

Shepherds eager to serve

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[0 : 00] 1 Peter chapter 5, and we'll read the whole chapter together. But eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders.

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.

[1 : 39] To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God.

Stand fast in it. She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings. And so does my son Mark. Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ. Amen. Amen. Okay. I wonder if someone were to ask you, if somebody asked you why we have elders in the church, what is their job?

I wonder what you would say, what job description you would give for them. I suspect, my suspicion is most of us would talk in fairly abstract terms.

Maybe you say the job of an elder is to lead the church or something like that. Well, this first part of chapter 5, Peter is addressing the elders.

[2 : 41] And the picture that he paints of their task, of their role, is far from managerial. It's not an abstract picture that he paints, is it? No, what he presents here is very personal.

He cautions against our poor motivations for elders and commends some better approaches. And then, in light of what he said to elders, he then addresses the rest of the church thereafter.

So we're going to move through the chapter under three headings. Shepherd the flock, clothed with humility, and alert to danger. Now, before we go any further down this, let me just clear up a quick point on language.

The Presbyterian Church in Scotland today, we tend to talk about ministers and elders as though they were kind of two separate categories. That's not a problem to make some kind of a distinction. But in many respects, they're kind of blurry subdivisions of a single category. Now, to whatever extent it's a useful or valid description, let's be clear that that's not a distinction in Peter's mind here.

[3 : 47] Peter is absolutely addressing all elders, both those we call ministers and those who we call elders. So Peter, as a fellow elder, verse 1, is appealing to all of the elders among the group to whom he writes.

And by extension, those in like positions today, whether they're being referred to as ministers, elders, vicars, pastors, bishops, parsons, whatever you want to call them, Peter is addressing all such people.

So to what task does he call such men? First heading, shepherd the flock. I think that provides a fair summary of what Peter has in mind here, but there's quite a bit to unpack in these first four verses.

Perhaps useful to start with the idea of the shepherd itself. The idea of a shepherd as kind of a metaphor in this kind of context, it's far from a new idea to Peter himself.

This characterization of community leaders as shepherds, it goes back well into the Old Testament, both in terms of God shepherding his own people. So God as the shepherd, for instance, Ezekiel 34, this is what the sovereign Lord says, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. [4 : 59] So it's a description of God's relationship to his people and it's a description of human leaders. So for instance, 2 Samuel chapter 5, the people go to David as he prepares to be anointed king and they say to him, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns.

And the Lord said to you, to David, you shall shepherd my people Israel and you shall become their ruler. So it's God's intention for David as the king to see himself as a shepherd of the people. And that sits alongside ruling them as kind of two aspects of the same thing. So amongst God's people, ruling means, involves, implies, is almost synonymous with shepherding.

And for the people to whom Peter writes, that idea of shepherding is of course a more visceral, immediate image than it probably is to you and to me. See, they know that the call of the shepherd is to care for the weak, is to seek out the lost.

The shepherd is even, you know, to jeopardize himself in order to protect the sheep against danger. Think of David saying, as he prepares to fight Goliath, saying, you know, as a shepherd, he used his sling to defend the flock from lions and bears.

[6 : 18] That's the job of the shepherd, to defend the sheep. Or part of the job, anyway. And God has incredibly harsh words for shepherds who fail to act in that kind of sacrificial manner.

Jeremiah 23, woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people.

Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done, declares the Lord. I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number.

I will place shepherds over them who will tend them and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the Lord. So what Jeremiah here and Ezekiel earlier, what they write of God gathering and caring for his own sheep, his own responsibility to do that, gathering his own flock, that fits together with what Peter's saying here in his letter, doesn't it?

Because verse 4 refers to Jesus as the chief shepherd and reminds us that he will return. And notice as well in verse 2, it is God's flock.

[7 : 41] So to my fellow elders and to myself I say, remember these are not your sheep. They are not our sheep.

See, with your own property you can do whatever you like with it, can't you? You're in charge. But these are not our sheep. We cannot do as we choose.

