

Ps 95:3

Yarrow, June 19, 2011

Ps 79:3

Ps 31:7,8,9,10

Ps 37:5

Ps 134:3 (after ordination)

Ps 23:1,2,3

1 Peter 4:12-5:5

Ezekiel 34:1-16

Matthew 20:20-28

1 Peter 5:2a

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We receive today from God's hands three new elders and a new deacon. We recognize that it's the Lord who gives us these men, and so we'll be grateful for them and pray for them.

Yet what, brothers, is the actual task you receive? And congregation, what do you expect these brothers to do for you? Would their mandate pertain only to spiritual matters, or would you welcome their input and leadership in any area of life?

We've come in our reading of Peter's first letter to the last chapter, where Peter addresses the elders of the congregation. He describes there the mandate the Lord gives to office bearers, and lays out too the context in which the brothers do their work. It will be helpful to us all to read along with Peter's first readers as we seek God's instruction to elders today.

I should add: though Peter's instruction is pitched specifically to the elders amongst his readers, what he says is applicable (as we shall see) to every office bearer, deacons and minister too. Indeed, he describes attitudes that every Christian needs to adopt.

I summarize the sermon this morning with this theme:

## **THE CHIEF SHEPHERD MANDATES HIS UNDER-SHEPHERDS TO TEND HIS FLOCK AS HE WOULD.**

1. Why God's people needs shepherding,
2. How the shepherds are to do their job,
3. What response shepherds may expect.

### **1. Why God's people needs shepherding.**

Peter instructs elders to be "shepherds" and pictures God's people as a "flock". That sort of language generates a specific image in our mind. We visualize a flock of sheep with a shepherd leading them, and to us it's a picture of peace... – the ultimate rural setting....

It's not quite that way. Sheep may be nice animals (and they are; I've had sheep for many years), but they need care in a way few other animals need care. That's why they have a shepherd, both to feed them and to protect them, lest they perish. Sheep are vulnerable..., and that's why they make a fitting comparison for God's sinful people in a fallen world-with-devils-filled, each threatening to devour God's own.

The picture, then, is not complimentary, not flattering. The premise behind what Peter writes in our chapter is that people are vulnerable, are weak, and are not able to protect themselves or look after themselves. We're not asked whether we *like* that description, but we *are* instructed that it is so – and so we shall need to embrace it.

The picture is made more unfavorable by the context in which these sheep live. Peter places his instruction to elders to “be shepherds of God’s flock” directly after his instruction of chap 4, where he’d spoken about how suffering invariably characterizes the people of God. We’d listened in earlier sermons to the message of that chapter, but it’s necessary (if we’re to get a good grasp of what Peter says in our text), to revisit that chapter briefly.

1 Peter 4:3 had described the behavior that characterized the communities in which the Christians Peter addresses were living. Debauchery (that’s loose living, especially in relation to sexuality), lust, drunkenness, orgies: such behavior was the order of the day, be it in private, be it in public. When the gospel of Jesus Christ came to town, those whom God had chosen to life eternal came to faith – with the inevitable result that they were *changed*, broke with the habits of their past, and began to image in their conduct what God was like. They were now ‘holy’, and so no longer conformed to the evil desires they used to have when they lived in ignorance of the gospel (cf 1:14f).

The reaction of their peers was predictable. Vs 4: “They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” These peers thought the Christians were weird, strange, odd, and told them so in the way they treated these Christians, in the way they looked suspiciously at them, and called them names behind their backs. Because they were no longer part and parcel of the normal social fabric, these Christians were treated as different, kept at arms’ length, no longer welcomed in the halls of power and influence in the city, at work, or on the street. Rather, they were treated with misgivings, even blamed for things that went wrong....

*That* is what Peter means with the words of 4:12, when he tells his readers not to “be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” That “painful trial” is (according to context) the *rejection* these Christians experienced on account of their changed behavior. Vs 13: “rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ.” How Jesus suffered? Our thoughts go directly to the cross with its horrid agony. That was indeed the climax of Jesus’ suffering, but it wasn’t the total of His suffering. On the contrary, the gospels make clear that in the course of His three-year ministry Jesus suffered all sorts of abuse at the hands of the crowds. I think of Luke 4, after His sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth: “all the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove Him out of town, and took Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw Him down the cliff” (vss 28f). Luke 6: “The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus” (vs 7); that speaks of suspicion, not of acceptance. Luke 11, after Jesus had cast out a demon from that mute man, some in the crowd told others that Jesus was in league with “Beelzebub the prince of demons” (vs 15). Talk about rejection, name calling, *suffering!* Now Peter says: “Rejoice that you *participate* in the sufferings of Christ” (4:13). Point: as Christ Jesus suffered, so His people suffer. Hence the encouragement of 4:14: “If you are insulted” –as Christ repeatedly was– “because of the name of Christ, you are blessed.” It leads to the conclusion of vs 19: “So, then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”

