

The Gospels contain a number of tender moments where you see Jesus' love for his people and great sadness for what has become of his creation. In one instance, we're told that, as Jesus ministered from town to town, he had compassion on the crowds, for they were harassed and helpless, "thinned and tossed aside", like sheep without a shepherd. The people of God were subjected to a cruel world and suffered, in large part, because those charged with their care and protection severely neglected their calling.

Even though Jesus had come to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to secure our perfect eternity with him, and even though he knew this world was temporary, he was not indifferent to the condition of his people here and now. In fact, it was just the opposite. Jesus was so concerned about the welfare of his people, he established leaders who are responsible for the care, protection, and guidance of his church. In a conversation with Peter, we begin to get an understanding of what Jesus had in mind:

[John 21:15-17] ¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

As Peter is restored and his love of Jesus is substantiated, he is given his charge as a leader in the church. Jesus connects Peter's relationship with himself to his relationship with his people, because love for the shepherd becomes love for the sheep. And as we continue in our study of 1 Peter, we will hear echoes of this exchange in 1 Peter 5.

Immediately following a passage on the fiery trials of suffering at the end of 1 Peter 4, Peter directly addresses the leadership of the church. Through it, he defines the responsibilities of an elder, the relationship between a congregation and its leaders, and a call to all of us to love and care for one another in the same way. It is Peter taking the charge of care and leadership given to him by Jesus and passing it on to us.

[1 Peter 5:1-2a] So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed.

² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.

Peter begins by giving his credentials. He is not some distant apostle who cannot relate to what they are going through. He is a fellow elder, a co-laborer, who has both seen the Christ suffer and personally experienced the sufferings of Christ. In the face of persecution, he has chosen to deny his faith and run away, and also chosen to declare his faith and pay the price. He is well acquainted with fiery trials, understands and empathizes with what the church in Asia Minor is experiencing, and gives an urgent, heartfelt, compassionate, and encouraging plea for the elders of that church to shepherd their flock.

Peter uses three words to define the work of those called to leadership in the church (used throughout the New Testament). Three words: elder (someone of standing in the community), shepherd (caretaker, pastor), and overseer (supervision and leadership). He continues the longstanding biblical use of the shepherd/flock metaphor to explain the relationship between God's people and their leaders and what elders are to do.

Sheep are hungry. They need to be fed. Elders are to feed them God's Word and show how it applies to their lives.

Sheep are vulnerable. They need to be protected from threats. Elders are to be alert and watchful to identify threats and courageous in engaging them; both internal that threaten unity and external that threaten doctrine and belief.

Sheep are to be cared for. Elders are to care for their people through prayer, encouragement, counsel.

Sheep are prone to wander. Elders are to seek the lost, bring wandering sheep back into the fold, and correct behavior not in alignment with God's will.

Sheep are to be gathered and led. Elders are responsible for the hard work of gathering the church and overseeing its ministry. And like a shepherd, they are to lead from the front.

Sheep are to be loved. Shepherds know their sheep by name. Elders are to be with their people and know them intimately.

What a beautiful picture of what the care of God's people looks like. What a beautiful reflection of the heart of the one who calls himself the Good Shepherd. Peter continues, because God is not only concerned with what elders do, but also with how they do it. What should the motives, attitudes, and methods be for those who lead his people? Peter lays out three pairs of contrasting ideas to show how they should and should not shepherd.

[1 Peter 5:2b-3] not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you:

God is not looking for reluctant, unwilling shepherds to lead his people. In Peter's day, some were likely hesitant to take on an official leadership role of an institution that was decreasing in popularity in the culture. Today, whether it's social or familial pressures, a sense of obligation, or any reason other than a willingness to serve God and his church, a leader begrudging of his position is a leader who won't please God. A leader indifferent to his responsibility is a leader indifferent to the results.

God wants individuals who view leadership not as a "have to" but as a "get to". Who look at eldership as an incredible way to serve God and his people, regardless of the cost, and who do it freely and gladly. It is the attitude with which he shepherds us, and it's the attitude he expects from those who shepherd his church. Our elder meetings are full of joy and excitement and unified around shepherding God's people and fulfilling what he is calling us to.

Not for shameful gain, but eagerly:

I was flipping through TV channels recently and came upon the section of religious stations. And while I found some faithful followers of Jesus proclaiming the Gospel, there was also no shortage of charlatans abusing their position and influence, misappropriating the Word of God for their own benefit and gain. I believe most of us cringe, and are enflamed with righteous anger, when we see someone, supposedly in the name of Christ, fill their pockets by preying on those most in need and tarnishing the reputation of our Savior along the way. This has always been a concern for God's people.

Instead, elders are to serve eagerly. God is looking for someone raising their hand and shouting "put me in the game, coach!" Paul says anyone who aspires to the office of elder desires a noble task because they eagerly accept the burden, responsibility, and hard work that comes with leadership. **A godly shepherd is motivated not by what they get out of God's people, but what they pour into them.** Our elders serve with zero remuneration (and we're about to double their salary!), but they eagerly pour themselves out in service to this church and care of our people.

Not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock:

You can't listen to the news these days without hearing a story about some leader abusing their power. Hollywood, politics, the corporate world, media. Unfortunately, leaders of the church are not immune to such temptation. For some, a position intended for leadership, influence, and loving care of others can instead become a self-indulgent, prideful exercise in ruling over those very same people.

