ▶ But while Christians were quick to borrow the term *Elder* to identify their own leaders, they placed more emphasis on the man's spiritual maturity rather than just his age. Because the elder's role in the church requires more than just life experience.

The Role of Shepherding

- ❖ *What's the role?* We see that elders had the role of shepherding. Peter starts off in v1 by expressing solidarity with the elders he's writing to. He calls himself a fellow elder when he could've easily asserted his authority as an apostle. He could've pulled rank. But no, instead he speaks to these elders as a fellow elder on the same level. As one who is partaking in the same sufferings that they're going through and who will partake with them in the same glory that's going to be revealed when Christ returns.
 - ▶ He goes on in v2 to exhort the elders to "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you*". The word for *shepherd* could also be translated *pastor*. "*Pastor the flock of God*". **Whenever that term is associate with elders in the NT, it's almost exclusively used as a verb to describe what they do.** Elders shepherd. They pastor.
 - The only time the word shepherd or pastor is used as a noun to identify a leader in the church is in Ephesians 4:11 where it says Christ gives the church "*shepherds and teachers*". Pastor-teachers. So the word *pastor* is mainly a verb in the NT and not a noun – not a title.
- ❖ **What this mean is that the more common term in the NT for the shepherds of a church is the title Elder and not Pastor.** Somehow we've reversed it. In the American church today, everyone knows what a pastor is and what a pastor does. He's a spiritual leader in the church and he leads primarily by feeding the flock the Word of God just like a good shepherd.
 - ▶ But that's what an elder is and what an elder does. The titles are interchangeable. There is no distinction biblically. Yes, I know *we* make distinctions. We usually reserve the title *Pastor* for those who have seminary-training, who serve on the church staff, who have been formally ordained. The title *Elder* is used for lay leaders.
 - **But from a biblical standpoint, the pastors of a church are elders. And the elders of a church are pastors.** They're the same men with the same task.
- ❖ In the end, I could care less what you call the man. **In the end, what matters is that churches understand and expect the men they call to serve as elders to carry out the responsibility of shepherding/pastoring the church and not to leave that task for the church staff, the so-called professionals.**
 - ▶ Elders shepherd. Elders pastor. They're not just board members who handle the business of a church. They're spiritual leaders who are responsible for the feeding, nurturing and protecting of God's flock. Some are vocational; while others are volunteers. But they're all shepherds.

The Role of Overseeing

- ❖ We also see in our passage that elders have the role of overseeing. Look back at v2. Peter exhorts the elders to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight*”.
 - ▶ Overseeing. Now you might be thinking that's a completely separate role from shepherding. Granted, there are some slight nuances between the terms, but they're actually closely related. In the end, both emphasize the giving of leadership.
 - **Shepherding is the figurative expression. Overseeing is the more literal expression.** Both communicate the idea of leading a body of people.

- ❖ Overseeing – or the noun form *overseer* – points to the influence of Greek culture on the early church, just as *elder* points to the church's Jewish roots. **The Greeks used the word *overseer* to describe any office that had superintending functions.** It communicated the idea of caring for or watching over others.
 - ▶ So while *elder* tells you more about the character of the man – his spiritual maturity – the terms *overseer* and *shepherd* tells you more about what he does. In the end, they're all interchangeable. So whether you reading a passage that addresses elders (v1) or shepherds/pastors (Eph. 4:11) or overseers (1 Tim. 3:1), all three terms can be read synonymously.

- ❖ A good example of this is found in **Acts 20:17**. Turn there with me. Here Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders. “*Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.*” He goes on for a few verses recounting his ministry among them.
 - ▶ Skip on down to v28. Here Paul says to the elders, “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God.*”
 - Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Spirit has made them overseers tasked to care for the church, and then he applies pastoral imagery describing the church as a flock and the elders as shepherds who are to guard the sheep from fierce wolves, i.e. false teachers (cf. Tit. 1:5-7). All three terms being applied.

- ❖ Bottomline, what this means is that when you're looking for elders in a church, you're not looking for board members. For those with the most managerial experience. For those with the longest track record in the church.
 - ▶ **You're looking for shepherds, for pastors, for spiritual leaders.** Most elders wont be seminary-trained – but they ought to be trained in sound doctrine. Most wont be regular preachers – but they ought to know how to feed the sheep God's Word like any good shepherd. Most wont serve full-time on the church staff – but they ought to commit the necessary time it take to watch over a flock, to oversee it.

Elders and Their Heart

- ❖ Now that we've considered the role of elders, let's examine their hearts. Now that you know what they're called to do in the life of a church, let's consider what kind of men should be called into this role.