But there’s the challenge. No one likes to suffer, no one likes to be insulted, no one likes to be ignored, sidelined, treated with suspicion. It’s true of us as much as it was for the Christians of Peter’s day: we don’t like being seen as strange, weird, out-of-step. We feel vulnerable exactly because we’re different, and the temptation is great to take the edges off our being ‘different’ so that we’re not insulted so much or sidelined so much.

You see: it's in *that* context that Peter writes about elders, and then characterizes their work as *shepherding God's flock*.<sup>1</sup> God's people, the elect for whom Christ died, the heirs of life eternal: *they're like sheep*, vulnerable, needing guidance and care and protection. Leave a sheep alone in the wilds of life, and it is bound to perish; leave a child of God alone in the wilds of life, and he is likewise bound to perish – he'll collapse under the pressure of insults and suffering and return to the habits of the world from which he was rescued coz his default preference is to *not* be different. That sheep of the Lord, for whom Christ died, *needs* a shepherd.

That answers, then, the question of our first point: why God's people need shepherding. And it explains at the same time why the apostle colored the work of elders with the picture of *shepherding God's flock*.

Given that God's people are insulted and sidelined, and don't like that, given that it's family and friends of youth and mates at work who now treat these Christians with suspicion, how shall elders shepherd these vulnerable sheep? It's our second point:

## 2. How the shepherds are to do their job.

The manner in which Peter would have elders shepherd the flock is caught in what the apostle writes in the second part of vs 2 and in vs 3. The shepherding is to happen, says Peter, by means of "overseeing" – and that "overseeing" is in turn characterized by three attitudes.

That a shepherd "oversees" his flock is, of course, no surprise. He needs to use his eyes to observe the needs of his flock, whether they need water or feed, whether they need protection from some predator, whether they need a place to rest, whether there's a sore foot or leg, whether there's a straying sheep that needs to be pulled back into line, etc. A sleeping shepherd is useless, and so is a shepherd who's forever busy whittling on his whistle. Shepherds by definition need to be constantly overseeing their flock, need to keep their eyes on the flock to discern its needs – and then, of course, acting upon the needs he sees, going after that straying sheep, paying attention to that sore leg, chasing away the predator, giving the water and feed and rest the sheep need, and so much more.

Yet for alertness to be effective, of course, a shepherd needs a certain attitude. That's true for the effective care of the sheep of the field, and it's just as true for the effective care for the sheep of the Lord. Peter fleshes out the right attitude with three parallel phrases, each consisting of a negative and a positive. Elders shepherd God's flock "serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing", says Peter; they shepherd God's flock "serving as overseers – ... not greedy for money, but eager to serve"; more, they shepherd God's flock "serving as overseers – ... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." We need to pay attention to each of those three in turn.

"Serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing." The term translated as "not because you must" is simply the Greek word for compulsion, being forced. We well realize that a shepherd who's *compelled* to oversee a flock simply isn't going to see the limp yonder sheep has, and isn't going to act quickly either on the threat that the wolf half a mile away may present to the flock – for his heart isn't in the job and so the sheep aren't dear to his heart. That sort of an attitude is simply not to exist amongst the elders (and deacons) of God's flock. As shepherds under the Chief Shepherds they are instead, says Peter, to oversee the flock of God *readily, eagerly, willingly*. Jesus Himself set

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Greek text of 5:1 has the word 'therefore' – as other major translations also render.

the example. I think of the instance in Jesus' ministry when Jesus had labored a long day (there wasn't even time to eat) and had invited His disciples to join Him in getting some rest (Mark 6:30f). But, it turns out, many found the solitary place to which Jesus had retreated. Then we read this word: "when Jesus ... saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So –tired though He was– He began teaching them many things (Mark 6:34). That's the notion of *readily, eagerly*. The sheep entrusted to your care, brothers, live in a world of much abuse, many insults, much suffering. You'll see the sheep limp because of the hard ground, you'll see the sheep thirsty because of life's dirty water. As shepherds of God's flock, you're to keep your eyes open to spot the thirsty lamb and the limping ram, and then you're not to consider whether you *feel* like helping; you're instead, says the Lord, to get out there and readily tend the needs of that sheep – even as Jesus did.

