

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 9, 2011**

TO THE ELDERS AMONG YOU

1 Peter 5:1-5

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

It may seem like ancient history now that it is 2011, but you may recall that we spent more than half of last year chronicling the life and times of Simon Peter on Sunday mornings. Today we turn in God's Word to a portion of a letter written by Peter to the followers of Christ in several churches scattered throughout the regions of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1), areas which today are part of the nation of Turkey.

I originally planned to give a single message on the ministry roles of both elders and deacons, but it didn't work out that way. There is no way I can do justice to both today. I probably should have realized that from the get-go. So today's message will focus on elders, and I will follow up next Sunday with a message on the ministry office of deacon.

In your Bible or one of the pew Bibles, please turn to 1 Peter 5:1-5. In these verses you will see that Peter has a message for the elders who have been called to serve as leaders in the church. On a day in which we ordain and install both elders and deacons for servant leadership in the life of our church here at Faith, it seems appropriate to consider what Peter, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has to say to and about the elders among us. So, let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

THE MINISTRY OF THE ELDERS

Some of you know our dog Bailey. Bailey is a Sheltie, a Shetland Sheepdog. Not everyone believes that, because of his size. Bailey was less than three months old when we brought him home about a week before September 11, 2001. We didn't know he would grow into the biggest Sheltie we've ever seen. But he is a Sheltie through and through, and he does what Shelties were born to do. He herds. We don't have any sheep for him to herd, so do you know what he herds? He herds *people*. He herds *us*. He herds *our family*. He tries to herd *anyone and everyone* who comes into our home. Sometimes it takes Bailey a little time to warm up to someone he doesn't know, but his herding instincts come out whenever someone – family member, friend, neighbor, or stranger – tries to leave. You see, Bailey never wants us to leave. He is happiest when all of his "sheep" are at home. He loves to have his whole "flock" where he can keep an eye on us. I'm sure Bailey believes his job is to shepherd the flock that is under his care. And you know what? He is passionate about it. He is neurotic, too. But that is another story.

Peter, of course, does not have Shelties in mind. He is talking to and about the elders of the church when he says in verse 2 that they are to "be shepherds of God's flock that is under (their) care." This may not be anything new to you, but there are several things I want you to notice in this passage.

Notice first that Peter addresses this message “to the elders among you” (5:1). The New Testament word for “elder” – the word Peter uses here – is the Greek word *presbuteros*, from which, of course, we get the word *presbyterian*. The word *presbyterian* describes our form of church government. In the EPC we are governed in our church life by servant-leaders who have been called to the office of elder. As you can see, it is a ministry office that goes all the way back to the New Testament church.

Notice also that Peter identifies himself with the elders of the churches to whom he is writing. He refers to himself as “a fellow elder” (a *sumpresbuteros*), as well as a witness (Greek *martus*) of the sufferings of Christ, and one who will get to share in the glory of Christ to be revealed when He returns (5:1). I think it is interesting that Peter doesn’t take advantage of the opportunity to tout his apostolic credentials here. He doesn’t boast of his position as one of the pillars of the New Testament church. He doesn’t put himself on a pedestal and claim to be spiritually superior to all these elders. He is just “a fellow elder” to whom God has given a message for the elders called to lead their congregations.

There is nothing confusing about the charge Peter gives the elders in verse 2. He says: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers” (or, “exercising oversight,” as it says in the ESV). The word “overseer” comes from the Greek word *episkopos*, from which we get the word *episcopal*. Even though their meanings differ from one another today, in the New Testament, the words *presbuteros* (elder) and *episkopos* (overseer or bishop) were interchangeable. They meant the same thing. To be an elder was to be an overseer, and vice versa. If there were any distinction between them, it would be that *presbuteros* (elder) refers to the office, while *episkopos* (overseer) refers to function.

