*Shepherding the Flock of God*

1 Peter 5:1-4

4/30/23

Our text today focuses on pastoral ministry. It may be tempting to think this is a subject you don’t need to worry about unless you are a pastor, but Peter thinks otherwise. He exhorts the elders *among you*, meaning the church. It is important for every Christian to understand what elders are supposed to do, not just elders. This is especially true for Baptists because we are self-governing. Appointing and, when necessary, dismissing pastors is the responsibility of the congregation. If you are responsible to hire and fire them, then you better know what kind of men they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do.

Unfortunately, churches often function like businesses, where the lead pastor is the CEO, while other staff members function like vice presidents. The church board serves as the board of directors, while the congregation takes on the role of the shareholder. In this model the pastor is expected to keep the organization functioning so that the shareholders receive the benefits they want. But this is not how the NT describes the function of the church. We need passages like 1 Peter 5 to redefine our thinking so that God’s design for the church may be established among us.

Before we walk through this text, we need to define some terms. In the NT, there are three words used to describe pastoral ministry. The first and most common is the word *elder*. 1 Timothy 3 introduces a second term when it lists the character qualifications of those who aspire to the office of overseer. Finally, Ephesians 4:11 says that God has given as a gift to the church *pastor/teachers*. There are some who draw a distinction between *pastors*, who would fill a role like I have, and an *elder* who would be a congregant with spiritual authority. Some people make a distinction between the function and purpose of these terms. Some churches see an overseer or bishop to be a third office. Yet here in 1 Peter 5 we find all three terms used together to describe one office. Peter exhorts elders to shepherd (same word as pastor) God’s people by exercising oversight. There are not three separate offices, but one office described in three ways. Each title emphasizes a different aspect of the office.

These three words will guide our discussion of this text. We encounter the word *elder* in vs. 1. As I just mentioned, this is the most frequently used word for the role of a pastor in the NT. The word automatically draws our minds to things like maturity and experience. The Bible uses it of those qualified for the office. We are not going to walk through those qualifications today. They are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. I intend to do a series on 1 Timothy in the fall, so we will discuss them at that time. But as you read those passages, you will see two main qualifications for an elder. First, he must be above reproach in his character. This does not mean he is perfect; but it does mean that he demonstrates a consistent character at home, in the church, and in the community. It is the kind of character every Christian should strive to have. But there is a second qualification that distinguishes elders from other godly men in the church. They must be able to teach. This gifting allows him to instruct others in the word of God, equipping them for ministry; and it enables him to refute false teaching, protecting the flock from those who seek to harm them.

So the term elder points to the spiritual maturity and gifting of those whom God calls to be shepherds in the church. Peter opens his discussion on their ministry with the word therefore, which connects the experience of persecution addressed at the end of Ch. 4 to the instructions for elders here in Ch. 5. This reminds elders of the need to care for those who are suffering; and it reminds those who are suffering of the gift God has given them of a shepherd. This does not mean pastors have all the answers or can fix all your problems; but they are to be a resource for grounding you in God’s word, which is how we endure suffering; and they are to pray with and for you. Ephesians 4 is clear that pastors are a gift Christ has given to the church.

Now, elders here is plural. This is a circular letter written to a large geographical area that would contain many local churches. If these churches functioned biblically, they would have elders. Some take this to mean that every church should have a plurality of elders. Opinions vary on that subject. As I read the NT, I cannot find a definitive answer in either direction. I am great with churches appointing multiple elders, as long as they are biblically qualified and faithfully doing the work of an elder. But I also do not believe a plurality of elders is mandated.

Notice also that elders are not isolated from the rest of the church. Peter exhorts the elders *among you*. Elders are members of the church. Just like everyone else, they need fellowship, support, grace, understanding, correction, and so on. People tend to have different standards for pastors than for everyone else. Some people want their pastor to fill a role in their life that only Christ can fill. A pastor is an under shepherd whose job is to point you to the Chief Shepherd and guardian of your soul. Elders are members of the church who need the graces and supports of the body of Christ as much as the church needs the graces and supports of the pastor. It is a two-way relationship.

