

Faithful Shepherds

1 Peter 5:1-5

5/29/16

Randy Lovelace

In some ways it's a risk to spend a Sunday morning talking about elders. That's invigorating right? My hope is, however, that you will see the gospel of grace in the role that God has established for His church, for elders. It's not about a role, or a position, or power. It's about the Lord Jesus Christ. So I want to tell you a story about an elder who was important in my life. I've shared this with you before, not this story, but the reality that—so this June 25th I will celebrate thirty years as a Christian. Thirty years ago, this month, I had been invited to go back to this PCA church. I'd been kicked out of the church a year earlier. I was not allowed to come back to their youth group events, and frankly I didn't care.

Spending the night on a Saturday night with my friend, Brian, he said "we're gonna go to church tomorrow, are you ok with that?" and I said "sure." My friend Brian had a full—if you were alive in the 80's you'll know what I mean—he had a glorious mohawk. It was really cool. Shaved on both sides, it was multi-colored, it was cool. And I couldn't do that, I had curly hair, it didn't work for me. But we just exuded a skater hate that was just—we loved it. And so I said "Sure, let's go to church. Where are we going?" And he said "Cornerstone"—I'm like "That'll be interesting." And so we went back and we had been there for about two or three weeks. I decided to come back, because they invited me to come back, which I was surprised.

So as it would be amongst skaters, we camped out sort of back there in the back right, you know, we had this one little row with all of our glorious mohawks and hair and stuff. But one of the elders of that church was about sixty-five years old, a professor at a local seminary. He began to come over and sit next to me with all my friends. He didn't ask us why our hair was that color. He did ask us or presume that we knew anything about the faith. He just sat there. And he would then welcome me; each week he would greet me. Because he chose, instead of sitting over with his family, he would bring his family to us. And while he would not be the one who would directly share the gospel with me in a personal invitation kind of way, he was serving as the hands and feet of Christ to me. He got out of his comfort zone and came over and sat with a bunch of sixteen-year-old skaters. The two-year-olds could not be more different. But what he demonstrated to me, is what it would mean to be an elder.

It wasn't about a position, wasn't about power, wasn't about respect, it was about showing the love of Christ to someone very different than he. That in a nutshell was the picture for me, early on, for what it meant to be an elder. Peter would struggle with this whole idea of being an elder. He was struggling because he wanted it to be about position early on. He liked being really close to Jesus and sort of, what did that mean for him? And yet he was confronted in his pride, he was confronted in his self-reliance, and brought low with an invitation: feed my sheep. But let me say to you, if you are a died-in-the-wool Presbyterian, or if you've been around the reformed church at all... so often times when you hear the phrase "feed my sheep" we think about this, the pulpit. That is not the sum total of feeding the sheep.

Though he never broke open the Bible and showed me a passage, that elder was feeding me. He was feeding me with relationship. He was feeding me with the love of Christ. And that can happen in a lot of different ways. It's not just about the pulpit. It's about our lives, and sharing it with each other. And that's messy, it's difficult, it's uncomfortable. And so we hear this call that Peter gives to these elders who are shepherding a flock that was under great persecution. What would he tell them? What would be his instruction? As a man who was brought low himself. Let's hear the words 1 Peter 5:1-5.

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

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now heavenly father we ask that by Your Holy Spirit and through my words as a humble servant, I pray that You would bring out the glory of Christ. The beauty of the gospel, through the role of being a shepherd of the sheep, faithful shepherds. Help us, Lord. And I pray for my brothers, my fellow elders, who I know find the role of elder to be incredibly humbling, and difficult. I pray this morning that You would encourage them. I also pray for the folks who are a part of this congregation, the sheep. I pray Lord that You would help us to love and care for them. But I pray, O Lord, that You would help us to submit unto one another as unto the Lord, to help one another. We pray this in Jesus name, Amen.

You see in your outline there, witnesses. You see the second point, partakers, that’s my mistake. That’s a wrong second point, it should be shepherds, not partakers. So second point, shepherds. So if you take notes at all, please mark through that and write shepherds. The third point is examples. So, witnesses, shepherds, examples. Let’s go together.

You’ll see hear Peter greets them by saying, you know, here as he’s closing up his letter: “So 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.” He’s appealing to them as one who is an elder and as one who is a witness, but in the way which he’s doing it and the best way we know how to translate it in English. It sounds as though he’s not intending for them to be elders or intending them to be witnesses to the sufferings of Christ, yes, Peter’s role as an apostle was unique, but he’s still calling these elders to be witnesses. And he’s calling them to be witnesses of a couple of things. First, to be witnesses to the sufferings of Christ. Second part of that is to be partakers of the glory of God itself, but let’s look at the first part of this. What does it mean for elders among you to be witnesses of the sufferings of Christ?

It most certainly means, to serve as a witness means you are appealing in your own testimony, to the reality and to the person of Jesus Christ. That witness can take on all different kinds of forms. One of the forms it can take is certainly the preaching of Christ and Him crucified. Most certainly means that. That we are as a church, and as a group of elders, protecting the pulpit of this church, that we might preach the crucifixion of Christ and the beauty of Christ, as we gather together. But it is more than that, and not less, but rather I might say, it is deeper than that. That to be witnesses to the sufferings of Christ, it means that we are called, like Peter was, to feed the sheep. That we are called to come and to live our lives among you, both formally and informally. To direct and appeal to you. To look to Christ as Savior. What does that mean?

