Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Who here likes sheep? And I don’t mean lamb chops or a lamb roast, but actual, living sheep?

Well, the Bible describes Christians as sheep. And I have no wish to offend any sheep-admirer’s among us, but sheep are pretty dumb. In fact, I saw a video, recently, that someone posted online. In the video, a shepherd comes across a sheep that is cast; it is lying on its back, and it can’t get up. So, the shepherd explains why this happens and he helps the sheep up, but he doesn’t let the sheep go; he holds it upright for a bit. And this is because, while on its back, blood circulation has been affected so the sheep is dizzy and confused. And if he just let the sheep go, it would fall down again, straightaway. So, he holds it for a while and rubs it a bit. And you can see the gentleness and affection that the shepherd has for the sheep. And finally, the sheep starts moving and bleating, which means that it has recovered. So, he let’s the sheep go. And you know what happens? The sheep takes about 5 happy steps and then falls and is once, again, cast.

And that really is the perfect picture of the Christian life, isn’t it. As one commentator says, “Christians are messy people. Our lives are filled with brokenness, waste, trouble, and sticky situations. We are timid, and we sometimes wander.” **Isaiah 53:6** describes our spiritual condition like this: “*We all like sheep have gone astray; each one of us has turned to his own way*.”

So, we *really* need a shepherd. We need someone who knows what to do with sheep; how to care for us and protect us.

Boys and girls, can one of you tell us how **Psalm 23** begins? “*The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want … He leads me … [His rod] and [staff], they comfort me*.” And when Jesus was on earth, He said, “*I am the good shepherd … and I lay down my life for the sheep*.” So, Jesus is our ultimate shepherd. It is from Him that we receive the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life.

But Christ has also provided the church with **elders**. And if you look at the beginning of verse 2, elders are told to “*shepherd the flock* …” So, one of the ways that the Lord Jesus shepherds His people is by elders. And in this passage, **Elders and church members are Told what Godly Shepherding looks like**.

Now, even before we get into the details of our text, the fact that Peter addresses elders at this point in his letter is noteworthy. A major theme of Peter’s letter is **suffering**, and especially suffering because of persecution. And it is in this context that Peter speaks to elders about their duties toward members of the congregation. And in verse 5, which we shall look at next time, Peter speaks to members of the congregation about their duties toward the elders. So, this relationship between elders and members is *really* important. Elders who shepherd well and sheep who humble themselves are how the church will survive persecution and even flourish. So, may the Lord bless His word to Shepherds and to sheep.

Well, there are three parts to this passage: First, the **command given** to elders, second, the **core actions** of elders, and third, the **crown promised** to the elders.

