

“THE ELDERS AND THE FLOCK.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: I Peter 5:1-5

Prayer: Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the responses of all our hearts glorify you, exalt Jesus, honor your Word and edify your people according to our need. Come, Holy Spirit, help us I pray.

Introduction.

Because of the occasion today I am skipping ahead to I Peter 5 and his exhortation of elders. The text has application to all leaders, pastors, elders, deacons, spiritual leaders, community leaders, teachers, parents, employers, all who have some position of leadership or authority.

So don't tune out just because you are not an elder. If you are a person with some spiritual oversight or influence in someone else's life then there is application here for you.

Also don't tune out because we are all under the spiritual leadership of our elders and that has implications for all of us, and certainly for how we respond to our leaders and pray for them.

The Paradoxes of Leadership

One of the paradoxes of leadership is it's always done by sinners for sinners. Every pastor, elder and deacon who has ever served this church has been a sinner. And every sinner called by God to lead has the unenviable job of trying to lead a bunch of sinners.

No leader is perfect and if you expect or demand perfection from your leaders you will be disappointed and maybe even become angry.

God has raised up and called out of our midst certain men to be pastors, elders and deacons. Of all the people in this church, God has called these particular men at this particular time to serve. I am aware every year at the changing of the council that only God knows what's ahead in the next three years and why the particular character and make up and set of life experiences of these particular men is needed at this time. It is humbling to be finite and not know why God has done what He has done.

Another paradox of leadership is we are asked by God to submit to these leaders even though they are sinners and not perfect and sometimes make decisions or say things we don't agree with.

Leadership is often making judgment calls based on their best understanding of the best information that they have at the time, sometimes they get it right, sometimes they get it wrong.

Some people like their decisions and others dislike them. Every president, boss, coach, teacher, judge, pastor and parent knows the fickleness of affection and dissatisfaction.

You understand I am not talking about decisions or actions that are clearly unbiblical, immoral, unethical or illegal. Of course, in any of those situations it's right to question and challenge. I'm not talking about that. I am talking about submitting to those in authority when we just don't agree or don't like it or want something else.

That's why it's called submission. If our leaders only did and said things we agreed with or if they only asked us to do things we already wanted to do, that's not submission.

Teenagers aren't submitting if their parents ask them to do what they already want to do. Submission happens when they are asked to do their homework or clean their room or be home by 11.

The paradox of leadership is trusting God and showing our faith in Him by humbly submitting to those over us, those who love us and pray for us and are accountable to God for our souls.

I Thessalonians 5:12-13 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

An Exhortation to Leaders

Peter says leaders are to be an example to the flock that is worthy of being imitated. There is a challenge here for leaders to watch their life and faith closely as others are watching.

Peter starts with a qualification to his being an elder, that he was a witness of the sufferings of Jesus. There is a connection between the sufferings of Jesus and leadership. Think about what that means and how it forms and shapes our leadership and makes it something to follow.

Why did Jesus suffer? For what He did wrong? No, He suffered for what we did wrong, He suffered for our sins. To witness Christ's sufferings is to see our sins in a mirror, to see the depths of our own sin and failure and shortcomings. No one saw that more clearly than Peter, watching Jesus die on the cross for his denials, for his betrayal, for his terrible sin. Peter knows that he himself contributed to Jesus' suffering.

To be a witness of the sufferings of Christ is to know our own hearts. The best people to lead sinners are sinners who have a clear and humble understanding of their own failures. We really are beggars telling other beggars where the bread is. When we call a sinner to repent it is not as one who is perfect, but as one who also has repented.

To witness the suffering of Christ is also to learn a lesson in compassion, to be willing to lay down our life for another, to be willing to seek the lost sheep and the wandering sheep and the rebellious sheep, to be willing to speak the truth with as much love and compassion as we can.

To witness the sufferings of Christ is to know Jesus, to know His life and purpose, to know the kind of Savior and Lord we have. To know Jesus is the essence of spiritual leadership. It is essential for church leaders, business leaders, parents and grandparents.

To witness the sufferings of Christ also means to be willing to share in the suffering of Christ, to endure hardship, to bear the accusations, the misunderstanding, the criticism. There are leaders in this church who have suffered those very things from those they have served.

I Peter 4:12-13 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

To be a leader is to be like Jesus. Know Jesus, spend time with Jesus, pray, read, meditate, worship, treasure Him who suffered and died for you and for the flock of God under your care. And let people see your progress in these things.

If you know and love and worship Jesus, if you know the meaning of His suffering for you and for the flock, you will be the kind of leader that the flock will find it easier to follow. It will increase their trust and their love for your leadership.

The Conduct of Leaders

While leaders are sinners and not perfect, that doesn't mean there aren't some standards of character, some expectations for conduct. While we may not always live up to them, we should always strive for them.

Shepherd the flock of God.

One of Scriptures most frequent and best images of the people of God is as sheep, and one of the best images of spiritual leaders is as shepherds.

We should be comfortable with such terms living in an agrarian community. We know how important it is for a farmer to know their flocks and herds, the condition of his animals, how they are doing, if any are sick. The importance of a shepherd or farmers is clear to us.

The Tired but not Retired group went out to Larry and Debbie Stap's and Mark and Michelle Tolsma's farms to see their milking and bottling operation. All their cows are all milked by three robots, 24/7/365. It was fascinating to see.

