

SERMON: ***Who Are the Shepherds?***

SCRIPTURE: 1 Peter 5:1-5

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1 Peter 5:1-5 (ESV)

¹So 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: ²shepherd 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; ³not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵Likewise, 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."

Sheep and Shepherds

This Sunday we will look at the role and responsibility of shepherds of the church. Next week we will look at the role and responsibility of the sheep in the church. But before we dive into these topics, I'd like to give some background as to why we're covering these topics.

In the fall of 2008 I began a study on the theme of shepherd which got me thinking about the role of pastors and elders. From that study, there are two verses that remain impressed upon my heart and mind. They frame much of my thinking about these topics.

Acts 20:28 speaking to elders says, *"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."*

Hebrews 13:17 says, *"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."*

I take three things from these verses: 1) The church belongs to God and it cost him dearly – it was bought with his own blood. 2) Elders are called to give careful oversight to the souls of those in the church. 3) And they will be held accountable to God for their oversight.

As I began to transition into my role as your lead pastor these verses were heavy on my heart. This is a big responsibility. But I knew enough about what the Bible says about elders to know that I was not alone. God has given his church elders – plural! We are in this together.

And so the elders began a serious discussion around the role and responsibility given to us by God. In our study we have been asking the following questions:

- What is the role of elders in this church?
- Are we mainly a board of directors or are we shepherds?
- And if we're shepherds, what do shepherds do?
- Are we giving careful oversight to the flock?
- Do we know who the sheep are?

- Do we know what's going on with them?
- Should we do anything differently?

What I'd like to do this morning is answer some of these questions by exploring what the Bible says about the role, responsibilities, and requirements for elders. Then we'll come back to 1 Peter and consider why it matters today. Let's now begin with the role of an elder.

ROLE OF ELDERS

Elders are shepherds

What is an elder? Elders are shepherds and shepherds are elders.

Notice in 1 Peter 5:1-2, Peter exhorts the elders to shepherd (or pastor) the flock of God, exercising oversight. Also in Acts 20:28 when Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders (20:17), he calls them to care for and oversee the flock (20:28). Who oversees flocks? Shepherds oversee flocks. Elders are shepherds (or pastors) and shepherds (or pastors) are elders. There is no distinction between the two in the New Testament.

A Biblical Theology of shepherd

The New Testament calls elders shepherds because their main responsibility is to shepherd. But what does it mean to shepherd? In order to answer that question, I'd like to briefly explore the biblical metaphor and trace the theme of shepherd through the Bible. This will help us understand the role and responsibility of elders.

The metaphor comes from the ancient Near Eastern world. And there are two foundational facts about ancient Near Eastern shepherds you need to know. First, most of the shepherds in the ancient Near East were hired hands, or under-shepherds. They cared for someone else's sheep, not their own.¹ Therefore, their role was a stewardship role. Second, shepherds in the ancient Near East had three main responsibilities. They were called to feed the sheep, lead the sheep, and protect the sheep. Think about their two main tools. They had a staff, which was mainly for leading the sheep out of trouble to good pastures to feed them. And they had a rod which was mainly for protecting the sheep.²

We see something very similar in the biblical use of the metaphor.

A divine preference for human agency

God is the shepherd of his people. The sheep belong to God (Ps. 23:1; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1). God feeds, leads, and protects his sheep.

But while it is clear that the LORD is the shepherd of his people, it is also clear, as Timothy Laniak has said, there is a divine preference for human agency. God delights to use human under-shepherds to feed, lead, and protect his people. For God knows his sheep need human shepherds on the front lines. Think about literal sheep. You rarely see sheep in the wild. Sheep

¹ Timothy Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*.

² "Sheep, Shepherd" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*.

were made to have shepherds. And they must follow their shepherds or they will become lost, hungry, exposed, wounded, they may even die.

While God is the shepherd of his people, he delights to use under-shepherds. There is a divine preference for human agency. The sheep need under-shepherds, for their good.

The chief examples of under-shepherds in the Old Testament are Moses and David. It is interesting that both Moses and David had literal experience shepherding someone else's flock before they became shepherds of God's flock – Moses shepherded Jethro's flock; David shepherded Jesse's flock. They needed to learn the lesson of stewardship before they were called to be stewards over God's flock.

But while Moses and David were great examples of biblical under-shepherds, they were also examples of how human under-shepherds can easily fail. David's failure with Bathsheba and Uriah is a sad example. As someone has said, David was fleecing the flock and roasting the mutton instead of feeding, leading, and protecting the flock. How often do human under-shepherds today care for and "feed" themselves, instead of caring for the flock?