1. So first of all, the **command given** to elders. And we read it in v2a, “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you*.”
   1. Now, Peter describes himself in verse 1 as a “*fellow elder*” and he addresses this command to **elders**. And I am sure you have noticed that in other churches there are apostles and bishops and archdeacons and cardinals and popes. So, are we missing out on some extra offices, perhaps? No, we are not. Peter was an apostle, which means an eye-witness of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But that was a one-off, limited time office. Once those apostles died, that office died with them. The ongoing offices that the Lord Jesus uses to build up His church are the offices of elder (and deacon.)
      1. We see this in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 where we see the qualifications for elder and deacon. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is addressed to the saints at Philippi, “*with the overseers and deacons*.” And an overseer is an elder. If you look at verse 2, you will see that elders are to “*shepherd the flock … exercising oversight*.” So, elders oversee, which is why they are sometimes called overseers in the New Testament.
      2. Now, the King James Bible uses the word **bishop** instead of the word overseer. But in our passage and in Acts 20, elder, overseer, and shepherd are terms used to describe one office; one group of men; the elders of the church.
      3. And so, there ought not to be apostles or bishops or cardinals, etc. The church of Christ is to be led just by elders and deacons.
   2. But notice also that Peter described himself as “***a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed***.” Peter had seen the sufferings of Jesus. And he had seen many Christians suffer and die for being a follower of Jesus. But after Jesus suffered, He was glorified! And He now lives and reigns in heaven! And every believer, though they suffer, will be glorified when Jesus returns. So, suffering and glory were Peter’s personal motivations and the motivations that he wanted to hold before his readers – though you suffer, you will be glorified!
   3. And so, with that in view, Peter says to elders, “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you*.” And let’s unpack this, together.
      1. **Why *this* term – why *shepherd***?
         1. Well, let’s start with sheep as a picture of the Christian:
            1. I am sure you have seen sheep. What do they do pretty much all the time? They eat. And they will eat good grass or poisonous weeds if that is what is there. They find it difficult to distinguish between the two.
            2. They will also drink water that is dirty, too hot, or too cold, if that is what is there.
            3. And who remember Shrek the sheep? His wool grew so heavy that he could hardly walk. And he couldn’t sheer himself! And sheep also need their backsides kept clean or they can get very sick.
            4. And sheep can easily get lost. Jesus spoke about this in the parable of the lost sheep.
            5. And lastly, because of their largely passive nature, sheep are easy pickings for any predator. They are virtually defenceless against wolves or dogs.
            6. So, sheep need shepherds to make sure that they have good food and water, to keep them clean and shorn, to keep them from getting lost, and to protect them from predators.
         2. And I hope you can make the spiritual link to us as believers:
            1. There are so many good books and podcasts and articles out there that will edify us. But there are also lots of books and podcasts and articles that can be very bad for us. And we will not always be able to recognize the difference ourselves.
            2. And things like relationship struggles, financial hardships, addictions, or emotional burdens can build up and bring us down, and we need help to recognize these things and deal with them.
            3. And for a whole variety of reasons, we can stop attending church or Bible study, and stop fellowshipping with church members. And the world is always holding its glittering temptations and false philosophies before us. And so, we are in danger of becoming spiritually lost.
            4. It can also be that we hear a new and popular minister, who is charismatic and has new ideas and his church is growing, but his theology is wrong and we cannot see it, ourselves.
            5. And congregations, all these things are **common to all Christians**, to one degree or another. We will encounter all or most of them, at one time or another.
         3. And so, we need **shepherds**.
            1. And as I said at the beginning of the sermon, our good and great shepherd is the Lord Jesus. But He has given us Elders to be under-shepherds – shepherds who represent Him to His people.
      2. Something that Peter is infamous for is that he denied Jesus three times on the night of His arrest. And so, after Jesus rose, this situation needed to be remedied. And in **John 21**, Jesus talked to Peter. And you can be sure that that conversation was very prominent in Peter’s mind as he wrote these words here in 1 Peter. In that conversation, Jesus said, three times, “*Peter, do you love me?*” And three times, Peter responded with a “*Yes*.” And do you remember what Jesus said after each of Peter’s responses? He said, then “*feed my lambs … tend my lambs … feed my sheep*.” As an elder, Peter’s love for Christ would be revealed as he fed Jesus’ sheep.
      3. And how does an elder feed and care for the sheep? Well, in **Acts 20**, the Apostle Paul was speaking as one elder to the elders of the church in Ephesus. And he spoke of his shepherding. And he said to those elders, You know “*how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house … I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God … for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears*.”
