

“Humble Shepherds in the Likeness of Christ”

I Peter 5:1-4

January 19, 2020

A friend just recently gave me a book by Stephen Witmer, entitled “A Big Gospel in Small Places.” Ray Ortland wrote the forward to the book and I’d like to draw on a few thoughts he compiled there regarding how essential humility for the Christian.

Jesus said, “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Mt 23:12). Chrysostom (347-407), and early church father, said “*the foundation of our philosophy is humility.*” Charles Simeon (1759-1836), a prominent British minister captured the heart of Christian ministry saying, “*The three lessons which a minister has to learn: 1. Humility. 2. Humility. 3. Humility. How long we are learning the true nature of Christianity!*”

On the flip side, C.S. Lewis declared, “the essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness...are mere fleabites in comparison. It was through pride that [Lucifer] became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind.

Ray Ortland concluded that “historic Christianity agrees that humility is the only human condition God can bless...All grandiosity offends God, especially ministry grandiosity. But all humility pleases God, especially ministry humility.”¹

If humility is that essential to the Christian’s walk, then what might the implications be for those who are called upon to lead the church? Well, in I Peter 5:1-4, Peter calls the elders of the church to exercise their leadership in ways that are deeply permeated with the humility of Christ. While Peter doesn’t use the word humility in these opening verses—he saves his strong

and weighty message of humility for vss. 5-6—nevertheless, the only way for elders to actually live out Peter’s instructions in vss. 1-4 is on the road of humility.

Elders must humbly shepherd God’s church, exemplifying the selfless spirit of Christ which will be rewarded with glory when Jesus returns.

So let’s turn our attention now to take a close look at verses 1-4.

Peter begins with the word, “therefore,” pointing us back to chapter 4 where Peter has been discussing not only the suffering and persecution that the church should not be surprised to endure (4:12-16) but also the sobering reality that it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God (4:17-19). So in light of the hard road of suffering and in light of the vital need for sanctification, Peter exhorts the elders to exercise great care and diligence in their leadership of the church.

Churches don’t just walk through suffering well without good leadership and instruction from the Word. We need mature believers to model the right attitudes and behaviors when suffering tempts us to retreat to our sinful nature. Nor do churches just spontaneously become healthy. Health is the result of intentional leadership and a congregation of people who giving themselves to the Word and prayer out of a desire to live God-pleasing lives.

And so Peter appeals to the elders in vs. 1 as a fellow elder; one who knows the challenges, strain, and need for selfless sacrifice to lead and care for God’s people amidst a hostile culture. Peter appeals to the elders because the church is being put to the test and He wants the end result to be that these believers can rejoice with exultation when Christ returns, because they have been faithful to imitate Christ through the test (4:13).

Peter also appeals to them in vs. 1 as an eyewitness of the sufferings of Christ. This is important because Peter not only knew *what* Christ suffered.

¹ Ray Ortland in the forward to *A Big Gospel in Small Places* (Stephen Witmer), pg. 1-2.

He had been able to observe *how* Christ suffered. He could instruct them in the spirit, the manner, in which they were to follow the example of Christ. Back in 2:21, Peter said, “*you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.*” And then Peter went on to describe the humble, selfless way in which Jesus refrained from sin in the face of suffering.

Yet Peter was not only an eyewitness of Christ’s sufferings, he also appeals to them as one who would personally share in the coming glory at Christ’s return. This is true for every believer but Peter wanted to encourage these leaders who would sacrifice so much for Christ to remember that following Jesus on the road of suffering will ultimately lead them to blessing and glory.² Just what is this glory that will be ours?

- Crown of life (James 1:12)
- Crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8)
- Crown of rejoicing—the joy of seeing those we have ministered to in heaven (1 Thess 2:19)

Now in light of the sufferings of Christ (which they share in now) and in light of the future glory which will be theirs when Christ returns, Peter gives them this exhortation in vs. 2: “shepherd the flock of God among you...” (vs. 2).