I am encouraged because I often am struck by a man who we share the last name, but no direct relation that I’m aware of—his name is Richard Lovelace and he wrote a number of books. But in one of those books he talks about one of the challenges that many Christians face as he, as a pastor and professor, as he sought. And I think this is instructive for the elders in our midst, but also those of you who are members. And he says this: “Many Christians have a theoretical commitment to the doctrine that Christ has died for you. But for many Christians in their day to day existence, they rely on their sanctification for their justification. What do I mean?” What does he mean?

He means this: for many Christians, they have a theoretical commitment to trusting Christ as Savior, but in our day-to-day existence, we draw on our performance before God. Our sincerity as Christians, our past experience of a conversion, on our recent religious performance. We rely on our relatively infrequent, conscious, willful, disobedience. In other words, we only theoretically commit ourselves to trusting in the salvation that is in Christ, but in our day-to-day, in-fleshed life, we rely on ourselves. On doing good, and being good, to have a place before the Lord. Lovelace continues when he says “Few know enough to start each day with a thorough going stand upon Martin Luther’s great statement ‘you are accepted.’ Looking outward in faith, and claiming Jesus’s righteousness as the only ground for acceptance, and relaxing in a trust which will produce increasing faith and love and gratitude.” He’s saying something that’s very real for Christians.

It isn’t that we don’t believe in Christ, we do. We’ve made profession of faith, but in the nuts and bolts of a Monday morning, or a Tuesday afternoon, or a Thursday morning conference meeting, or when our children get home from school, or in conversations with our neighbors, are just going through the incredible distraction and the life of distraction that many of us live in this culture. We often times do not start each day resting in the fact that all that we have, all that we do, is of sheer grace. And has nothing to do with our performance. That before God, who is holy and righteous, we cannot point to one ounce of obedience that would ever gain any acceptance before God.

And yet each day we try in subtle ways to prove to God, yet again, I’m being good, I’m doing good. And the elders in your midst are called to serve you and to come alongside you, through the ministry of community groups, through the ministry of the Word, through the ministry of prayer, through living lives with you, with their own lives. To say “are you relying on Christ” or “are you relying on yourself.” Because to witness to the suffering of Christ, is to witness to the One who’s lived in your place. He has lived a life, He has died a death, and He has been raised to life as one in our place. This is what it means to be a witness to the suffering of Christ.

But also he says, not only to be witnesses to suffering of Christ, but to be partakers of the glory that is to be revealed. Now here I want to say to my fellow elders, my role as a pastor—my full time job, my life—is to be a pastor. Your elders, have full time jobs, and full time lives, and are then called to serve you as elders. And so what I want to say to them, I want you as members of this body to pray for them. Because we cannot lead you where we ourselves have not gone. And when he says that we are to not only be witnesses to the suffering of Christ but to be partakers of that glory, we need to find out what that means.

It means this: the biblical word for “glory” has two words. In Hebrew its “kabowd.” In Greek its “daksa.” Now in Hebrew, the word “glory” literally means weighty. Something that is significant. In other words, as one writer said, “The glory of the Lord indicates the brilliance that is connected with all of God’s virtues; His character, His self-revelation, His nature, and the weightiness, and beauty, and the brilliance of His grace.” In Greek it also means all of that, but it also contains within it, this idea of reward. But here’s the key, it’s not a reward that is separate from God, that if you’re really good boys and seek to be an elder, well you get all this good stuff in the end. But rather the glory that is to be revealed is the Lord Himself. To be with Him and to see Him face to face and to know Him fully, as you are fully known.

So the idea here is, that elders among you, ought to regularly, though by grace alone and through much failure, to work at seeking to experience God’s glory. We’re called to do that. Because in seeking to experience God’s glory we can lead others to do it. What do I mean by seeking God’s glory? Well when it says here this idea of the biblical word being a weightiness or a significance, how is it understood biblically? The glory of the Lord has just three quick aspects. First, when God’s glory is an object of adoration, we call it His beauty. When God’s glory is referred to as something to which we give submission to, it is called His majesty. And when we are called to give gratitude to Him, we call His glory, His worthiness. Now here I want to say to each one of my elders—I can’t eyeball them all here, and some of you who are thinking about wanting to be

elders—brothers, everything in our lives will scream and yell at us to not take the time to stop to seek God’s beauty, His majesty, and His worthiness. If we are not seeking to wrestle to find that space, where we can rest and glory in His glory, revel in His beauty, in His majesty, in His worthiness, than we’re not going to be very good at leading others to do that. Brothers, we are called to be partakers of these things. And that means we’re going to have to say no to some things. It’s going to mean that we have to create space somewhere in our lives where we can stop—and I say to you as one who loves to be like an energizer bunny, I’m constantly going. Someone asked me this week, “Do you sit still?” And I said, “Do naps count?” And he said no. So I say this to you as a fellow sufferer of an addiction to being busy, both internally and listening to the voices that come from the outside, we must wrestle and seek to be partakers of His beauty, His majesty, His worthiness. We’re called to be witnesses. Witnesses to others of these things.