Peter is going to exhort elders to do their job. But before he does that, he gives a three-fold appeal to them. He appeals to them first as a fellow elder. Although the Apostles played a unique role in the early church, they largely functioned as pastors. Peter does not see himself as a superior to these pastors; rather he appeals to them as peers. Second, he appeals to them as a witness of the suffering of Christ. Here he does note the unique authority he possessed as an apostle. Finally, he appeals to them as a fellow believer. All Christians are partakers of the glory that is to be revealed at Christ’s return. There is no distinction between members of Christ’s body. He assigns us different roles and functions, yes. But that does not mean one is superior to another. We are all members of one body and individual members of one another. As a fellow elder, Apostle, and Christian, Peter exhorts elders to do the work God called them to do. This is something we can all do: call one another to faithful service to Christ in the ways He has gifted us to serve.

What is the work God has called elders to do? He has called them to shepherd the flock of God. This is our second word, which has become the primary word we use for the office of elder, for shepherding and pastoring are the same word. An elder’s calling is to shepherd God’s people.

We already mentioned how many Christians have a faulty notion of the pastor being the CEO of the church. Others view pastors to be the religious equivalent of a therapist whose job is to help you cope with life and feel better about yourself. But as you read the NT, there are three things pastors do as shepherds. First, and primarily, they feed God’s people the truths of God’s word. In John 21, Jesus commands Peter to feed and tend His sheep. Second, they protect God’s people from false teaching. Titus 1:9ff. says elders must *hold fast the faithful word, which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers, and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.* Pastors must protect God’s people by identifying and refuting false teaching.

Finally, pastors train God’s people to do the work of the ministry. Ephesians 4:11-12 says: *And He* (God) *gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,* ***for the equipping of the saints for the work of service,*** *to the building up of the body of Christ.* I sometimes joke about how I get paid to be a professional Christian. I hope you know that is just tongue in cheek. But many people believe it is the pastor’s job as the paid professional to do the ministry of the church. But Ephesians 4 says that responsibility falls on the church members. The pastor’s job is to equip them to do ministry.

The bible regularly uses the imagery of a shepherd to describe the leaders of God’s people. A shepherd cannot make a sheep do anything. They cannot cause the sheep to reproduce, grow wool, eat grass, drink water, or do anything else. What a shepherd can do is cultivate an environment where the sheep can thrive. So it is with a pastor. He cannot control people’s response to his leadership, but he can labor to place people in ideal circumstances for their spiritual thriving.

God has given the pastor two tools for doing this work: the word of God and prayer. That is all he has to work with. The ministry of the word is more than preaching on Sunday morning. It should include personal interactions. I love it when people ask me questions about the bible and how it relates to their lives. I do not have an answer for every question, but hopefully we can identify Scriptures that apply to what people are wrestling with. But if I were to boil pastoral ministry down to one sentence, it would be this: give people God’s word and pray that it takes root in their lives. That is what it means to shepherd God’s people.

Notice how Peter defines those whom a pastor is to shepherd. It is the *flock of God*. Pastors have a habit of talking about *my church.* I catch myself doing this. But it isn’t my church, and those who attend FBC are not my sheep. It is God’s flock. You are people Christ has purchased for Himself, to be His own possession. He is the Good Shepherd who laid His life down for the sheep. A pastor is an under shepherd to whom Christ has entrusted the care of some of His precious sheep. A pastor’s job is not to collect a following or build a brand; his job is to point people to Christ. Beloved, if your hope is in me, you will be disappointed, for I cannot give you what you need. My only desire is to point you to the Rock who is higher than I. Only He can fill the longing of your souls. Only He will never fail you.

Notice also how the flock of God is defined as *among you*. There is a defined element to the church that Peter thinks can be identified. The pastor is not responsible for the sheep in the next town over. They are responsible for the sheep God brings under their care. I received wonderful advice early in my first pastorate. A good friend told me *Tyler, you are responsible to care for those God brings through the doors.* By that, he was encouraging me to focus on those whom God was bringing together, rather than stressing about those who refused to be ‘among’ us. It was freeing advice that let me focus my attention on where God was working, rather than where He was not working.