And don't kid yourself, brothers: Peter –and the Holy Spirit who moved him– knew very well that the elders amongst the exiles did not have an easier life than the sheep entrusted to their care. Elders tend to have a higher profile in the community than the average church member, simply because they're known to have to give leadership. So elders too –in Peter's day as well as today– experience the insults Jesus experienced, the arms-length approach that comes with being seen as different. And the elders of Peter's day had their own families and bills to look after too. But Peter is adamant: you are elders mandated to shepherd God's flock, and so you're to do it as Jesus did it, "not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be." It may well require the extra effort to get out there and tend the sheep when you'd rather be in your lazy chair or at the lakeside. It be so; that extra effort, that self-denial, comes with the task.

The second phrase Peter uses to describe the attitude of the shepherd overseeing his flock appears in our translation as "not greedy for money, but eager to serve." Other translations have rendered the Greek with the phrase "not for shameful gain," and that's indeed more accurate – for the "gain" you can get from shepherding God's flock isn't necessarily limited to money. In fact, the task may cost you money (both in lost time and in travel expenses). No, the 'gain' one can get from being a shepherd is that you have an opportunity to push your own wheelbarrow, pursue your own agenda, put pressure on the sheep to do what you want – and we all know that there can be personal advantage for oneself in that, well beyond the financial. But being in it for yourself leads to the sort of shepherding that Ezekiel condemned so roundly. Said he: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock'" (34:2f). Christ Jesus Himself, Chief Shepherd of the flock of God, did not come to earth to fleece the flock and fatten Himself, but He –Good Shepherd that He was– came to lay down His life for the sheep. It will not do for His under-shepherds to do anything different. As the apostle says: shepherds are to oversee, and so tend the flock "not for ... self-advantage, but eager to serve." Eagerness, passion, keen to assist: that's the picture Peter gleans from Jesus' example, and so that's the style in which the office bearers are to carry out their office in Christ's church. Jesus was with the Father in glory from all eternity, but when the Father sent His Son to earth to ransom God's chosen from Satan's power Jesus did not protest that it was beneath His divine dignity to be born to a sinful mother or below His rights to lie in a manger or too humiliating to be abused and rejected and scorned by the very people He was meant to save. No, He readily emptied Himself, put His own preferences and needs and reputation to one side for the sake of those whom the Father gave Him – to the point of humbling Himself to the shame of the cross (cf Philippians 2:6ff). That's Peter's argument: if that's what the Chief Shepherd did, shall His under-shepherds be content to display less

willingness to care for God's sheep?? We realize, of course: it's not just the shepherds who are to empty themselves to that extent to serve the other; such behavior is to be typical of all Christians (cf John 13).

The third set of words Peter uses to describe the attitude the elder is to have as he oversees God's flock is this: "not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." The phrase "those entrusted to you" renders the Greek word for 'portion', 'lot', and so 'inheritance'. Yet the inheritance or portion Peter is talking about is not a section of land (as the Israelites received when they entered the Promised Land), but is instead a flock. That flock is the elder's inheritance-from-God, entrusted to his care. Well now, one is not, says Peter, to boss those sheep around, is not to lord it over them, but one is instead to *be an example* to the flock. An example of what? That's simple: an example of *service*. Consider Jesus' instruction to His disciples in Mt 20. Said He: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (vss 25ff).

That, we realize, is a powerful example. The sheep of God live in a world where they're sidelined because of the faith, are treated with suspicion and distrust, and they are themselves vulnerable to the temptation to take the edge off their Christian identity just to protect themselves from abuse. To make those sheep-of-the-Lord flourish, elders need to deny selves to tend the needs of the flock. That's the specific instruction of the apostle in our chapter today. Elders are to *shepherd as Christ did*, looking carefully for needs in the flock, and then *serving eagerly*, readily, without regard to self – even as Christ Himself did.

There, brothers, is the answer to our second point: how shepherds are to do their job. And, as I said before, this attitude does not describe only the work of elders but equally the work of ministers and deacons.

You will say: that's a steep command, and especially so in our world of growing hostility to faithful Christians. And you are correct. Let's move on, then, to our third point and the encouragement the Lord gives you.