Peter is likely remembering here a moment recorded Mark 10. There, the twelve are jockeying for position in the Kingdom, and it's clear they are looking at those positions as places of prestige, honor, and power. But our humble Messiah, who stepped off his heavenly throne and into creation to save us, called them on it. He compared their attitude to the rulers of their day who "lorded" (same word Peter uses) over their people...but that's not how it works in the Church/Kingdom of God. If they were to be first, to be great, they would have to be a servant. Jesus said that even he did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.

Whatever Jesus calls us to, he models first. Elders are to answer the call of God by following the example of Jesus. Our Good Shepherd came to serve, and he did so by laying his life down for his sheep. Undershepherds in the church are called to the same thing. Elders have been given a position of care, not of power, a position to serve the sheep, not be served by the sheep.

And something I don't want you to miss is that they do this to also be examples to the entire church. I know it would be very easy to look at this passage and think it's just for elders. But with a church our size, it's a challenge to shepherd and care for everyone. We have eleven elders, around 2,000 people here on a Sunday morning, and around 3,000 who call Fellowship their church home. There is no way they can shepherd all those people by themselves. I was reminded of this last week when I received an email from someone who felt let down by our church, who didn't get the care they needed. It broke my heart to think we let someone fall through the cracks and not get the care they needed.

If the elders are to lead *by example*, then the congregation must follow and emulate their example. That means we all have a role to play in the care of the flock. We don't need hundreds of elders, but we do need hundreds of co-laborers who aspire to that way of life and faith and help care for God's people, where we all answer the call that went from Jesus to Peter, and from Peter to the elders of the church, and from the elders of our church to each and every one of us. **The care for God's people is the responsibility of all of God's people.**

I saw a wonderful example of this recently in one of our Life Groups. We often refer to our Life Group leaders as living room pastors, because they lead the people who are the first line of care for the members of their group. We have a young woman in our church whose father, who lives in another state, passed away very suddenly and unexpectedly. And while we were made aware of it at a staff and elder level, and were able to do a couple things to help out, it was her Life Group that stepped up and really took care of her. One of the guys in her group had a business trip in the same city where her dad lived, so the group put together care package for him to deliver. The care package included letters for her to open up each day, words of encouragement and Scripture reading. A member of the group flew to be with her for several days and help with the funeral service. And, as she's had to stay there for an extended period of time to deal with family matters, her group continues to check in on her, pray for her, and help her take care of things she can't get to back here at home. This is the kind of care that we want to be known for in this church. It starts with the elders going first and modeling the behavior Jesus calls all of us to, and then calling us to do the same.

[1 Peter 5:4] ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Throughout his letter, Peter consistently has an eye towards eternity. He continues that here when exhorting elders. He knows leadership can be a thankless and lonely job, particularly in times of great trial. It can include heartache, problems, and even persecution, risking some leaders to burnout and tempting others to simply say "I'm out." So he offers the encouragement to persevere in their love and care for the sheep, knowing that, in the end, they will be rewarded for their tireless labor and sacrifice when Christ returns. They will receive not a perishable earthly crown worn by kings, but instead an unfading crown worn by faithful servants of the King, and full of the glory of the Chief Shepherd. If you are fading, hang in there. The unfading crown of glory will one day be yours.

For a flock to thrive, there must be a healthy relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. For a church to thrive, there must be a healthy relationship between its elders and body.

[1 Peter 5:5] ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

This only works if we are covered up with the character of our Lord and Savior by being humble. Humility confesses our desperate need for Jesus, and our interdependence with other members of the body of Christ. Humility values someone above yourself and places their interests above your own. Humility allows me to accept the place Jesus calls me to in his church, and allows me to

cheer on others where he's placed them. It is humility that makes an elder worth following and humility that enables the flock to submit to their authority and follow their example.

I want to invite our elders and their wives up to the platform. I do this for a couple reasons. First, I want you to know who they are, to pray for them, encourage them, and appreciate them. This is more than just a corporate board of directors tasked with keeping Gary and me out of trouble and making sure we have enough money to pay the bills. This is a group of men who shepherd the flock. They lead Life Groups, teach, disciple, generously and cheerfully give, pray for and with our people, and lead. They are my friends, and they are humble servants whose love for the Chief Shepherd results in love for the sheep.

I also invite them up here because we have some elder developments we want to let you know about. The first is that we believe God has moved and identified the next member of this team. At Fellowship elders are not selected by current elders nor elected by the congregation. It is the Holy Spirit who appoints elders to a local body. Our job is to identify and affirm the men God has appointed. [Acts 20:28] **28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you (appointed you) overseers (elders), to care for (pastor) the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.**

The elders of our church are thrilled to recommend Michael Gayles to serve as our next elder. Michael and his wife Cheryl have been attending Fellowship since 2005. He was initially identified by our elders through his exceptional leadership and shepherding of a Life Group.

We have been in conversation with Michael for several months. In our first conversation about this, he said he would need some time to talk to Cheryl about it and pray...which seemed like really "eldery" things to do. Our confidence in him has only grown since. We believe Michael meets all the qualifications of an elder listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We also believe he is characterized by what Peter is calling elders to do and be in today's passage. Michael has a faith that is to be emulated, is a catalytic leader, is able to feed the flock through teaching of Scripture, and is willing and eager to care for God's people and help them flourish in their faith.

While we believe elders are appointed by the Holy Spirit, we also believe candidates should be confirmed by the local body. You may not know Michael, but if you do and you have any objections to him serving as an elder, go to him privately, as a brother or sister with your concern and if there is no agreement about their suitability for the task, contact one of our elders. If there are no objections, we will lay hands on these men in our worship service on March 4.