- ▶ Let's go back to v2, "²*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; ³not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*"
 - Not just anyone can serve as a church elder. You have to have the right heart – a heart that offers willing service, eager service, and exemplary service.

Willing Service

- ❖ Let's consider each starting with a heart attitude of willing service. Peter says elders are to shepherd the flock, to exercise oversight, "*not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you.*"
 - ▶ He expects whole-hearted devotion from any man who would serve as an elder. **If a man feels pressured to serve, if he's doing it under compulsion, that's not how God would have it.** That doesn't please him.
 - The Apostle Paul uses similar language back in **2 Corinthians 9:7** when he talks about giving financially to the mission of the church. He says, "*Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*"
- ❖ Begrudged giving done out of a sense of obligation is not something God loves. He loves a cheerful giver. **In the same way, begrudged shepherding without a willing, cheerful heart is not pleasing to God. It's not how he would have you do it.**
 - ▶ This is why over in 1 Timothy 3 – the chapter that lays out that the qualifications for overseers, for elders – this is why it starts off in v1, "*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*" I think it's significant that an aspiration, a desire, to exercise oversight is the first qualification for elders.
- ❖ **He could be the godliest man you know, the most spiritually mature, but if he doesn't have an internal motivation and desire to serve as an elder, then he's not qualified.** This principle would actually apply to any position of leadership in the church.
 - ▶ We don't want small group leaders or deacons or disciplers to serve simply because there's no one else available. Or because everyone expects them to. If they're serving under compulsion and not willingly, then that does both the individual no good and the people being served. God's will is willing service.

Eager Service

- ❖ Peter goes on to say that elders ought to exercise oversight, "*not for shameful gain, but eagerly.*" In other words, elders can't be in it for the money. Now you might be thinking, "What money? Elders don't get paid. They're volunteers."
 - ▶ Well remember, your pastors, who are on the payroll, are technically elders. **The point is that when it comes to elders who do get paid – who we typically call pastors – if they're overly concerned with their paychecks, they're under qualified.**

- ❖ Shepherding the flock of God is high calling and a high honor. You defiled it when you're motivated by a spirit of greed that seeks financial gain. Elders should be motivated by a spirit of eagerness to serve.
 - ▶ Now the solution here is not to forgo paying your pastors and turning all of them into volunteers or to purposely give them meager salaries bordering the poverty line. Financially compensating certain elders is not a modern invention. It's a practice that dates back to the early church (cf. 1 Cor. 9:7; Gal. 6:6).

- ❖ In **1 Timothy 5:17-18**, Paul instructs the Ephesian church to compensate elders like Timothy who are called to regularly preach and teach. He says, *"¹⁷Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."*"
 - ▶ But clearly in our day, many churches and many pastors have taken this to the extreme – to their extreme shame. When pastors make more than the average congregant in their churches, when they're wearing designer suits and driving luxury cars, then you really have to wonder what's driving them.

Exemplary Service

- ❖ Peter goes on in v3 to say elders should not be, *"domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."* Now the fact that there's a danger and temptation for elders to become domineering implies that they do hold a certain degree of authority over the flock. *If your elders had no authority over you, then why would Peter have to warn about this?*
 - ▶ **The fact is church elders do hold authority over church members.** They're called to rule and lead the church. But they're not to do so like the rulers and leaders of the world who pull rank and lord their authority over others. Jesus told his disciples in Mark 10 that those who rule the church, those who would be great must become servants. *"Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."* (Mk. 10:42-45)

- ❖ **The point is, when it comes to the household of God, those with the authority to lead lead by example – not by force of will.** That's why the Bible consistently applies a shepherd-sheep analogy to the relationship between elders and members.
 - ▶ **Ancient shepherds never drove their sheep like you would cattle. Instead they would walk on ahead and call the sheep to follow.** That's how elders are to lead the flock of God. By going ahead and setting an example, a pattern for others to follow.

- ❖ When Peter mentions in v3 *"those in your charge"*, it's a unique term he's using. I think the NASB translates it better. It says, *"those allotted to your charge."* It's actually the same word in Scripture for a "lot", as in casting lots (cf. Mt. 27:35; Acts 1:26). When an ancient Hebrew would cast lots to make a decision, he wasn't relying on random chance. He was putting himself in the providential hands of God. What God appoints by his sovereign decree is what you get. This is where we get the phrase "your lot in life."