We must follow the instructions. We must follow the requirements. We must follow the commands of the chief shepherd. Of the one who is in charge. Of the one who actually owns this flock.

See, for elders in the church today, if we don't wish to be replaced like those shepherds in Jeremiah who were condemned for scattering and destroying the sheep, if we don't want to be those shepherds, then we have to be the shepherds of verse 4 in Jeremiah, tending the flock so that they will no longer be afraid or terrified.

And all of this Old Testament background, all of this is carried into what Peter says here, this call to be shepherds of God's flock in verse 2.

[8 : 52] All of this background comes in and is his charge to the elders. There's even more than that. Because remember who's writing this?

This is Peter. And it seems to me that for Peter there's an even more immediate idea in his mind when he talks about being a shepherd. Remember after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples and they had breakfast on the beach.

John chapter 21. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Yes, Lord, he said.

You know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my lambs. And again, Jesus said, Simon, son of John, do you love me? He answered, yes, Lord.

You know that I love you. Jesus said, take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon, son of John, do you love me? And Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, do you

love me?

[9 : 54] He said, Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you. Jesus said, feed my sheep. So surely, as Peter calls his fellow elders to be shepherds of the flock, surely he has this incident in his mind.

This threefold charge that he was given to care for the Lord's sheep. And as a fellow elder, he summons others into that same task. But notice on what basis Peter is called to this work. What does Jesus ask him each time? Do you love me? See, to care for the Lord's sheep is an expression of love for the Lord. And it's on the basis of that love that the role of shepherd takes place.

It seems to me that is what Peter means in the middle of verse 2 when he talks about serving willingly rather than under compulsion. Serving from a place of love.

Peter says, if you feel trapped into eldership, if it once seemed like a good idea but now you're not so sure, or if an examination of your heart shows some shoddy motivation, well, Peter says that needs to change.

[11 : 04] In these three, you know, not this but that phrases that Peter lays out in these verses, in comparing ourselves to that standard, if we fail on those charges, then we must either pray for a change of heart or, well, resign.

You can't be an elder in these situations. If your motivation is dishonest gain rather than eager service, if you're not willing to be an example but instead you delight in lording it over the flock, well, then your need for repentance is urgent.

But it also seems to me that in the context of those weighty charges, it seems to me that there is also hope for struggling elders as we reflect on that beach encounter with Jesus.

The background to Peter writing here. Because even more famous than that three-fold restoration and three-fold call to service, even more famous is Peter's three-fold denial of Christ. from which he is restored by means of this beach encounter. See, this is the same Peter who denied all knowledge of Jesus when he was on trial for his life and he's now called to feed the Lord's sheep.

[12 : 24] And in his letter he invites his fellow elders into that, presumably on the same basis. Presumably he invites elders to be, you know, fellow elders on this same basis of being imperfect people who get things wrong and make mistakes and yet are willing to say afresh, yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

One of the questions that's asked in our denomination of ministers being ordained, the question is as follows, are not zeal for the honor of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire of saving souls, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the function of the holy ministry and not worldly designs or interests.

That's setting out what Peter talks about here, isn't it? Anyone who is seeking the office of minister or of elder for any reason other than from love of Christ and love of the flock and love of the people out there, the world at large, any other motivation must be roundly rejected.

And to my mind, verse 3 is perhaps the most challenging because, well, I think in our society it probably is quite rare to end up as an elder unwillingly and at least in the free church there's not a whole lot of opportunity for dishonest gain that we should guard against a mercenary heart that resents the financial remuneration that given to elders and to ministers as insufficient.

We should guard against that attitude but it does seem to me that to seek the office of church elder of a minister in the church to seek that office out of a desire to lord it over others that seems more plausible because there is a degree of respect a degree of authority that is right and proper but it's all too possible to enjoy that far too much.

[14 : 35] And Peter says rather than lording it over those who are entrusted to us elders must be examples to the flock. When Paul writes to Timothy he calls him to be an example in speech conduct love faith and purity.

