The Purpose of a Structured Household

A Structured Household: Elders, Deacons, with the Saints / Multiple Passages / October 25, 2026

Introduction:

Last Sunday, we began a new series on the roles of elders, deacons, and the saints in the church to consider God's design for leadership of His people. We opened with God's promises of providing one Shepherd over His people with under-shepherds caring for local flocks, and saw those promises fulfilled in Jesus and the apostles. Then, we saw the apostles give a group of seven in Acts 6 leadership responsibilities to prioritize their shepherding ministry, and how elders and deacons were formed around that delineation of leadership to guide Christ's church in fulfilling its purpose of magnifying the gospel. In the coming weeks, we'll cover the unique roles and responsibilities in the gathered church for elders, deacons, and the saints, starting today with elders. Look at 1 Peter 5:1-2. Peter writes, "I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder…shepherd the flock of God that is among you." Peter's identification as a fellow elder and call to shepherd shows he's not talking about older people in the church, but leaders that continue the under-shepherd function of the apostles. This doesn't mean elders hold apostolic authority, only that they continue their shepherding ministry as overseers in Christ's Church. Now, before we unpack this, we must understand something about leadership.

Leadership in Christ's Church is a Deeper Commitment to Service

Our understanding of leadership must be vastly different than the worlds. In Matthew 20 & Mark 10, Jesus is approached with a request for James and John to hold prominent positions in His kingdom. His response lays the foundation for leadership in His covenant community. Look at Matthew 20:25-28. Jesus says, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" Leaders in Christ's Kingdom don't demand honor, respect, or prestige, but go lower in sacrifice and service. They follow Christ's lead, who laid aside His right to be honored and worshipped, took on the limitations of humanity, and became obedient to death on the cross to provide atonement for sin, securing forgiveness and reconciliation with God for all who trust in Him. Leaders are called to be the premier examples of Christ's sacrificial service to His people. That has to be our foundation before we go any further. And this is one reason God's highest call in leadership is shepherd-leaders. Shepherds lived to serve their flocks. Consider two truths about the shepherd ministry of elders with me. First,

Elders Shepherd by Faithfully Knowing, Protecting, Feeding and Leading the Church

Leading is integral to being a shepherd. In Psalm 23, David says, "The Lord is my shepherd…He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters…He leads me in paths of righteousness." God is not a passive bystander who hopes His people might respond. He actively leads. Christ remains active as our shepherd. Every under-shepherd takes cues from the great Shepherd. Shepherd's are always leading their sheep somewhere, to safe places to eat and rest, through dangerous terrain, etc. An elder's role is the same, and to lead well, they must adhere to four things. First, they must know their flock. Look at Acts 20:28. Paul says to the Ephesian 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, which he obtained with his own blood." Note his emphasis on the need to pay attention to all the sheep, including themselves. The elders primary mode of oversight isn't decision making, it is a personal awareness of and attention to those God has entrusted to their care. Much of shepherding fails if we miss this. Elders should know the weaknesses and tendencies of God's people to wander. They should understand what influences their lives and how their faith needs to be strengthened. They should know their gifts to be employed in service and whether they are faithfully using them. To lead well, elders must know the sheep. Second, elders must protect their flock.

Continue in verses 29-31, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.” Pause there. The attention needed is for protecting God’s people from being drawn away by wolves. Wolves, Paul says, who will enter the flock and even arise from among leadership. Church, our enemy strives to lead people away from sound teaching and Christ’s covenant community to make them vulnerable, and elders must be alert to protect them. But we’re not talking about wolves like the one in the fable of Little Red Riding Hood, who simply throws on a red cloak to disguise himself. Our enemy is far more cunning. Jesus warns that false prophets come to us in sheep's clothing. Paul says Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. The danger is not always obvious. To lead well, elders must be vigilant in protecting their flock from those who would lead them astray. Third, elders must ensure their flock is fed with God’s Word. Notice Paul’s emphasis on teaching in verses 31-32, “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Reminding them of his instruction, which covered the whole counsel of God in verse 27, he commends God’s Word to them as what they and God’s people need. How did Jesus respond to Satan’s attacks in the wilderness? “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” God’s Word is the daily bread His people need. So, the supreme responsibility of elders is to feed God’s people with it. Remember Jesus’ commands to Peter in John 21:15-17? What were the first and last commands? “Feed my lambs” and “feed my sheep.” This places a priority on this ministry. This is why the only skill listed as a qualification for elders in 1 Timothy 3:2 is that they, “must be…able to teach.” And Titus 1:9 says elders, “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught,” so they, “may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Now, does this mean all elders must teach the gathered church? Look at 1 Timothy 5:17, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Paul shows only some elders will labor in preaching and teaching. So, Paul is not saying all elders must feed people through preaching and teaching. Some will labor in this, while others feed the flock through exhortation, admonishment, and counseling. Note also how Paul speaks of a plurality of elders, even among those who preach and teach. Every mention of elders in Scripture is of plurality in a local church. Family, God’s design is for every local church to have multiple shepherds. The only difference between my role and other elders should be time available and laboring in preaching in teaching. We’ll come back to this later. For now, consider the final thing elders must adhere to. To lead well, elders must be examples to their flock. In 1 Peter 5, Peter’s instructions focus less on what elder do and more on how they shepherd. Look at verses 2-3, “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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” Peter gives three building contrasts. The first makes sense. I heard it rephrased, “Elders shepherd through love offered, not duty performed.” The second contrast is a little more interesting. “Shameful gain” refers to any personal delight gained. “Eagerly” communicates a positive emotional desire. Jesus uses a form of this word when calling the disciples to pray in Gethsemane, saying “the Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” This is a Spirit-charged selfless desire. He lands the plan with a curious final contrast. Not domineering relays Jesus call for not lording if over people like the Gentiles, but why is being examples the contrast of domineering? I’m persuaded the point is, elders don’t dictate what others should do, but say, “follow me as I follow Christ.” Timothy Witmer shows how the way of a shepherd illustrates this. In “The Shepherd Leader,” he shares of a tour guide in Israel noting how shepherds “never ‘drive’ the sheep from behind” but always “lead their flocks from the front.” Shortly after saying this, the tour passes a flock of sheep with what looked like the shepherd walking behind them. When the tourist called this to the guide’s attention, he stopped the bus to have a word with the “shepherd.”