The elders are called to shepherd the flock. Question: Whose flock is it? It is *God’s* flock (5:2). It is not *my* flock. This is not *my* church. It is not *our* church. I hope you can say without hesitation that this *is* your church in that you have found a place of belonging here at Faith, a sense of connectedness with other believers here, a sense of being a part of what God wants to do through us together in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to bring glory to His name. But it is not *our* church. It doesn’t belong to any of us, regardless of how long you’ve been here, or how much money you’ve given, or what title(s) you hold. It belongs to God. The elders (and pastors, who are also known as *teaching elders* in the Presbyterian tradition) are called to be shepherds, yes. But we are “undershepherds.” We are under the authority of the Chief Shepherd (5:4), the Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep (Hebrews 13:20). The flock belongs to Him, not to us.

In Acts 20, in his farewell message to the elders from the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul says essentially the same thing as Peter. This is the charge Paul gives to the elders: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopoi*). Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The flock and the church are one and the same. Whether it is called the church or the flock (or the body), it is God’s. He bought and paid for it – *for us* – with His own blood.

So, the job – the mission – of the elders is to shepherd the flock or people of God under their care. What does that mean? What does it mean for elders to shepherd the people of God?

There is more to being a shepherd than just making sure the sheep get fed, though providing spiritual food for the flock in the form of sound, faithful, biblical teaching applied to life in the world is an essential aspect of the elders' role. The task of the shepherd is to care for every aspect of the spiritual health and well being of every member of the flock. To shepherd the flock of God's people includes giving spiritual oversight (acting as overseers), protecting members of the flock from spiritual danger, or moral or doctrinal error. It includes seeking to rescue sheep who have gone astray in some way. It includes providing spiritual and organizational leadership and direction for the whole church, as we deal with the challenges of life and ministry in our community and culture, and discern the opportunities to serve the purposes of God in this place and time. As one Bible expositor (Robert Mounce) said, "to shepherd" encompasses everything required for the safety and well being of the sheep. This is true whether you're talking about a flock of sheep (literally) or the flock of God in the church.

It is a big job. A huge job. And a high calling. Before we move on, take a moment to consider this side thought. The late Dr. Robert Mounce, a Presbyterian himself, made the point, with respect to the church, that "enlarging the flock is the concern of every member. We are all witnesses. But caring for the flock (i.e., caring for the spiritual well being of the flock as a whole and of each member of the flock) is the special ministry of the elders."

Please don't miss this point, because it is an important one. I want the flock of God's people here at Faith to grow in love for God and one another, to grow in biblical knowledge and spiritual understanding, to grow in service and generosity in giving. I want this flock to grow in all these ways, because I believe God wants us to continue to grow in these ways. But that is not all. I also want the flock of Faith to grow larger in number. I hope you do, too. I believe with all my heart that God wants this flock to grow in number. It was God who sovereignly, graciously, some might even say miraculously placed this flock of His people here in Kingstowne. He did it for a purpose. He did it for a purpose that includes each and every one of us and our families. But He did it for a purpose that reaches way beyond us. He placed us here, at least in part, because of all the lost sheep, the hurting sheep, and the sheep who have gotten discouraged or disillusioned and left the sheepfold. He placed us here because of the sheep who feel unloved, and need to know and experience the unchanging, grace-filled, saving love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. He has placed us here to love our neighbors and friends and unbelieving family members into the kingdom of God. Enlarging the flock is a mission that belongs to all of us. We are all witnesses and servants and representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is our job. All of us. And you know what? As a church, we haven't done a very good job of it. We're not doing a good job of it. I don't like admitting that, but it's true. We need to repent – all of us – and dedicate or rededicate ourselves to this mission from God, to find ways to build bridges and make connections with our neighbors right here in Kingstowne (and wherever you may live or work), in order to bring these lost and hurting sheep to the Lord Jesus and the flock of His people.

I know all of that is not in today's text in 1 Peter 5, but I believe it is a message from God that we need to hear and do something about. Amen?

NOT LIKE THAT, LIKE THIS

Now, back to Peter's message to the elders: After giving them the charge to shepherd the flock of God, Peter then tells them how to do it. Actually, he gives them three specific ways how not to do it, followed each time by how to do it. Three times he gives them a negative followed by a positive. He says: "Not that but this. Not like that, like this."