So the term elder points to the qualification of those who serve as pastors. The term shepherd defines what they do. Finally, we see how they perform this shepherding ministry. They do it by exercising oversight. This points to the authority God gives to those who hold this office. 1 Timothy 5 talks about elders who rule well. Hebrews 13 calls people to obey and submit to their leaders, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. In 1 Peter 5:5, young men are told to be subject to their elders. God has placed elders in a position of spiritual authority from which they are to oversee the spiritual health and ministry activity of the church.

The bible defines authority very differently that the world. The more authority you have, the greater sacrifice you are to make. For those who have authority are to use it, not for personal gain, but for the good and thriving of others. A father is the spiritual leader of his home. He is to use that authority to love, serve, protect, and develop the other members of his household. This is how a pastor is supposed to use their authority. They oversee the growth and development of God’s people, using their authority to serve those whom God has entrusted to their care.

The text defines the pastor’s oversight through three contrasting statements. First, oversight is to be exercised willingly. There is weightiness that comes with pastoral ministry. The bible warns that not many should be teachers in the church, for they incur a stricter judgment (Ja. 3:1). Heb. 13:17 says that pastors will give an account to God for how they cared for His people. Any pastor who thinks about these things will feel the weight of these realities. That weightiness can cause some to shrink back from the work God has called them to, or to do it from a sense of drudgery because they fear God. But God does not want shepherds to serve by compulsion. Instead, they are to serve voluntarily *according to the will of God.* God calls men into pastoral ministry. I cannot think of a higher honor than to be entrusted with this task. Love for God and His people cause the pastor to joyfully serve *because he wants to fulfill God’s will for his life!*

Second, the pastor is to serve *not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.* It would be nice if every pastor served from pure motives all the time; but they are men who struggle with their flesh just like everyone. At times, pastors can approach ministry like a job, doing it because they need a paycheck and feel like they cannot do anything else. Some serve because they like authority and feel the need to be in charge. But no pastor should serve for personal gain of any kind. They should do it with eagerness. Again, this points to the *desire* to serve. It is great to be paid to do ministry. The bible commands churches to care for their pastors; but I think every pastor should ask themselves *would I still do this if I wasn’t being paid?* There is no greater joy to be found than doing what God has called you to do. That joy should be evident in the way a pastor serves.

Finally, a pastor is to exercise oversight not by lording their authority over those allotted to their charge but proving to be an example. In the west, we drive sheep from behind, pushing them in the direction we want them to go. But that is not how shepherds in the Middle East work. They lead their sheep from the front, calling them to follow them. This is how a pastor is to lead. They are not to drive their people forward or to scare them into action by threatening the use of their authority; they are to lead by example. They are to adopt the posture of Paul who said *follow me as I follow Christ.* They are to show what a life of abiding in Christ looks like. They are to demonstrate what it means to be a humble servant and faithful witness of Christ. They are to display faith in action, providing the sheep with an example to follow.

Apart from God’s grace, no man is sufficient for these things. If a pastor is not feeding on God’s word, maintaining a posture of prayer, and abiding in Christ, ministry will wear them out. All of us probably know pastors who have wiped out in ministry. Sometimes ministry can be downright discouraging, especially when a pastor falls into the trap of looking to people for affirmation. Like everyone else, pastors need their eyes lifted from the horizontal plane of this life onto the vertical plane of eternity. The pastor serves sacrificially, willingly, joyfully, purposefully, and so on, because they love God and His people. It is to God they must look for approval.

That is why I love how Peter ends the text by pointing pastors to the Chief Shepherd. As Peter has done so often in this letter, he reminds us that Jesus is coming back. When He does, He will reward His people for their service. Christ will reward His under shepherds with the unfading crown of glory. I don’t know exactly what that is, but Peter’s point is that a faithful minister’s efforts are not forgotten by God. He will reward them for their labors.

It is a joy to serve as your pastor. I am sure that, as you look at this text, you can see ways I miss the mark. I am thankful, not only for God’s grace, but for the graciousness I receive from most of you. I want you to know that I count it a privilege to serve you in this way.

Before I close, I want to address our young men. There is no greater privilege than for God to set you apart for His service. The church needs a new generation of men like Ezra, who set his heart to study the word of God, and to do it, and to teach it to others. The next generation of pastors and missionaries must come from you. As you consider what God wants you to do with your life, prayerfully consider a life of ministry. It is not always the easiest path to walk; but if God calls you to it, you will never regret it.