David's failure was just the beginning of the failures of the shepherd-kings of Israel. Eventually their failure is so bad that God sent the Jews into exile and promises through Ezekiel that he will send away these so called shepherds and he himself will shepherd his people.

Ezekiel 34:15-16, 23-24 (ESV)

¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

²³And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

God promised to be the shepherd of his people *and* he promised to set up over them another Davidic shepherd, a future Messiah.

The Good Shepherd

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of this prophecy. He is the good shepherd who is both God himself and a human Davidic under-shepherd. But unlike the Davidic shepherds who came before him, he doesn't fail the sheep.

- He is the shepherd who protects the flock by laying down his life for the sheep – he protects them from the wrath of God (Jn. 10:11). He is the shepherd who became the sacrificial lamb (cf. Rev. 7:17)!
- He is the good shepherd who calls his sheep by name (Jn. 10:3) and leads his flock out of sin to the pasture of abundant-eternal life (Jn. 10:9-10).
- And when his sinful sheep believe in his death and resurrection they feed on the bread of eternal life (Jn. 6).

None of us will ever be perfectly fed, led, or protected by any human shepherds. Our only hope is to fall on the mercy of God in Christ. We must remember this, as we continue to look at the role of shepherds. Christ is our Good Shepherd.

Elders as under-shepherds

But until the chief Shepherd returns, God still delights to use under-shepherds to keep watch over the church – the church that Christ has purchased with his own blood.

He commissions Peter to feed his flock at the end of John (21:15ff). Peter and the apostles then do this. And then as they planted churches all over the ancient world, they appoint elders (or shepherds) in every city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). This continues today.

This big picture of what a shepherd is and what a shepherd does impacts the way we view the role, responsibilities, and requirements of New Testament elders.

The role of an elder is primarily to be a shepherd! We are not primarily a board of directors making decisions for the flock. We are shepherds and overseers of the flock. While a not-for-profit organization needs a board of directors – and it makes sense that the elders sit on that board – what the church really needs is shepherds. First and foremost we need the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. But we also need under-shepherds who will keep watch over our souls until he returns.

I'd like to now look at the responsibilities of elders and how the elders at First Free are trying to be faithful to what we've been called to do.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ELDERS

You won't be surprised to hear that shepherds of Christ's church are called to feed, lead, and protect the flock.

The elders at First Free have been influenced by Timothy Witmer's book *The Shepherd Leader*. In that book he makes a distinction between macro shepherding and micro shepherding which has been helpful as we think about shepherding in a large church. I will use these categories of macro and micro shepherding to explain the responsibilities of elders.

Know the flock

Before the elders can shepherd the flock, we have to know the flock. At the macro level we need to know who's actually in the flock. The elders in the local church are not called to shepherd every Christian everywhere. We're called to shepherd "*the flock of God that is among you*" as 1 Peter 5:2 says. Who is the flock that is among us? Is it everybody that walks in the door, regular attenders, or the membership?

Surely we're not called to provide pastoral oversight to anyone who ever walks in the door. But at a minimum, we are called to shepherd those who have joined the church and said they want to be shepherded. That's one of the benefits of joining a church. If you are a member of this church, there is no question that we are called to care for your soul.

So at a macro level the elders have the responsibility to oversee the membership process. And we are seeking to be more faithful to this process.

But not only are the elders called to know who the members *are* we are also called to actually *get to know* the members – we need to know the flock at a micro level as well. This involves relationships.

The elders have taken a more active role in membership interviews at First Free in recent months because we want to get know those of you who are joining the church. Another way we are trying to get to know the flock is through our small group ministry. We are connecting elders with small group leaders in the church. Through connecting with small group leaders, we hope to have a better finger on the pulse what's going on with the flock. If you'd like to know more about our small group ministry, please talk with Pastor Matt.

We're called to know the flock. That doesn't mean that every one of us needs to know every one of you. But we do want every one of you to be known by at least one elder either directly or indirectly through your small group leader. For unless we know you, how will we be able to feed, lead, and protect you?

One way you can follow your shepherds is to let them get to know you. If you don't know who your elders are, their names are listed in the bulletin and as of today, they should have on name tags (like this) along with our staff.

Let's look now at the elders' responsibility to feed the flock.

Feed the flock

The church grows as the Word of God does the work in the lives of God's people.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 says that as God's people receive the word of God through their teachers that the Word is at work in the flock. Therefore, the shepherd-elders in the church must feed the flock with the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is no surprise then that the elders in the early church devoted themselves to the Word and prayer (Acts 6). It is also no surprise, then, that elders are required to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). But we'll return to that later.

