**“BE SHEPHERDS”**

**1 Peter 5:1-14**

**Key Verses: 5:2-3**

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Do you consider yourselves to be servants? Adults, do you work at a job, as a servant to others in exchange for money? Married couples, do you serve your spouse? Children, do you serve your siblings and friends? If you do, why? Is it in exchange for something else, like money? Maybe its because you feel obligated out of duty to do it? Today’s passage focuses on serving others as shepherds, and doing it entirely out of love for God and for others, even if it means self-sacrifice and self-denial in exchange for nothing. With this in mind, let’s focus especially on how we are watching over others, and with what motives, as we think about this passage.

As a reminder, Peter is speaking to the churches of Asia minor, Christians who fled persecution in Rome. Previously in this letter, Peter has spoken of Christ, living for him as a Christian, and suffering persecution for remaining faithful to him. Now, Peter begins this passage by speaking specifically to the elders. Let’s read verse 1 together. Unpacking this, Peter says three things. First, he is also a church elder, just like them. Therefore, he understands their concerns and struggles. Second, he was even an apostle of Jesus, one of the original twelve who followed and served him during his ministry, and was even present during his persecution and ultimate sacrifice. Therefore, he speaks with authority when he writes these things in this letter. Third, he is also serving God in the same way. Therefore, he has the same goals as they do. Ultimately, Peter is explaining to these elders that the following advice is trustworthy, and is to be taken seriously.

Now, let’s read the actual advice given to the elders, our key verses 2 and 3. What can we personally take away from this advice? First, Peter names several roles: God, the shepherds, and the flock. Furthermore, he introduces the flock as God’s flock. We can see from this that the shepherds ultimately do not own the flock. Peter subtly reminds them of God’s rule over all of us, regardless of our situation and role here on earth. In other organizations, such as governments and corporations, those at the top always rule those under them. In the past, and even now, some of these leaders claim to have a divine mandate, and use God as an excuse to do whatever they wanted to those under them. But, that is not the case for us as Christians. In our church, the elders’ only role is to intercede between Christians and Christ, just as Christ himself intercedes between us and God.

So, why would Peter bring this up? There are a couple of very significant reasons why. First, the Jewish pharisees and teachers of the law of Jesus’ time placed themselves over God. They claimed ownership over the flock under them, often using them for their own personal gain. As a result, they willingly and eagerly sought to kill Jesus, the son of God, and eventually succeeded by having him arrested, flogged, and crucified. Second, Rome itself was one of these governments with rulers that act as though they had a divine mandate. They were led by an emperor, Nero, who claimed to be an actual god. He used this as justification to attack the Christian church. He ordered that soldiers should round up Christians and kill them. As a result, many Christians fled Rome, and some of those ending up in Asia minor, where they became the Christian churches that Peter is addressing in his letter. With such great examples of the atrocities that happen when elders place themselves above God and rule over those under them, Peter must remind the elders of who truly owns the flock, and establish the proper role of the shepherds to differentiate them from the rulers of that time.

Instead, how does Peter say we should act when being shepherds? Let’s read verses 2 and 3 again. Essentially, we should actually be shepherds to those under us, caring for them, rather than treating them as a burden or a resource. It should also be noted that he says these things not as a follower giving his advice, but merely repeating what Jesus once told him. In John 21:15-17, Jesus tells Peter that, if he loves him, Peter should “feed his lambs” and “take care of his sheep”. In Luke 9:23, Jesus says to his disciples, “whoever wants to be [his] disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow [him].” And, in Luke 22:25-26, Jesus says, “The kings of the gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.” Jesus taught his disciples each of these things previously, in both word and action, and now Peter passes these teachings on to the elders.

Still, going even further, why are spiritual elders and shepherds needed in our churches at all? Speaking honestly, sheep need their shepherds to watch over them in order to survive. In the same way, followers of Christ need elders to watch over them in order to survive spiritually. Good shepherds protect those under them from threats to their faith, ensure that nobody abuses the church for self-gain, and set an example for the younger Christians to follow. There are plenty of real world, modern day examples of churches that are led by good shepherds and many that are led by bad shepherds. And, it’s easy to tell by the fruit of the church what kind of shepherd leads them. This role must remain the job of those who have come to Christ, recognizing both his sacrifice and his love for us personally. Otherwise, they will lead with only human concerns and ideas, and the motive for worship quickly becomes something other than love for God.

Even then, how can we put our own selves second when it comes to serving others? Personally, I could only be humble and serve others once I had accepted Jesus’ love for me, as well as for everyone else. I had to admit to my own sin, my own lack of power to overcome it, recognize Jesus’ sacrifice, and fully accept that I needed it. Only then could he guard me from selfish temptations in my own life. Even now, after these changes, I must hold on to Jesus in my mind, and not take his sacrifice for granted. Furthermore, it required my own self-denial, entirely changing my own identity and replacing it with one that is entirely centered in Christ. I still struggle to care for and encourage others in the church, and I especially struggle when it comes to serving the college students here on campus while so many of them reject our message. The only thing I can do is remain in Christ and continue to imitate his character, learning to love others as he did. Without him, there is no salvation, neither from our sin, nor from our own pride and selfishness.

Now, let’s read verse 4. Peter reminds us of what awaits us at the end of this dedication to him: a crown of glory that will never fade away. This is our reward, our payment, in exchange for all of the self-sacrifice and self-denial we do in Christ’s name. Truthfully, it’s not even our crown. Actually, it is the crown of glory that is given to Christ. But, in following Christ, sharing in his sufferings, we may share in his victory as well. And once this is finished, this victory of ours will not waste away over time, like so many of our possessions and victories here in this world do.

