Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Last Sunday we noted how apt it is that Christians are described as sheep in the Bible. And so, just like actual sheep, we need good shepherds. And while our chief shepherd is the Lord Jesus, He has also given us elders. And we saw that they are to teach the Bible, from the pulpit and in our homes, and always be on the lookout for trouble, both from outside the congregation and from within, and they are to do their work willingly, eagerly, and as good examples for the flock. And we noted that these words to shepherds come in the larger context of a letter about how Christians should expect to be persecuted. So, clearly, the work of shepherds is *very* important.

But today we come to the other half of this important topic – Peter's words to the sheep. And so, having seen that the flock of Christ needs good shepherds to survive and flourish, today we see that **to survive and flourish as the flock of Christ, we must be good sheep**.

And there are really just three main parts to this brief command: First, who does Peter have in mind when he addresses this command to “*you who are younger*”? Second, what does to “*be subject to the elders*” look like? And third, why is this important? So, the who, the what, and the why of being good sheep.

Now, let me say here that we are in the ‘this is how Christians are to behave’ part of Peter’s letter. So, the sermons are ‘this is how Christians are to behave’ sermons. But we are to behave this way *because we are Christians*. We are forgiven sinners, in Christ. Our eternal life is secure, in Christ. So, none of this is about earning salvation. Nevertheless, as in Christ persons, we are under obligation to obey His commands; as He said, “*If you love me, you will obey my commandments*.”

1. So, with that in view, and first of all, **who does Peter have in mind when he addresses this command to “*you who are younger*”**?
   1. You see, there are other places in the New Testament where all members of the congregation are told to be subject to the elders: **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13**: “*Respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and … esteem them very highly in love because of their work*.” **Hebrews 13:17**: “*Obey your [elders] and submit to them*.” So, all of us, regardless of how old we are, are to be subject to the elders. So, again, why does Peter address this command to “*you who are younger*”? Well, one of the terms we hear a lot these days is “**teenage rebellion**.” Have you heard term that before? It’s nothing new, but because of hormones, a growing desire for independence, and the power of peer-pressure, it can be the case that young people ‘go off the rails’ a bit or a lot. And so, they will no longer just do as they are told; they want to be convinced to do whatever is being asked. And they don’t have whatever opinions mum or dad have; they begin to develop their own opinions. They begin to discover other ways of behaving and other philosophies and religions. They want change and new ideas; they don’t want to do the same old same old. And some of their peers might suggest trying this or that out, even thought it is illegal or forbidden by parents or frowned on by the church. So, it is not uncommon for those who are younger to struggle with submission.
   2. But think also of **the context of Peter’s letter**. We have heard that Christians thought that Christian prisoners should be helped to escape, that Christians were setting government property on fire, that soldiers and governing officials were being attacked and even assassinated by Christians, that Christian slaves thought they were free to run away from their masters and Christian wives thought they were free to leave their unbelieving husbands. And all this was going on because these Christians thought that they were fighting for righteousness and freedom. Well, what age group do you think would have been to the fore with this sort of behaviour? Yup. The youth or “*those who are younger*.” You can just imagine the actual elders and grey-haired or balding members of the congregation saying things like, “Calm the farm … don’t be too hasty … don’t poke the bear … let’s just be patient and live quiet lives … trust in the Lord …” while the younger ones wanted to overthrow the system and resist the tyranny and to fight for what is right, etc. And this is probably what ay behind Peter’s command
   3. And there is a general lesson here for “*you who are younger,*” which is that you need to understand the temptations particular to this stage of life.
      1. Earlier, we read from **Proverbs 2**. And those chapters are part of a series of instructions from a father to his son. And this is no 5 year old boy; this is a young man being warned about sexual immorality and drunkenness and bad-business practices and peer-pressure, and being exhorted to choose wisdom and purity and kindness and the company of godly friends.
      2. Or, think of **Ecclesiastes 12**: “*Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth … Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*”
      3. There is no doubt that us oldies can be wonderfully helped by the energy of the young. Experience and energy, harnessed together, can be a wonderful thing. But the young must not be eager to throw away all that is old and to rebel against the system and to question everything.
      4. Young people, you must work hard to recognize the follies that belong to youth and to resist them.
   4. And you have **the perfect example of this in the Lord Jesus**. You see, if any young person ever had the right to put Himself above his elders, it was Jesus. He was without sin. But He had sinful parents who made mistakes and got things wrong. He had schoolteachers and catechism teachers who knew less than He did and who made a hash of how they taught. He would have listened to rabbis preach sermons in the synagogue that would have horrified Him, with their wrong interpretations and poor applications and, at times, outright false theology. But how did He respond? Well, we know how He responded.
      1. I am sure you boys and girls remember **the time when Jesus was with His parents in Jerusalem**. And they left town to return to Nazareth, thinking that Jesus was somewhere in the group, only to find out, three days later, that He was not with them. So, they hurried back to Jerusalem and began to search for Him. And where did they find Him? In the temple. We read that He was “*sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. And when His parents saw Him, they were astonished. And His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress."*” Now, He could have said, Why were you so worried? I have done nothing wrong. I have every right to be here, teaching at the temple. You go back home. This is where I am meant to be. But instead, we read that, “*He went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them … And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man*.”
      2. So, Jesus’ twin priorities were submission to lawful authority and increasing in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man. What a great philosophy of life for “*you who are younger*” to pursue!
2. And this is the perfect lead in to our second point, which is that we are to “**be Subject to the elders**.” And here we are thinking about the **WHAT** of this command.
   1. Verse 5 begins with the word “***likewise***.” And we have seen that word already in chapter 3 verses 1 and 7. So, this command continues a prominent theme of Peter’s description of Christian living in this section, which is to “be subject” or to ‘be in submission’ to lawful authority. And we have spoken about this in connection with the sections addressed to Christian citizens, employees, and wives. We noted that the Greek word translated as “subject” is a word that comes from the military world. It literally means ‘to arrange in formation under the commander.’ In the military, it is the duty of each person is to submit to all those who are higher in rank, end of story. **And** **we** **must not soften or smooth out what is in view here**. Our modern world despises the idea of submission. It emphasizes equality. But the Holy Spirit led Peter and Paul to borrow this word from the military world so we would have no doubt about what is in view – we must submit to lawful authority. And, as we saw last week, in the church, the lawful authority is the elders.
      1. And let’s think about this a little more:
         1. In the military, if your commanding officer says to you, ‘Go and take a nap,’ or, ‘take a couple of days off,’ and you do, is that submission? Well, in the broadest sense it is. But they are hardly commands, are they. You will be happy to take a nap or a couple of days off. This is not difficult or something you don’t feel like doing. This is easy! This is really just agreement!
         2. But when you commanding officer says, Hit the floor and give me 30 push-ups! Now!’ Or comes in at 4am in the morning and says ‘Get up!’ or orders you to run over the hill with your platoon, when you suspect that the enemy is on the other side, waiting to open fire, and you do those things, despite not feeling like it or not wanting to, but he is your commanding officer and you must obey orders, that is submission.
   2. And it is from that world, that way of functioning, that Peter says, “*You who are younger,* ***be subject to your elders***.” And as we noted earlier, the same command is given elsewhere in the New Testament to all members of Christ’s church, regardless of age: “*Be subject to (or submit to) your elders*.”
      1. So, when your elder says, “You need to be attending a regular Bible study,” or “You should be coming to the afternoon worship services,” or, “As a husband and father, you need to be leading family devotions after the evening meal,” or, “men, join with the monthly men’s breakfast study,” or, “Women, join with a women’s Bible study,” the right response is submission. Now, we elders know that none of us can attend everything, every time, we understand that. But we are usually saying things like this because we are concerned with *regular* non-attendance. And that is not spiritually healthy, whereas regular attendance at things like this is for our spiritual benefit, and that of our families, and each person who attends is a blessing to others who are there.
      2. Now, I know the objections that quickly arise: The Bible doesn’t say we have to go to church twice. What about people who are there just because they are told to, but their heart is not in it. What about family time? I don’t get anything out of the Bible studies. I work hard and I am tired in the evening. Saturday is the only day I can sleep in or mow the lawns. So, why should I go to men’s breakfast?
      3. Well, “*you who are younger, be subject to the elders*.” “*Obey your [elders] and submit to them*.” “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:* Who [submitted to lawful authority].”
3. And this leads us into our third and final point, which is **Why this matter of being subject to the elders is so important**.
   1. Having watched All-blacks games for many years, I have seen them win, many times. And sometimes it is a comfortable win, but some of the most memorable victories have been when they came from behind to scrape through right at the end or they held on to a narrow lead and won. And perhaps the 8-7 victory over France in the 2011 World Cup final is the most memorable example of a win like that. And if I were to ask the avid All-blacks fans among us why the All-blacks were so dominant around the time; so able to come from behind or hold on to a narrow lead, I think that the answer of most of them would be two words – **Richie McCaw**. You see, Richie was the captain; the leader of the team. And not only was he tough, physically, he was incredibly tough, mentally. He led from the front, he rallied the team when they were down, and he changed the tactics when that was what was needed. So, his leadership was what helped the team when it was tough going.