Coming back with a grin on his face, he said, “That wasn’t the shepherd, that was the butcher” (Timothy Z. Witmer, The Shepherd Leader, p. 156). Elders never lead by dictating or demanding. They call God’s people to join them in following Christ. Paul’s emphasis on character and purpose in 1 Timothy 3 shows their way of life among God’s people models God-glorifying behavior, but they model more than just moral character. Elders must be examples to their flock in pursuing Christ through study, prayer and worship, dying to self, and sacrificially serving the body with their time, resources, and spiritual gifts. This brings me to the second truth about the shepherd ministry of elders.

Elders Shepherd through a Fervent Devotion to Prayer and God’s Word

Elders can only fulfill this calling through a devotion to prayer and the Word, both for themselves, and as their primary tools of ministry. The apostles revealed this in Acts 6 with their response to the widow care need. Look at Acts 6:2-4 again, “And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’” The apostles weren’t saying, “we’re the leaders of the church and can’t be bothered with service.” They were saying, “we need to devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word to fulfill our calling to shepherd, and this will cause us to neglect those things.” Family, when elders are distracted from these things, they detach themselves from God’s primary means of grace. Look at 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Paul tells Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Spiritual growth comes from time in God’s Word, because it is a means of God’s grace to instruct, reprove, correct, and train His people, equipping us for every good work. When calling for God’s armor to be put on for wrestling against the forces of darkness, Paul concludes by saying, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.” His repeated emphasis on prayer communicates this is how God’s armor is put on. When elders become distracted from a fervent devotion to prayer and the Word their own faith and walk will suffer, and their leading and teaching will as well. They will shepherd in their strength and wisdom, building with wood, hay, and straw. Consider this lofty calling church. Elders are called to shepherd the flock of God among them by faithfully knowing, protecting, feeding and leading God’s flock through a fervent devotion to prayer and God’s Word. Now, there are some questions left to answer like, who can be elders? In our class next Sunday, at 9:00am in this room, we’ll cover why we’re persuaded God has designed the role of elders to be filled by men who have been called and qualified by His Spirit for this task. I encourage you to attend for answers to questions like this. Our goal today is to understand the role and responsibilities of elders so we can respond appropriately. To find the temptation to think this sermon only applies to those called to be elder, let me suggest two questions everyone can ask in response to this. First,

1) How Should We Change Our Understanding of Elders?

I am going to speak frankly. The modern church has greatly confused the role of elders. One reason is the influence of American democracy. This role is treated like a political office where we choose people to represent our interest in governing affairs. Churches even hold elections and set terms limits for elders similar to our democratic process. Family, this couldn’t be further from what we see in Scripture. Shepherds are not elected officials who carry out the wishes of the sheep. They are Spirit appointed leaders to watch over, protect and faithfully lead people to follow Jesus. Frankly, that will often mean the exact opposite of representing our wishes. A second reason is how we refer to elders. My heart breaks when I hear “elder board.” This suggests elders are a committee to help the pastor make wise decisions.

Alexander Strauch says, “New Testament elders are not temporary, church board members. They do not comprise the church finance committee, nor are they a body of trustees required for legal purposes. On the contrary, the New Testament eldership forms the pastoral body of the local church” (Alexander Strauch, Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon, pp. 65-66). The only difference between a “lead pastor” and other elders should be available time and laboring over preaching and teaching. Every elder should be seen as a shepherd of this flock. And every elder should be shepherding this flock by knowing, protecting, and feeding the sheep. Every elder should be an example to follow. You should be able to trust that every elder holds fast to God’s Word and can exhort, admonish, and counsel you. If they show up at your hospital bed, you should delight in the shepherding care of your elders. If you need counsel, you should feel comfortable approaching any elder to receive sound encouragement. Their care should be seen as the same as mine. Think about it. How many people are here today? How could one or two people possibly faithfully shepherd everyone? They can’t. God calls for a plurality of elders so the church can be faithfully shepherded. Whether you are called to be an elder or not, understanding this role properly is vital to life in this expression of Christ’s church. Second,

2) How Can We Support & Prioritize the Ministry of Elders?

This is one of the primary goals in this series and the reevaluation of our leadership structure. Last week, we saw the apostles ensure the ministry of shepherd-leaders continued to be prioritized. We should do the same. How should these responsibilities of elders shape the kinds of concerns they field? Or the tasks they are given? How can we protect the elders time for prayer and the Word? What should we expect of individual elders? What should elders strive to do well? Who should we contact when we have a need? How should we pray for them and encourage them in their ministry? What can we do to raise up elders? These are all questions that help us consider how we can support and prioritize the ministry of elders.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, I want to encourage you to think on these two main questions and ask God to shape your heart around His desires for faithful shepherd-leaders. Today is also communion Sunday, where we take communion together to remind us of our unity in Christ. As prepare for that, reflect on the price Jesus paid to make us one body, who together are a pillar and buttress of the truth of the gospel. Consider how His sacrifice influences our understanding of leadership and His design for the church. And let it guide us through this season to trust in His goodness through that design, and adjust our leadership structure according to it. Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?