Once he is done advising the elders, Peter then turns to the rest of the church, those who are younger. Let’s read the first part of verse 5 together (5a). He leads with urging the younger followers to submit to the elders of the church, and he is very direct in doing so. First, regarding the word “submit”, we should consider the advice that Peter previously gave the elders in this passage. With this in mind, Peter’s intent for the word “submit” is clearly of a loving sort, perhaps as part of a two-way relationship. Aside from leading their church and caring for those in it, the elders have also already endured many of the life and faith struggles that the younger members are experiencing. Just as Peter advised the elders, so too will the elders advise these other followers in their churches, helping them to overcome any struggles.

Furthermore, if these elders are in fact good shepherds, then they will surely follow Christ’s example. Therefore, submission to them will help those under them to follow Christ’s example as well. This should be of utmost importance for any follower of Christ, as our faith depends on following him. Paul explains more directly to churches under his care how submission to elders helps us achieve this in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”. With the living examples given to us through our elders, we more easily understand Christ’s character and imitate it ourselves.

Next, let’s read the second part of verse 5, up to the word “because” (5b). Peter asks the younger Christians to not only submit to their elders, but to also submit to each other. He encourages them to literally put on the work clothes of humility, implying that they need to work for and serve one another, in humility. Peter wants them to be humble to each other not only in speech, but also in action. As with any other aspect of our faith and belief, words are easy, but ultimately not as meaningful as actions. In order to truly be humble, we must serve one another in a show of humility.

Now, the question needs to be asked, why did Peter feel that his advice of submission towards elders and humility toward each other was so much more important for those who were younger in faith? Peter seems to be implying that these younger followers of Christ would still be struggling with submission to others and humility, instead preferring to be self-serving. One could blame this on the environment that they grew up in. But, given that this self-serving environment ultimately exists in all cultures, and in all times, it is much more likely due to our own inborn sin. We are all like this originally, born proud and stubborn, and only through Christ can we be reborn. And, furthermore, only through this submission and humility, in recognizing our own sin, can we truly repent and come to Christ to be reborn.

Finally, Peter emphasizes the need for this submission and humility. Let’s read the final part of verse 5 and 6 (5c-6). This is actually very similar to the warning that Jesus himself once gave to his disciples and crowds of people listening to him. Matthew 23:12 reads, “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Realistically, we cannot say that we obey God, and yet not submit to Him. We cannot say that we follow Christ, and yet not be humble as he is. If we truly want to be Christians, then we must have these attributes. Otherwise, we merely claim to be Christians for other, selfish motives.

So, how can we, as followers of Christ, have this loving submission to our elders and caring humility for our peers? Let’s read verse 7 together. Peter then advises that we must give our anxieties to God and rely on His care to replace them. This is especially important for younger Christians, and younger people in general, because of all the anxieties we have. Anxieties such as not having a high social-status, a well-paying job, a large home, a nice car, or even a good spouse. A person, even a Christian, cannot devote their self to humility and submission while they are worried about so many other things in their life. What then can humility do for us? On its surface, having humility requires self-denial, which means we cannot devote our full attention to these anxieties. Unfortunately, it does not also solve the source of these anxieties on its own, meaning that we will still be anxious after becoming humble. Furthermore, in being humble and submissive, now we must also worry about others abusing this, by asking us to serve them and then not giving us anything in return. The only way that we can escape this cycle of anxiety is to give our worries up to God, and rely on him to care for us. Matthew 6:33-34 reads, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” In the end, if we hold to our anxieties, we will chase them until we are old, leaving no room for Jesus in our minds. But, in relying on God, we can finally have a true peace of mind that only He can give.

After giving his advice to both halves of the church, he gives one final warning. Let’s read verse 8. The true enemy isn’t those who cause persecution, but the devil himself. Although he can do nothing against God, the devil is more than capable of tempting us, and leading us away from God. Without God’s help to remain alert and sober, we cannot resist such temptations, especially during times of persecution. But, what does it mean to be alert and sober? We cannot always be physically alert, so clearly Peter is talking about this from a spiritual perspective. Spiritually, to be alert requires us to come to God daily, and to be sober requires us to practice Christ’s teachings. Let’s read verse 9. As long as we remain in our faith, in this way, we will have nothing to fear from the devil, or his workings. Additionally, we can be sure that we are not alone in our persecutions, temptations, and success in Christ, as there are believers around the world who have undergone all of the same sufferings as we have, and plenty of additional ones too. And in the end, we will all be restored and uplifted by God. Let’s read verses 10 and 11.

Finally, Peter closes the end of this passage, and his letter, with greetings from those in Rome. Let’s look at verses 12 and 13. He names himself, Silas as his writer, those of the Roman churches who have remained through the persecution, and his son Mark. Then, he closes with the following. Let’s read verse 14. In these verses, we see Peter ensures that these Christians are aware that others elsewhere are thinking of them, and praying for them. This is a great example of being mindful of the brothers and sisters whom we advise and encourage within our church. It’s important to remember to see each other as part of the same family in Christ. Otherwise, our relationship between one another becomes like that of any other human-made organization, no longer centered around the grace and unity given to us by Christ. We can serve one another and be shepherds over entire churches, but if we do not remain in the grace of Christ, then we cannot truly love one another in this way.

To wrap up today’s message, let’s reread our key verses, 2 and 3. Every one of you should ask yourself: are you willing to be a good shepherd for others? Can you truly serve others out of love, in returning the love that Christ has shown you? Not, then why? What obstacles stand in the way of you emulating Christ in your own life? May God grant us the strength to follow his example of love and grace.