* 1. Well, we have repeatedly noted that the context into which Peter wrote this letter was **severe persecution** of the church. At present, we do not face overt persecution. Apart from covid restrictions, we are free to worship and free to preach the full counsel of God’s Word. So, our ‘struggles’ are the sorts of things I referred to in our second point. But when persecution comes, as it surely will, we will face new challenges and threats. There are certain things we will not be allowed to preach. We may lose this property. We may face arrest. We will be tempted to compromise. Going to church or Bible study will be dangerous. So, we may be tempted to stay home and to stay silent. But there will be others who call for action and rebellion and resistance. So, how will we navigate a time like that? Which voices will we listen to? Well, here we have the answer of the Holy Spirit: “*You who are younger, be subject to the elders*.” “*Obey your [elders] and submit to them*.”
  2. The flock of Christ needs good shepherds to survive and flourish. But, as we have seen today, to survive and flourish as the flock of Christ, we must be good sheep. And I really like how this commentator summarizes this:

*Back in chapter 1 the apostle had identified his readers as privileged pilgrims, elect and holy, full of grace and peace. These pilgrims are very much like sheep who need someone to provide food and water, protection and direction. These pilgrims who live among pagans are like sheep being attacked daily for Christ sake. Their survival depends on the right order of the church. The flock of Christ must be led – and must willingly follow! – in the green pastures of His word, guided by His rod and staff along the narrow paths, through shaded ravines, up to the luscious pastures where they may lie down along the quiet streams of divine Mercy and grace …*

*[And so, we see that] the proper exercise of office and respect for office is needed in order that believers may endure persecution at the hands of a world whose passion is power. But these are needed also in order that the church may bear witness to how real power ought to be used: in protective service and self-sacrifice.*

*Elders, the sheep entrusted to you by Christ need you to be faithful to our Lord in terms of these verses. Church members, Christ's elders need your submission in cooperation according to these instructions. Together strengthening one another, the congregation will thereby be a witness for good among [unbelievers].*

May the Lord make us a congregation of shepherds and sheep like this, for Christ’s sake. Amen.