That's 1st Timothy chapter 4. That's pretty comprehensive isn't it? Those five different dimensions it covers well most of the things that you might do. So if you are an elder then people should be able to point to your life and see evidence that the gospel is true.

Evidence that the gospel has had an impact on your life. People should be able to look at you and see how the gospel is lived out in daily life. Be able to see the implications of the good news that we have believed.

Peter says Paul says there's been example in speech conduct love faith and purity. Peter has that same idea in mind here as he calls elders to be an example to the flock.

Particularly it seems to me that he particularly thinks of us being exemplary in humility. Because see this being an example is contrasted against lording it over people.

[15:51] And a couple of verses later he's going to say all of you clothe yourselves with humility towards one another because God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. And immediately before this comparison the positive example of the preceding couplet eager to serve.

Elders should be exemplary in their service. Willing to do whatever jobs need to be done not just those with high prestige. Feels slightly odd doesn't it?

slightly odd to say in the same breath you should be humble and you should be an example to others. But this is the almost paradoxical nature of servant leadership.

And as ever we have in Christ the supreme example of this kind of humility. Christ who humbled himself more than anyone else in all of history and who is also the quintessential example that we are all called to strive to imitate.

And Peter's challenge to the elders then ends with the promise in verse 4 when the chief shepherd appears you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

[17:02] He will say to you well done good and faithful servant. We not only follow the example of our saviour but we also serve him first and foremost as the chief shepherd and it is in service of the Lord that shepherds are called to love and care for the sheep.

Now there are of course in those verses some very direct challenges for me and for the other elders here at Covenant Church. And I think it would be legitimate to extend at least some of those expectations into other roles of leadership within the church for instance as a children's church leader to expect some of those same attitudes and behaviours.

and it would also be good to bear these kinds of things in mind all of you as a congregation to bear these things in mind as and when we might come to appoint new elders here or in due course when you come to appoint your next minister.

Not that I have any plans to make you do so anytime soon but these are good things to bear in mind when those days come. That these are the kinds of elders that we are to be looking for.

But for those of you who are not elders there is I think another key application of this picture of eldership that Peter has painted. This picture of what eldership is and should be, this makes verse five plausible.

[18:28] Here we come to our second heading, clothed with humility. Now that phrase comes from the second half of the verse, the universal call to humility but it also undergirds the first half of verse five.

Four verses addressed to the elders and then one short sentence for the rest of the church. In the same way you who are younger submit yourselves to your elders. Now folks, there is an obvious link with age in the term elders but it isn't only a marker of age.

It should be the case that Christian maturity increases with age and that therefore on average elders are, well, older. But it is far from universally the case and that's been true throughout history, throughout God's dealings with his people.

We don't need to look any further than Timothy who's advised not to let people look down on him because of his youth. It isn't a perfect correlation between the role or the office of elder and age.

And therefore similarly when Peter addresses here in verse five, you who are younger, he is not just talking to the teenagers. He's using kind of the obvious complementary term, elders, younger ones.

[19:38] So this is addressed to everyone who's not elders. In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. And Peter's charge, therefore, to those of you here, those of you at home, if you count this as your church, then his charge is submit yourself to your elders.

Remember back in chapter three, we heard Peter's call to be like-minded? Is it? Well, elders are part of the means by which that like-mindedness can be achieved. And in this call to submit here, there are of course limits.

There are limits in the profoundly unfortunate case of an elder who urges you to act in a way contrary to the will of God. Of course, submit does not apply in that situation.

But absent that, Peter's charge is, submit yourself to your elders. Which might not be an easy call to hear, but it does seem to me that in the context of elders who are being called to behave in the way

that Peter's laid out in the first few verses, in a situation where the elders have shown themselves to be gentle shepherds, who aren't pursuing dishonest gain, but are rather eager to serve, and who are not lording it over you, but being examples.