      4. So, to shepherd the sheep is to teach them the full counsel of God’s Word. Whether that be from the pulpit, as I am doing now, or when your elders visit you at your home, when your elders open the Bible and teach and counsel and admonish and encourage, they are feeding you and caring for you and guiding you on the straight path.
      5. And ultimately, through them, it is the Good Shepherd Himself who speaks to you.
2. But let’s press on to our next point, which is the **core actions** of the elders. And we see this in **verses 2-3**: “*exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock*.”
   1. And the very fact that Peter instructs elders about the right way to shepherd alerts us to the reality that **not all shepherds are good shepherds**. Earlier we read from **Jeremiah 23**. We could also have read Ezekiel 34 and other Old Testament prophecies about bad shepherds. For back then, the priests and kings and prophets were greedy and corrupt, and they did not teach the Law of God to the people. So, we want elders who are good shepherds. What does that look like? Well, the first thing we see is that a good shepherd **exercises oversight**.”
      1. And literally, the Greek word used here means to ‘have scope over.’ If you were to try and draw a picture of the elder/shepherd, it should be of a man with spiritual binoculars who constantly sweeps his gaze over the flock, always on the lookout for trouble. And if you think that sounds a little negative, that is a repeated emphasis of scripture.
      2. A moment ago I mentioned **Acts 20**, which is where the Apostle Paul spoke to the elders of the Ephesian congregation. And what you don’t read there is some poetic description of cuddly and fluffy, care-free sheep casually strolling about in the safety of a sun-drenched paddock while the shepherd lies in the sun chewing on a stalk of grass. There is an intensity to Paul’s words to these elders that you cannot miss:
         1. He urges them to “*pay careful attention*” to the flock, or to be watchful.
         2. He warns them that savage wolves will come in to trouble the flock, and that trouble-makers will also arise from within the congregation.
         3. He says, “*Be alert*.”
      3. And later in **Ephesians 4**, we read that the Lord Jesus has given elders to the church “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*,” that we might become mature believers. And listen to the reason why we need elders: “*So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes*.” You see, left to ourselves, we will be carried about by every wind of doctrine.
      4. Proverbs 3:5 says, “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding*.” But elders often hear members explain their decisions by saying, I have prayed about it, and I feel at peace about this decision. But the Scripture is clear that our own understanding and our feelings can very easily get us into deep trouble. And the Lord knows this, so He has given us elders.
         1. And this is why we have district groups with an assigned elder or two.
         2. That is why we believe in the importance of elders visiting people in their homes.
         3. This is why if you are not at Lord’s Supper or at church for a couple of Sundays, your elder will call you to see if all is well.
         4. This is why your elders are on your case about not attending Bible study or the second service.
         5. This is why your elder might question you about something you liked on Facebook or an article you posted online.
         6. This is why your elder will come and confront you about sinful behaviour, or give counsel about relationship or career or education or church choices, etc.
         7. And this is also why we have elders that liaise with all the groups of the church, and provide input on discussions about study material or new committee members or other major decisions, for example.
         8. These are some of the ways that elders exercise oversight.
   2. But this can all be done in a wrong and unhelpful way. And so, we have this series of ‘not like this but like this’ statements in vv2b-3. The wrong way is by compulsion, for shameful gain, and/or by domineering over those in your charge. The right way is willingly, eagerly, and by being an example to the flock. So, let’s consider each of these:
      1. By **compulsion** means being forced to do it. And remember that the context of Peter’s letter was a time of government persecution. So, if you served as an elder, you had a very large target on your back. So, elders who were forced into the office were no help to the church. In **2 Corinthians 5**, Paul explained the motivation to serve for him and his fellow elders in this way; he said, “*For the love of Christ controls us*.” And that is what willing shepherding is about; it is men who love Christ and His people so much that they serve, willingly, despite the cost.
         1. Recently the Canadian government passed legislation that has effectively made the gospel illegal. You cannot call on homosexuals and lesbians to repent and offer them counsel and care. You cannot tell a ‘gender-confused child’ that God makes us male or female and offer them counsel and care. And so, last Sunday, churches all around Canada and the USA preached sermons proclaiming the biblical truth on these matters. And those sermons were illegal, which makes them liable to charges or arrest. Why did those ministers and elders do that? “*For the love of Christ controls us*,” and He has commanded them to feed His sheep. And it seems inevitable that we will face the same situation here in NZ very soon.
         2. But even now, it is only elders who are controlled by the love of Christ who will spend their evenings making home visits, some of which are not really wanted, when it would much easier to stay home and watch Netflix. And they will make time to prepare a Bible study or a reading service, or to read church committee minutes. And brothers and sisters, we are blessed with elders like this! But you must pray for them and that the Lord would raise up others who will exercise oversight, willingly.