So what are elders called to do? Shepherd the church as overseers. And who are they to shepherd? God’s people. So this is a sober calling and responsibility because they have been entrusted with the care of God’s own children. So it would be wise to ask, ‘what does it mean to shepherd?’ Well certainly shepherding is more than going to elder meetings and attending to church business and programs or facilitating church services.

Shepherding is about fulfilling four key roles we see in the NT: *feed, lead, protect, correct*. These are the ways in which they are to exercise oversight.

- ***Feed the word*** – In the words of Paul, they are to work hard at preaching and teaching, accurately handling the word of truth so they can prescribe and teach sound doctrine (1 Tim 5:17; 2 Tim 2:15 1 Tim 4:11).³ In fact, the only skill-related qualification for elders in 1 Tim is their ability to teach—all others are related to character.
- ***Lead by example*** – by example and with the authority of the Scriptures. Paul urged Timothy to show himself “an example to those who believe” and when it came to sound doctrine and holy living, he instructed Titus to “speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you” (1 Tim 4:12-16; Titus 2:15).⁴ So overseers are to humbly uphold the authority of Scripture first by their own lives and also in their teaching.
- ***Protect the body of Christ and the gospel of grace*** – According to Hebrews 13, elders are to keep watch over the church with care for their souls. And these leaders will be held to account by God for how they went about caring for the souls of those entrusted to them—namely, did they feed, protect, and correct. One of the ways that leaders protect the church is by protecting the purity of the gospel of grace, or as Paul said, retaining the standard of sound words (2 Tim 1:13-14).⁵
- ***Correct persistent sin and false teaching*** – Paul told Timothy, “*those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all,*” and in Acts 28 he warned the elders of Ephesus, “*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them*” (1 Tim 5:20; Acts 20:28-32).⁶

Beloved, this is why it is so important that we take great care as to who we appoint as elders of the church—men who are entrusted with the sober

² Glory is an important theme in 1 Peter. In this book on suffering, Peter uses the word *suffering* 11 times yet also uses the word *glory* 10 times.

³³ See also Acts 6:4; 1 Tim 1:3-4; 2 Tim 2:2, 14; 3:14; 4:2; Titus 1:9-10; 2:1, 15; 3:8

⁴ See also 1 Pet 5:3; 1 Tim 6:6-12; 2 Tim 2:22-23; Heb 13:17; 1 Tim 5:17.

⁵ See also 1 Tim 6:13-14; 6:20; 2 Tim 2:15-16; 4:15; Titus 1:9; 3:9

⁶ See also 2 Tim 2:23-25; Titus 1:9-14; 3:10-11; 1 Tim 1:3-4; 4:17

responsibilities of feeding, leading, protecting, and correcting so that the church can maintain a pure and powerful witness for Christ.

In vs. 2-3, Peter now turns his attention to the specific manner in which the elders are to shepherd the church as overseers.

1. **Elders are to shepherd *not under compulsion, but voluntarily* (vs. 2).**

Serving under compulsion is doing the job reluctantly rather than with a loving desire to serve the Lord and His people. It is the difference between being a drafted soldier and volunteering to serve.⁷ A man should not serve because he feels pressured by others in the church. He should not serve out of obligation or guilt because no one else is stepping up or to merely avoid a vacancy. That would be serving under compulsion. Now that's not to say that there aren't times we should serve because its right to care for one another, even though we may not feel like it in the moment. But overall, we want to serve voluntarily, from the heart; not for the purpose of advancing one's own agenda, but as vs. 2 says, "according to the will of God." That is, we take on the responsibility of leadership because we want to help the church live and function according to the scriptures to advance God's purposes. Elders are called to model a willing gladness to serve the body, even though many times it requires personal sacrifice. We don't want to be like the Israelites in Deut 28:47 who were disciplined because they did not serve the Lord with joy and a glad heart. If we are struggling to serve with gladness (in any ministry), it may be that a certain ministry is not the best fit for us, or it may be that our hearts need to be renewed. *Those who serve compulsively will struggle to shepherd God's people with love and grace. Those who serve voluntarily will diligently honor the Lord and serve His people from the heart.*