In that context, then this does become a much more realistic prospect, doesn't it? So let's consider briefly what does that submission look like?

[21 : 06] I want to flag up three dimensions that I think are worth us considering. The first implication of submission to the elders is that when the elders set before you a plan, a vision, a direction for how the church should go, or even when the elders come to a decision in a relatively minor matter, well submission means that you're your default response, if you like.

Not necessarily your universal response, but your starting assumption, your default response, is to go along with that vision, to be supportive, to get stuck in and say, how can we help?

When the appeal is made for people to help get something done, submission means actually what you ask yourself isn't quite, do I want to do that? But submission means, well, more you ask, could I do that?

Can I serve in this way? Submission means following the vision. Second, I wonder if submission to your elders might mean that we kind of increase the likelihood of asking for advice when making a decision.

Now, most decisions that we make are not clear, black and white, right and wrong. And where those decisions aren't black and white, right and wrong, well, shepherding the flock well means that elders shouldn't imply that those kinds of decisions are black and white, right and wrong.

[22 : 36] But what elders should be able to do is to help you think things through, to help you find some godly wisdom, to point you to dimensions of what the Bible has to say that might not be a specific thou shalt or thou shalt not, but does give a bit of a guide, give a suggestion, help us to think things through.

Seems to me that submitting to your elders might suggest being interested in input from your elders. And if we as elders are eager to serve, if our desire is to see you flourish, which is the picture that Peter's presented, if that's what your elders are like, then why would you not want that input?

Submission means asking for advice. Thirdly, for some of you in this room, and some of you who I imagine are watching at home, thirdly, the charge to submit yourselves to your elders means you should become members of the church.

Some of you have been coming here for years, and to your own best judgment and the judgment of those around you, you are truly Christian believers. When both of those things are true, you should become a communicant member.

Now, there's a number of reasons why you should do that, and I'll gladly discuss those with you. We can sit down and have coffee and talk through why is this a good thing to do. But today I want to highlight one reason because it comes from this passage.

[24 : 06] Peter writes to Christians and he says, submit to your elders. And folks, the position of our denomination, the position of the Free Church of Scotland, and therefore the position of the elders of the Kirk session here, our position is believers in Christ should formally become members of their church.

Formalizing your membership is therefore a matter of submission. And that submission in a broader sense is part of what you're agreeing to when you do become a member.

Therefore, for the Free Church of Scotland, and therefore for us here at Covenant Church, membership doesn't necessarily mean that we're agreed on every possible matter of interpretation and understanding.

Membership is somewhat simpler than that. Membership at its root is the church recognizing your faith, and you recognizing this to be a true church, and then both parties committing to one another, declaring ourselves to be family.

And sometimes that's, you know, sometimes you do that kind of as you come in, and sometimes it's a recognition of what has been more or less the case on the ground for some time. But it's actually recognizing it to be true.

[25 : 24] Formalizing the relationship. And so, if you're a teenager and you've realized, yes, I believe the gospel, I know I'm saved by God's grace alone, not by any goodness in me, and my desire is to live for God's glory all my days.

If you have come to that recognition, if that is true of you, well, you should be talking to us about making what we call a profession of faith. But even more than the teenagers kind of coming to that realization, I'm talking more to the adults who've been here for months and years.

I've lost my place completely. Where am I? Okay. Folks, if you want to consider yourself part of what verse 2 calls the flock under the care of the elders, if you want to be in that position, then the way you do that is become members of the church.

So, folks, please speak to me, speak to Kevin, our session clerk, and we'll get moving on that. We'd love to walk that road with you, because that's the position of our denomination on the basis of Scripture.

Full participation in the life of the church is for those who have formally aligned themselves with the church in communicant membership, we call it. And yes, that term communicant membership points to one of the key things which in the normal course of things should only be for members.

[26 : 43] Visitors from another church are welcome at the Lord's table, but it should normally be the case that if this is your church, that coming to the Lord's Supper is for those who are members of the church.