First, in verse 2 he tells the elders to carry out their ministry as spiritual overseers "not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be." God does not want elders who serve against their will, or out of a sense of guilt, or because they feel some kind of religious obligation. God does not want elders who agree to serve because other people expect them to, or because they feel pressured to serve, even though their heart is not in it. God wants elders to serve with willing hearts, voluntarily, because they want to, because they believe it is what God wants them to do.

The ministry of the elders to shepherd the flock of God, and give wise and loving spiritual oversight to God's people, is way too important to be placed in the hands of leaders who don't want to do it and see it as a burden instead of a blessing. That is the first thing.

Second, Peter goes to the motive of the elder's heart at the end of verse 2 where he says: "... not greedy for money, but eager to serve." The Bible is unequivocal in declaring that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10; cf. Hebrews 13:5). In 1 Timothy 3, Paul says that being money hungry (*The Message*) disqualifies a person from serving as an elder or deacon in the church (3:3, 8).

I can tell you this: Anyone who seeks the office of elder or deacon out of a desire for financial gain is crazy. Or not to be trusted. Or both. Trust me when I say it is *not* the way to financial independence!

The proper heart motive for serving as an elder is not a selfish desire for personal gain, whether it is monetary gain or some other kind of benefit, like recognition or status or praise or power. That is not what it is about. What pleases God is when elders shepherd His flock not for what they can get out of it personally, but because they want to do good, because they want to serve God, because they want to be a blessing to others. God wants elders and deacons alike to be leaders who serve and servants who lead, for the glory of God and the blessing of His people. Elders and deacons who eagerly and faithfully carry out their ministries with this heart-attitude bring joy to the Lord.

Third, says Peter, elders are to lead and serve the church "not [by] lording it over those entrusted to (them), but [by] being examples to the flock" (5:3). Ordination to any ministry office in the church – deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder – does not confer the right to be bossy. It does not give one the right to treat others with disrespect. It does not confer the right to throw your ecclesiastical weight around in order to get your own way. It does not give anyone the right to be a dictator, even a benevolent one. Ordination is not a license to be manipulative or domineering or controlling. All these things come naturally to us in our fallenness, apart from Christ and His transforming grace. But they do not reflect the character

of Christ, who has made us new creatures in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17). Nor do they reflect the will of Christ for us. Whether you are an elder or deacon or pastor or ministry director or none of the above, God's will for you is to imitate Christ in the way you think and speak and live. It is especially true that leaders are to imitate Christ, since we are called to be examples to the flock of the kind of life that pleases God.

More times than you can remember, you've no doubt heard that a picture is worth a thousand words. In a slight twist on this, Thomas Carlyle suggested that one example is worth a thousand arguments. If that is true, if Carlyle is right, think how important it is for those in leadership in the church – really, for all of us who profess to be followers of Christ – to be godly examples for one another, and for not-yet-found sheep who are watching our lives.

This is not to suggest that elders or deacons or pastors are holier than those who are not elders or deacons or pastors. Or that church members are morally or spiritually superior to people who don't attend church. Ain't so. And any of us who think we are holier than thou are skating on some awfully thin ice.

Notice what Peter says to the whole church in the second part of verse 5: "All of you," he says, "clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"

I'll say more about this next Sunday. For now, I will just say that humility is a conduit for the grace and power of God. Chuck Swindoll said something like that. It is true in the life of an elder. It is true in the life of any believer. Humility is a channel through which the grace and power of God flow.

And I will say this: The best servant-leaders in the church lead and serve out of their own brokenness. They have been spiritually broken and humbled by God, and they allow God to use them in their brokenness to bless others.

Thank God for the elders and deacons He has raised up to serve Him here at Faith. We are richly blessed. Ask God to protect them and their families, and to bless them to be a blessing to the church and the world.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory and honor of Your name. Amen.