- ▶ So for Peter to use the same word to describe a church of believers is significant. He's suggesting to elders that the sheep in your church are not under your care by accident. They're not there by random chance. No, they've been allotted to you. **These are the sheep that God has particularly assigned to your care and oversight.**
- ❖ When you have this mindset it changes the way you lead. If you knew the sheep belonged to you, then I guess you can treat them however you like. If your personal style calls for domineering leadership, then so be it. It's your flock.
 - ▶ But when you realize this is not your flock. **These are not your sheep.** They belong to another. To a chief Shepherd. Then that changes things. You don't have the liberty to treat your sheep however you wish. It doesn't matter what your personal style of leadership is. **If you're going to lead God's flock, it has to be done God's way.**
- ❖ Again, this principle would apply to all leaders in the church – deacons, small group leaders, disciplers, etc. You shouldn't ask another believer to go somewhere you haven't gone yourself. To do something you're not doing yourself. Or to avoid something you're not fleeing from yourself. **Christian leaders don't drive people towards godliness like cattle. We lead them like sheep.** We go ahead on the path of godliness and call them to come closer.

Elders and their Reward

- ❖ This idea of the Church's true owner being God leads to our third point considering elders and their reward. Let's read v4 again, "*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*"
 - ▶ The title "chief shepherd" is unique to the NT. It doesn't appear anywhere else. But the word itself was common in the first-century. When you were dealing with a very large flock, you would have more than one shepherd tending the sheep. There could be multiple shepherds, and the overseer of all those shepherds was the chief shepherd.
 - This is an obvious reference to Jesus. Peter says when Christ returns, all of his undershepherds (elders) will be judged and the faithful will be rewarded.
- ❖ **Elders will one day give an account for their shepherding, for how they watched over God's flock.** This fact ought to strike holy fear in the hearts of elders and anyone who aspires to the office. **Because if we lose a sheep due to our own carelessness or neglect, we're losing someone else's property.** This is a responsibility not to be taken lightly.
 - ▶ But to those elders who abide in Christ, who follow the steps of the chief Shepherd – not perfectly but yet still faithfully – they'll receive "*the unfading crown of glory*". Literally it says "the amaranth crown of glory". The amaranth is a mythical red blossom which supposedly never withers and whose color never fades.
- ❖ So when you think of a crown of glory, don't picture gold and jewels. Peter didn't use the word *diadema* where we get diadem, a royal crown. There will only be one person in heaven wearing a royal crown. It won't be you or me. Peter is talking about a *stephanos*, which refers to a garland, a wreath of leaves.

- ❖ In those days, when a city magistrate completes his term and steps down, the city would throw a special event in his honor, and they would put on his head a wreath, a crown to symbolize his faithful service. In the same way, faithful elders who exercise faithful service in shepherding the flock will hear the words, “*Well done my good and faithful servant*” and receive an unfading wreath of glory.

Members and their Responsibility

- ❖ So we’ve considered the elder’s role, the elder’s heart, and the elder’s reward. Let’s conclude with a word of response on the part of church members. If the elder’s responsibility is to shepherd, to exercise oversight, then what’s the member’s responsibility.
 - ▶ Let’s read v5 again, “*Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*”
- ❖ When Peter addresses the younger and the elders, some take it as referring to literal young people and older people in the church. But it makes little sense to think that Peter would be speaking of elders as an office but then shift one verse later to refer to actual elderly people.
 - ▶ **So it’s commonly understood that he’s not referring the literal age of people but to their standing in the church in relation to their elders.** It’s just another way of saying, “you who are not church elders – in other words, all other church members – be subject to the elders.” Submit to the elders of your church.
- ❖ That’s going to require humility. And not just for members but for elders. Peter says, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility.” **God opposes the proud whether it’s a proud shepherd or sheep.** Whether you have domineering shepherds who like to throw their weight around or contemptuous sheep who like to throw off all authority – God is opposed. But he gives grace to the humble. In **Hebrews 13:17**, we read a similar exhortation. “*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.*”
- ❖ Notice the mention of obeying and submitting to your leaders so that they can do their jobs with joy. The author could just as easily have said, “Let them do this willingly, eagerly, without compulsion.” **For that would be of no advantage to you if you’re elders are frustrated, burnt-out, and joyless.** When you humble yourself and submit willingly to your elders and to their leadership, you’re not just increasing their joy in serving you – you’re adding to your own advantage because now you’ll have healthier, happier shepherds keeping watch over your soul with greater eagerness. It’s a win-win.
- ❖ Let me leave you with this question: ***What is one thing you can do to make your leader’s job a greater joy?*** The pastoral staff gets all the attention, so I want to focus yours on small group leaders, youth group leaders, deacons, and especially elders. *What can you do to express your gratitude, to decrease their burden and increase their joy in serving you?*