   3. But secondly, elders must not shepherd “**for shameful gain**.” And this term describes the elder who uses office to make money.
      1. In **Isaiah 56**, the Lord rebukes the leaders of the Jews for getting rich at the expense of the poor. This is the language the Lord used, “*The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough.**But they are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all*.”
      2. And church history is full of men who sought office in the church to become rich. And we still see it today with TV preachers with mansions and supercars and corporate jets.
      3. And by contrast, even though he was entitled to be paid for his labours, according to the law of God, the Apostle Paul preferred to earn his own income, to eliminate even the possibility of being accused of getting rich from preaching the gospel.
      4. So, we don’t want elders who use their office to make money.
   4. And thirdly, elders must “**not [be] domineering over those in [their] charge**.”
      1. “***Those in your charge***” reveals that elders to have a position of authority in the congregation. But the must not be an autocratic, intimidating, oppressive, bully, which is what domineering means.
      2. So, hopefully, you have **an encouraging elder**. He chats with you after church and asks you about work and life and relationships and sermons, etc. And he texts you when you are not well and gives you helpful books, etc.
         1. And you know, you can invite that sort of interaction by seeking out your elder and telling him about what is going on in your life and asking his opinion about stuff.
      3. But there also comes a time when elders must **rebuke the sheep**. For their own good, as we have seen, they may need admonition, lest they wander off and get lost, or get tangled up in sin. And I can tell you that oftentimes sheep do not like to be told off. And almost inevitably, the accusation comes that the elder is being domineering. And this is especially so in our individualistic (which means it is all about me), egalitarian (which means everyone is equal; I don’t have to listen to you) age. But to lovingly rebuke someone is not domineering. And you should pray that should the time come when you need admonition that you have elders who are controlled by the love of Christ and His church and will admonish you.
      4. And ultimately, elders shepherd well by being “**examples to the flock**.”
         1. In the **Gospel of Mark**, we read of a time when James and John came to Jesus wanting to have the seats of honour in Jesus’ kingdom. And when the other disciples heard about this, they were upset because they wanted those honoured positions. But Jesus said to them, “*You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all*.” So, elders are to be the chief servants.
            1. I once had someone express surprise that I was doing the dishes in the hall after coffee after church. They said, You are the pastor. Why are you doing the dishes? And that is because in this person’s culture, the pastor never did the dishes. But elders should be on the babysit or dishes rosters, like everyone else. They should not be exempt from lowly service because of their office.
         2. I mentioned earlier that the Apostle Paul was also an elder. And he once said, “*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*.” So, despite their imperfections, elders should be able to say, imitate me as I imitate Christ. Here is how I do my personal devotions. Here is my pattern of attendance at church activities. Here is how I serve my wife, in practice. Here is how I raise my children. Here is how I tithe and spend the Lord’s Day. Here is how I pray. And all of this is not about them, but about Christ!
3. Brothers and sisters, can you see why you must pray for your elders? These are the core actionsof shepherding; they are to serve willingly, eagerly, and as examples to us. And that brings us, thirdly and lastly, to the **crown promised** to elders. Peter says, “*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory*.”
   1. To serve as an elder is challenging and difficult. And as we heard earlier, it can put men in the frontline in times of persecution. But the church needs elders. In Peter’s day, at the Olympics, the champion received a leafy crown. But those leaves soon faded and folded and fell apart. But the promise of Christ is that elders who serve well will receive a crown, from Christ Himself, that will never fade!
      1. In **1 Timothy 3:1**, it says, “*If anyone aspires to the office of [elder], he desires a noble task*.” So, brothers, please aspire or desire to serve as an elder. Pray about it. Serve in the church, wherever you can. Read theology. And answer the call to serve when it comes.
      2. In **Acts 6**, when deacons were needed, the Apostles said to the congregation, “*Pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty*.” And this is why, when we need elders, we ask you for nominations. Do you supply nominations? It is the privilege and responsibility of each one of us. So, prayerfully consider the things we have talked about today and give names to an elder.

* And eventually, we are given the names of men to vote for as a congregation. So, what guides your vote? As we have seen, we need men who will exercise oversight – wise men who know Scripture, who aren’t afraid to stand up for what is right when it is not popular, and who will ‘whack us’ with the shepherd’s crook when that is what we need. And this is especially true when the going gets tough; when persecution comes. So again, prayerfully ask the Lord to help you vote for men who demonstrate the characteristics of a good shepherd.

May the Good Shepherd provide us with men who will shepherd us well. To God be all the glory. Amen.