The way the elders feed the flock at the macro level is by overseeing the ministry of the Word. We are involved in determining what is preached on Sunday morning. And we are involved in overseeing what is taught in our classes as well. Historically this has been done through our staff and other lay leaders, but the elders desire to be more intimately involved in overseeing all that is taught at First Free going forward.

At a micro level the elders at First Free are involved in feeding the flock as they interact with the flock casually in conversations, in small groups, and in teaching in the church. Our job is to speak the Word of God into your lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is God's way of building up the body. And because this church belongs to God, not to us, we want to follow God's ways of shepherding this church.

Lead the flock

The Word and prayer are also the primary ways we lead the flock. We are called to lead the flock in faithfulness to the Great Commission and to lead the flock by pointing the flock to Jesus Christ.

This is God's church. Therefore, we need to lead it in God's ways. We do this at a macro level by articulating the mission and vision of the church and making sure all major decisions are in line with Christ's Great Commission. We are called to make sure that First Free makes disciples of Jesus Christ who glorify God as the grace of the gospel grows deep in God's people and goes wide to all peoples.

At a micro level we are to do this through modeling. As 1 Peter 5:3 says, we are to exercise oversight in the church, *"not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."* At the end of the day, we are shepherds of God's church, but we are also sheep. We are called to follow the Good Shepherd, first and foremost. As we follow Christ, we desire for the flock to follow our example (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1).

I don't know if you've noticed, but what elders are called to do at the micro level is not any different than what all Christians are called to do. Aren't we all called to get to know other believers, to speak the Word of God into the lives of other people, and to be faithful to the Great Commission of making disciples? Because elders are leaders, they must be an example in all of these areas.

Protect the flock

The final thing we are called to do as shepherds is to protect the flock. And we are called to protect the flock from two things. First, we are to protect them from false doctrine. That is why shepherds must be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and to rebuke those who contradict it (Titus 1:9). Secondly, we are called to protect the flock from sin. Galatians 6:1 says, *"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness."*

Protecting the flock at a macro level involves addressing false teaching in the church and overseeing any need for church discipline.

Protecting the flock at a micro level involves simply knowing what's going on with people and responding appropriately. In our everyday discipleship, when we see people whose lives are veering from God's Word, we're called to exhort one another so that no one will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12-14).

We confess that our failure to know the church as we ought has sometimes prevented us from protecting the flock as we ought, in the past. For example in recent years the elders began to see a troubling trend. We started hearing of people who were in significant crisis. But in many cases, the elders weren't aware of the crises until it was too late. This indicated that we weren't giving careful oversight to the flock.

We ask that you forgive us. And know that we have a renewed resolve to know you better and be more committed to protecting you from the evil one, who like a lion is roaming around seeking to devour sheep (1 Pt. 5:8).

I hope this small sketch of biblical eldership has helped you to see what we're committed to as elders. We believe the elders in the past have been faithful. We aren't ridiculing the past. We simply hope to build on past faithfulness and continue to grow in our faithfulness to biblical eldership. Please pray for us.

REQUIREMENTS OF ELDERS

Let's turn now to the requirements of elders. This applies to you as well; as you ultimately call new elders, you need to know what's required of them. There are three things required of elders: they must be called, have godly character, and be competent to shepherd.

Calling

An elder's calling involves three parts.

First, God calls elders. In Acts 20:28 we're told that the Holy Spirit makes elders overseers of God's flock. But we're also told that an elder himself must aspire to the office (1 Tim. 3:1) and that they must not serve under compulsion, but willingly (1 Pt. 5:2). But God's call and man's aspiration to shepherd must be complemented thirdly with the congregation's recognition of them as shepherds.

A man may fit all the external qualifications for an elder, but if he doesn't aspire to fill the office or the congregation doesn't recognize him as an elder, he is not an elder.

1 Timothy 5:22 warns the congregation to not be hasty in laying on hands. Before the congregation "calls" elders, they need to be recognized as men of godly character and have competence to shepherd.

Character

1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 give detailed lists of what is required of an elder. It is interesting that most of the space is devoted to the man's character and spiritual maturity.

An overseer must be above reproach, a one-woman kind of man, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. And he must not be a recent convert – that is, he must be spiritually mature (1 Tim. 3:1-7). Don Carson has said that the remarkable thing about the requirement for elders is they are not that remarkable. These are things that all Christians are called to be. But because elders are to lead by example, they must exemplify these qualities.

I confess, I have often times been discouraged by this list, for who measures up? In those moments, I look to Christ, the Good Shepherd who lived the perfect life and laid down his life for me. Then I pray, "God, enable what you require!"