2. **Elders are to shepherd *not for sordid gain, but with eagerness* (vs. 2).**

In other words, our leadership should not be motivated by personal gain, whether money or reputation. Rather elders should set the example of serving with a passion for God, and for the growing health of His church and the advancement of His kingdom among the lost. This kind of shepherd is unconcerned about receiving personal recognition because his desire for God to be glorified through a faithful, healthy, fruitful church is worthy of sacrifice. *Those who want to lead out of motivation for personal gain violate the spirit of Christ and rob the glory that belongs to God alone. But elders who serve with eagerness will be driven by a selfless passion for God's glory.*

3. **Elders are to shepherd *not as domineering, but as examples to the flock* (vs. 3).**

[vs. 3] "Lording it over" suggests "forcefully gaining mastery over others."⁸ Peter here is echoing the words of the Lord Jesus in Matt 20:25: "*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, 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.*" We know from the rest of the NT that Jesus and Peter are not saying that spiritual leaders do not have a level of authority, but it is a delegated authority through the Scriptures that is to be manifested from a servant's heart. Its' loving authority that seeks to meet the needs of those God has entrusted to our care by serving God's interests as supreme in our care for them. What Peter and Jesus are warning us against is the abuse of spiritual authority as a means for personal power. Rather, we are to model a life that is *under* the authority of Christ and His word. Elders are called to exemplify humble, selfless, God-exalting ministry. *Domineering leadership is worldly, abusive and stifling. Exemplary leadership is Christlike, motivating and inspiring.*

Finally, in vs. 4 Peter turns from exhorting elders to shepherd God's people in the spirit of Christ, to assuring them that the reward of glory with Christ will be theirs when He returns. **[vs. 4]** To those selfless, faithful elders who give themselves to the work of shepherding, the Lord will reward you in full for your labors of love. In the words of Hebrews 6:10, "*God is not unjust so*

⁷ Lenski cited by Alexander Strauch in *Biblical Eldership*, pg. 245.

⁸ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, pg. 246.

as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.”

Let me make one final comment on vs. 4. Note that Christ is referred to as the Chief Shepherd. He is the only one who has final and absolute authority over the church. Spiritual leadership *is* following Christ as the Chief Shepherd as stewards of those God has set among us. Furthermore, all of the under-shepherds are also sheep who need shepherding themselves. This is one reason why it's so important that we have a plurality of elders. Not only for mutual accountability but also for a greater spectrum of wisdom, discernment, prayer, and biblical understanding. And our elders here at Trinity need to be diligent to shepherd each other first so that they can effectively shepherd the body together with integrity.

Finally, we might ask the question, what about the members of the body that are not serving as elders or pastors. What is the application of this text for the church at large? (Note: this exhortation to elders was given publicly.)

1. Feel the weighty significance of calling humble, godly men to lead the church. And prayerfully take part in the nomination process each year.
2. Pray for the elders and pastors of your church. They need wisdom and discernment. They need sensitivity to the Spirit and word. Pray that they would continue to grow in humility and that they would be able to model the spirit of Christ when they themselves are put to the test. Pray that they would have God's favor.
3. Follow their example as you see them follow Christ. Perhaps it would be good for all of us to ask the question, "Am I willing to be shepherded? Am I willing to submit myself to faithful, humble, spiritual leaders? Am I teachable? Am I willing to seek the counsel of those who are committed to my care?" In light of Hebrews 13:17, is my walk with Christ such that it is a joy for my elders to care for me or do they carry grief in their hearts because of my obstinance to the Lord?
4. If you need incentive to pray for and care about who leads your church, someday you may be the one in the valley of suffering. Who do you want caring for? Who do you want coming to pray for you

when you are sick? Or should you find yourself entangled in sin, who do you want counseling you or loving you through difficult steps of correction.

5. Finally, I invite you to join me in praise and thanksgiving to God for providing faithful shepherds here at Trinity. My heart overflows with thankfulness for lay elders like Nick Elias, Chris Callahan and Doug Snyder. I'm thankful not only because of their leadership but because they are the men I want coming to my door should I find myself in the valley of suffering or in need of help to get out of the entanglement of sin.