But here is the really amazing part. To build a robot that can milk a cow is relatively easy, but that's not all a farmer or a milker does. The farmer also has to be aware of the condition of the cows. So when the computer people were programing the robots they knew that if their robots

were going to be of use to the farmers they would have to have a way of knowing how each cow is doing. So they made special collars for the cows to wear that keep track of the cows activity in the field, how much the cows chew their cud, how much milk they give and how often, if they have any diseases and if the milk is OK or if there is something wrong with it. The robots computer lets the farmer know which cows need attention.

The point is the robots are no good if they can't help the farmer know the condition of his herd because that's what's most important. That's what spiritual leaders need to know.

They are to shepherd the flock of God, to guide and care for the congregation.

Shepherds are to see that sheep are well feed, cared for, protected from danger, and delivered from trouble. They will seek the lost, they will visit the sick, they will give godly counsel, they will rule and lead with grace and wisdom and gentleness ***the flock among you.***

Let me say a word about our day. It's possible to stay home and listen to great sermons from famous preachers. Whether on TV or through podcasts we have countless opportunities to hear God's Word preached. That can be an edifying supplement but it's sort of like the robot milker without the computer to know the condition of the soul. God never intended that to be a substitute for being in a local flock with in-the-flesh pastors and elders who set an example and who know us, who hold us accountable and to whom we are called to submit.

God intends for there to be flocks and shepherds, that is the best way for the care of souls. God intends for the flock to be where the shepherds and the sheep know each other, where we know each other's lives, know each other's context, relate with each other in good times and bad. A podcast pastor won't visit you in the hospital and come to your home at the time of a death.

Next Peter gives three specific examples of conduct, three dangers to be avoided and three ways to avoid them.

Serve not grudgingly, but willing.

This should be true for every calling from God whether as a husband or wife, father or mother, employer or employee, church leader or follower. What benefit is there to being surly or bitter or negative or critical or in a bad mood?

Most tasks or callings have parts that are less pleasant, that are monotonous or hard. Most of us wouldn't say that meetings are our favorite form of entertainment. But in God's callings we should strive for a sense of God-appointedness and what God has appointed for us should be engaged with some willingness if not cheerfulness.

Brothers, for the next three years devote yourself to this work and you will be amply rewarded by your Heavenly Father. Pray for a willing spirit, pray for a want-to kind of attitude, pray for an enthusiasm in serving God's people, Christ's church.

If you serve out of duty you will be an OK leader, if you serve out of genuine love for the flock you will be a great leader.

Serve not for shameful or personal gain, but eagerly.

Our elders and deacons aren't paid, but leaders can serve for other means of personal gain, for status, popularity, recognition, bragging rights, being on the inside, personal power. This is an exhortation against seeking personal gain and the antidote is liberality in spirit.

Peter says, don't look to get but look to give, and to give with generosity. Come to spend yourself in service. Brothers, fight greed or gain with eager joy to give and serve. Pray for joy in your ministry and service. If it isn't there ask God for it. And flock pray for this in your leaders.

Serve not domineering but setting an example.

Spiritual leadership isn't about coercion or power trips, but about setting an example. Jesus spoke about this specifically.

Matthew 20:25-28 "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This is an exhortation against pride, lust for power or prestige, importance, that antidote is humility and meekness, a servant attitude and example.

This is not saying don't lead. Remember verse 2, "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." By all means lead, we need leaders, but lead with a proper humility, out of love and service.

This is leadership that places a high value on the flock and on the privilege of serving the flock. No other group of people in all the earth has the supreme worth or dignity or value that the church of Jesus Christ has.

When leaders consider who the flock of God is, they will treat them differently, not lording it over them as though they were their own, but loving them as God's own treasure, showing humility and gentleness, leading by serving and leading by example.

The Reward of Leaders

The calling of a spiritual leader is a high calling, a noble calling. While we don't do it for money, recognition or rewards, God promises a reward.

I Peter 5:4 When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Scripture reminds us that while we don't get into heaven by good works, our good works will be rewarded in heaven. When Jesus returns the elders will receive an unfading crown of glory.

Is there a better reward than to hear, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into your Father's joy."?

Spiritual leadership isn't easy, it isn't glamorous. The work is hard; there are many hindrances that can discourage even the most diligent. There are long hours, there are serious concerns, there are ungrateful people, and there is a great enemy of the church who is constantly on the prowl.

All who share in the sufferings of Christ, all who serve as under-shepherds to the Chief Shepherd will share in the Chief Shepherd's glory. It is the greatest reward conceivable to mankind.

Implications and Application.

There are none who are qualified in and of themselves to be a leader. There are no self-qualified leaders. As Jesus says there is none who is good, only God is good. There are none who deserve to be leaders. They are leaders only because God has called and God has qualified them.

The old saying is true, "God doesn't call the equipped, He equips the called."

All of God's work on earth besides Jesus has been through broken, sinful people. Abraham made some terrible decisions as a husband and father. Moses and David and Paul were all murderers. Jonah ran away. Peter denied Jesus.

The core qualification is Jesus. As Jesus asked Peter, so I ask you, "Do you love Jesus?" Are you willing to suffer and lay down your life for the flock? Love Jesus and love those under your care and your reward will be great.

Prayer: Holy Father, we pray for our church, for all who serve in leadership. Protect us from evil and the evil one, equip those you have called and set apart to shepherd the flock of God well. Protect them in their work, encourage them in times of difficulty, give them wisdom and courage to lead well.

I pray for your Fatherly blessing to be upon this flock. Make us faithful and fruitful for your glory. And above all, dear Father, grant that our lives will increasingly bring glory to your dear Son, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, in way completely disproportionate to who we are and what we have. Be glorified in our midst as we long for the day of our glorification. This we ask in the infinitely great name of Jesus. Amen.