Now, folks, saying these things, saying this doesn't mean that for those of you who aren't members, that the elders are somehow unconcerned or uninterested, or that you are unwelcome.

That is the last impression that I want to give. You absolutely can and should come to us and talk to us about all kinds of different things. But what I am saying is that that relationship shifts and deepens in membership.

That you have a right to call upon your elders. For Peter, this kind of submission to your elders, in all of these different aspects and plenty more that I haven't talked about.

Submission even when you might be being asked to do something that's not your first inclination.

Well, I think for Peter, that's one aspect of the humility that he calls us all to in this second half of verse 5.

[27 : 55] The outworking of that humility, it might be very different in all kinds of different situations and relationships. But that approach, that attitude of humility, is one to which we are all called.

Peter says, all of you, close yourselves with humility towards one another. And he gives a very, very clear reason why. God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Folks, humility is possible for us in the church. Because we know these glorious promises of God. Because we know that he will indeed lift us up.

We know that he does, in fact, care for us. And therefore, you can, in humility, place the needs of others ahead of yourself. Because you don't have to ask, well, if I don't look after myself, who will? Because you're given an answer to that question right here. God himself will provide for your needs. So you are free to humbly serve others. And that care from God, that brings us to my third point this morning.

[29 : 11] So you might think there's something of a crunching gear change between verses 7 and 8. Casting your anxiety on God, and then, on the other hand, be alert of sober mind.

You know, if God's caring for me, why do I need to be alert? But these two dimensions have always gone together. Ultimately, it is because we trust and depend on God that it's worth being alert.

It's because he does it. It's because he defends us that we have any hope of victory over the devil as he prowls around like a roaring lion. I can be alert as I like.

I still can't fight off a lion. But God promises to provide for our needs. This danger is real.

The devil is a clear and present danger. And God calls us to take care, to be alert. The devil makes his threats. The persecution may well come.

[30 : 15] The danger is real. The temptation to sin, the temptation to modify our faith, the inclination to ignore God's commands in order to escape persecution and discomfort. The temptation, the danger is there.

It is real. But walking that road is not a legitimate option for you and for me. Peter's charge, Peter's challenge is that we resist the devil's lies and attacks.

That we stand firm in the face of any kind of assault. How do we do that? How do we stand firm?

Well, the first point is we do it together. The commands here in these verses, these commands are all plural.

They address the church corporate. They're not directed to individuals standing alone. The elders are responsible to shield the sheep. The church is called to be united.

We together stand firm against the prowling lion. And that unity, verse 9, tells us it isn't just local, but is global in its scope.

[31 : 14] We stand together. We stand together as a denomination. You know, we make a collective response when the government threatens freedom of speech and freedom of religion. And we know we can cross the country and join with others of like mind.

We stand together as a denomination. And we stand together with others across the world. We pray for people in other lands because we are one church.

We pray for people who are facing far more extreme persecution than anything we face ourselves because that is what we are called to as a family of believers.

And we do that in the confidence of verse 10. Folks, we're alert to danger because we know that the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.

To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. Every loss, all of it, will be made right and right for all eternity because the God of grace will do it.

[32 : 27] This fundamental promise, this true grace of God to which he refers in the closing verses of the letter, this is what undergirds everything Peter has said throughout this letter.

Folks, how do we have living hope while we're far away from home? How do we withstand suffering and persecution? How do we humble ourselves to submit to one another in the church, to submit to governors and princes?

Why do we do all of these things? Because we know he will restore us and make us strong, firm, and resolute. So, stand firm in the true grace of God.

Let's pray. Amen. God of all grace, thank you that that is how we know you.

That we know you as a merciful God who bestows grace upon his children. That even in the midst of suffering, even in the face of persecution, even as you call us to do things that sit uncomfortably, that we don't necessarily feel like what we want to do.

[33 : 40] That even as you place us in these situations, that you provide for us all that we need. That we can have confidence in your loving, abundant care for us.

that we know the true grace of our God. Thank you, Lord. Amen.