The church must not be hasty in the laying on of hands. Before the church recognizes and calls an elder, they must look to their character. They must also evaluate their competence.

Competence

Shepherds are to be competent in two areas. First they must be able to teach. Second, they must be able to lead (“*rule well*,” as 1 Timothy 5:17 says).

I have already said why elders must be able to teach: the Word does the work. But let me say a little more about what this means in real life.

While all elders must be able to teach, not all who are able to teach are shepherds – there is more to being a shepherd than teaching. Also, not every shepherd will be a great public teacher. Some of them will teach more informally and interpersonally. Nevertheless, all shepherds must be able to teach.

Our authority as elders is a derived authority. Christ is the head of his church. And as some have said, he rules the church by the scepter of his Word. Therefore, those who have charge over the flock exercise their oversight by the Word of God.

Having great leadership skills in the business world is good and can translate to the church, but it is not enough. Our authority and effectiveness in shepherding is derived from the Word of God. That’s why all shepherds must be able to teach the Word and be able to instruct in sound doctrine.

As shepherds, elders must also be able to lead the church. Therefore, they should be able to manage their own homes as well. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul says, “[*An overseer*] must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?”

I tremble at these words because I know how often I fail! I know my fellow elders feel the same. But while we are not perfect, hopefully we want to do manage our own homes well, for our first flock is surely in our homes.

As I plan my week I think in terms of three prioritized roles.

- First, I am a sheep. I must follow my chief Shepherd.
- Second, I am a shepherd of my family. I must pay careful attention to them.
- And only third am I a shepherd in this church.

Now, this is not to say that an elder must be married with children to be a shepherd. If that were the case, Paul and Jesus would have been disqualified. But the principle still applies. One must be found faithful in the small things in order to be entrusted with more.

Do not be hasty in calling elders. Make sure the elders are competent to teach and lead.

SO WHAT?

So we have seen what the Bible says about the role, responsibility, and requirements of elders. But how does this apply to you? Let’s look again at 1 Peter 5.

1 Peter 5:5 calls you who are younger to be subject to the elders. “*You who are younger*” is simply a play on words, contrasting the word elders. It means, in this context, those in the church who are not elders are to be subject to the elders.³

This is counter-cultural! Who wants to submit to authority? But being counter-cultural was exactly what Peter was after in his letter.

Throughout his letter he is reminding the churches that they are a set-apart people, exiles in a foreign land, awaiting their heavenly home. He knows they are suffering and therefore tempted to give up and live just like the world that is opposing them.

The main way he motivates them to be faithful is by reminding them that they will one day enter into their glory. He wants that long term perspective to impact the way they live now. He wants their conduct to be honorable among the Gentiles, because God’s reputation is on the line. They need to live their lives for the glory of God now, as they await their glory then.

The elders play a role in the church’s godly living. So he urges the elders to keep watch over the flock: to feed them with the Word of God, to lead them in faithfulness to the Word of God, and to protect them from sin – which is contrary to the Word of God.

He knows for the elders this will put them at a greater risk of suffering – for leaders always take the heat first. But he wants them to put their neck out there for the church – like the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

And he also wants the church to be subject to the elders for their *own* good. While submission was counter-cultural, they needed to be subject to the elders, because it was God’s way of preserving his church as a holy nation, which would declare the excellencies of the one who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pt. 2:9).

In the same way that literal sheep won’t survive without a shepherd, God’s sheep also need shepherds. They can’t do it alone. There is a lion on the loose, seeking to devour the sheep. Shepherds are there to protect the flock. Submitting to elders is for God’s glory and for their good!

But in the same breath of calling the shepherds to shepherd and the sheep to submit, he reminds both groups to be humble in verse 5. Then in verse 6 he reiterates this call saying “*humble yourselves...under the mighty hand of God.*”

Any time there is an authoritative relationship, humility is critical, or everything will go wrong. And the way Peter motivates their humility is by reminding them that they are all under the mighty hand of God. God is the true shepherd over us. And we are all sheep under God our shepherd. But in the meantime God delights to use under-shepherds to feed, lead, and protect his church, for the good of his sheep and the glory of his name.

There is so much on the line. And as one of your shepherds, I tremble humbly at this reality, knowing that one day I will have to give an account. I know my fellow elders do the same. But we are committed to shepherding you.

³ Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*.

There is so much on the line. Therefore, I ask you to pray for your elders and to humbly obey them and submit to them. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb. 13:17).

Benediction

Hebrews 13:20-21 (ESV)

²⁰Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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