### 3. What response shepherds may expect.

Peter describes two responses shepherds may expect. The first response comes from the Savior Himself, and comes in the form of a promise. Vs 4: "When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." We understand the reference: Christ Jesus ascended into heaven, but will one day return as He went. When He comes He will fulfill the promise given to His disciples in the parable of the talents. The two faithful servants who doubled the master's money were told they'd be placed "in charge of many things" and invited to share in the master's happiness (Mt 25:21ff). We understand that the reward these faithful servants would receive would not be short-lived, but last forever. If you will, it's "the crown of glory that will never fade away."

Elders are entrusted with –it's their *portion*– the flock of the Lord. The flock remains *the Lord's* even while it's entrusted to the elders' care. The Chief Shepherd keeps the promise of the parable, and so faithful elders may be confident that they'll one day receive that word of commendation from the Master: well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master.

And what of those elders (and deacons) who neglect the sheep, who do not oversee the flock willingly but grudgingly, who're in it for personal reputation, who fleece the sheep for own advantage? The unfaithful servant in the parable of the talents received no reward; in fact, he lost all he ever had and found his eternal home in outer darkness where there's

weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 25:28ff). Peter doesn't mention the penalty that comes to office bearers who fleece the sheep of the Lord, but the answer to that is self-evident. Where any office bearer tends the sheep grudgingly or pursues his task for personal gain, there is need for repentance – lest this office bearer end up in the fires of God's eternal judgment. In the kingdom of God there is no place for anything less than one's best, and that counts very much for leaders first of all.

The second response elders may expect comes not in the form of a promise, but in the form of a command to the younger. Vs 5: "Young men, in the same way, be submissive to those who are older." The term translated here as "those who are older" is the same word translated in vs 1 as "elders". Those elders need to shepherd God's flock, but those sheep of the flock have their heads to think with and their preferences and tastes also – and in their context of suffering may not want to submit to the elders. Peter's point now is: the younger need to make a point of submitting.

To be clear: Peter's instruction is not just to young *men*, nor is it just to *young* men (or women). The term Peter uses describes all who are *not-elders*. The argument is simple: simply because the Chief Shepherd has placed under-shepherds over His flock, the whole flock is to submit to these shepherds. That's simple.

But it's hard to do. One wants to follow one's own head, instead of submitting to the instruction and leadership and care of another. That's perhaps even more so in a context of suffering-on-account-of-the-gospel. Honesty requires us to admit –and it's perhaps true particularly of young people– that we don't want to be different from the world precisely because we don't like being sidelined, don't want to lose our promotions, don't want to be the object of ridicule. So we try to be like the world in which we live. Elders –they've been around the block a few more times than the younger– warn against becoming like the world. The predictable reaction of the younger is: those elders are sticks in the mud, they're so narrow-minded, so traditional; they've got to break out of the mold of the past and get with the times. Elders, of course, recognize that language; in their zeal-of-youth years ago they said exactly the same thing (there's nothing new under the sun...). But Peter breaks the impasse, for he recalls the instruction of no one less than Solomon with his refrain in the book of Proverbs: "My son, *listen*." The younger are not the first generation to be confronted with the challenges and temptations of a world that ridicules Christians, and so Peter tells the younger to submit to the elders, to those men Christ Jesus has set as shepherds over His flock. Submit: that's the posture of *faith*, the resulting of believing that none less than the Chief Shepherd –He laid down His life for the sheep– has placed elders over His flock *for their good*. To refuse to submit to the elders is to disobey the Chief Shepherd Himself. And that, of course, is dangerous, suicidal.

Does that mean that elders can dictate coldly to the flock what they are to think and do? Not at all. Vs 5b: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another" – and then Peter quotes from Solomon to show that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34). Humility: we recognize the spirit of Jesus Christ, how He emptied Himself to serve His people. That's the attitude *all* in the congregation are to show to one another, be it that some do wearing the mantle of the shepherd and others do it wearing the fleece of the sheep. Such humility, of course, involves a readiness to listen to the other, a keen desire to understand where the other is coming from, and together promoting a deep respect for anything the Chief Shepherd says in His Word.

We receive new office bearers today. The Chief Shepherd is at work in our midst, caring for His flock as we live in today's Canada. The mandate of the Lord to the brothers is clear, and the mandate of the Lord to the sheep of the flock is clear too. So in faith we'll all

go forward, confident that Chief Shepherd has made no mistakes in how He's organized things in His flock. We'll believe that in obedience to Him lies the road to flourishing.