Second is Shepherds. He says to them, “Shepherd 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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” He says here that to be shepherds—if you have your pens, get ready—to be shepherds, he’s talking here about motivation, method, and means. First, the motivation. When he says what ought to be the reason why we serve it’s to be with wholehearted desire. Not because someone thinks we should do it, or because we feel we have to do it. It’s this reality, that with a wholehearted desire, we may not always get what we’re doing, we may not always understand the incredible importance of what the role of elder is, but we wrestle to see that what we are called to do is to serve. To serve others with a wholehearted desire and not for selfish gain.

And that means that the elders among you ought to be and seek to be, men who have financial integrity. They’re not using the church to gain financial gain, and not seeking to handle the Lord’s provision for His church in an unworthy way. But it seeks to be, instead of seeking it for selfish gain, he’s talking about selfless giving. And here, we hear the word which was referred to earlier this morning, that we have the one who has gone before us, the Lord Jesus Christ, when he says “Your attitude should be that of Christ Jesus, who being in the very nature of God did not consider equality with God, something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” His wholehearted desire was to serve God’s people, but he received nothing in return. Rather, he gave up of himself. That’s the motivation. But I must go further to say that while we do not pay elders to be elders, sometimes the selfish gain can be for position, or decision making power.

And that’s where we get into the method. When he says here to them, “when you exercise oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly” so that’s the wholehearted desire, “as God would have you. Not for shameful gain, but eagerly.” And then verse three, “not domineering over those in your charge.” What is the method upon which elders seek to shepherd? And that is in the spirit of humility and love. Not an autocratic means of making other people do what you want them to do.

Now some of you may laugh, but this kind of eldering still exists. And I will tell you, those who are called to be elders recognize that we seek to lead and to serve you, not because God says I’m an elder so therefore you should do it. It’s not being imperial, meaning, as we’ve been talking about as elders, we don’t seek to exercise imperial styles of leadership. Meaning, we’re the session, and we don’t owe any explanation to you, or, “I’m an elder, you should do what I say.” Now that may seem laughable to some, but I will say that this is still a style that is not used in this church, but I’ve seen it and experienced it in other churches. But it is tempting that when we have a group of brothers who are called “the session” or “the group of elders” and we’re called to lead God’s people and make decisions and so forth, sometimes you can forget that it’s not about the position. It’s about the method: serving others in humility.

And this is a reminder to you, those who are a part of this body, sometimes we get it radically wrong. And sometimes it may seem as though there may be an autocratic style. And

sometimes we don't give enough communication. Sometimes we over communicate and are afraid to make decisions. In other words, we are sinners saved by grace, but we are reminded over and over again that the method by which we are to seek to shepherd you is in humility, and secondly, love. Cornelius Plantinga, writer, author, says this: "The Father, Son and Holy Spirit glorify each other. Self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God." He was talking about, what does it mean to elder? It means that the dynamic currency that elders have with the body to which they are called to shepherd, is one of love. And that's truth, and love, not just truth. But also not just love. If we love but do not tell the truth, that's not love. Its truth and love in the spirit of humility.

But there's also the means. It's here when he says: "we're called to be shepherds of the flock of God." Meaning, elders, this is not our flock. It's the Lord's. This is not our church, it belongs to Christ. So the means by which we seek to lead and shepherd others, is recognizing that we are under authority. We're not our own authority. We submit to One who has all authority. And we submit our ways to Him. And it is by Grace that we can do this. It is only by grace that we begin to recognize that we are under authority. That we will have to give an account for the way in which we shepherd God's people. And we as brothers—there's no way that we can seek to serve and love this congregation, unless we seek to find our foundation ourselves in the love of Christ. And as we seek to love others, we can only do it as we recognize, we too are first and foremost, not elders.

We are sons of the living God. Sinners saved by grace who have received the love of Christ Jesus. And we then, by the means of God's grace, by the method that the Lord Jesus showed us in His humility, motivated by eager desire to shepherd this body. And so therefore you as a congregation, some of you might be going through a scorecard for how you think elders here have done. May God rescue you from doing that, because thanks be to God none of us are on a scorecard. Jesus Christ as paid the debt for your elders, as He has paid your debt. I encourage you brothers and sisters in Christ, to pray for your brothers, these elders. Pray for us. Because we must find our foundation in the love of Jesus, that we might lead and serve you in humility.

Because of what comes next. He calls us to be examples to the flock. To be examples to the flock. How do we do that? My guess is, if I were to go around to each elder today, I would say "Are you glad you're an example?" Most of them, I think all of them would say "Oh good grief." No, that is a hard thing. Why? Because we recognize how broken and how often we get it wrong. But how are we to be examples? It's not by our performance. It kind of comes full circle. We don't serve as examples before you because we're going to pray enough, read the bible enough, call you enough, train enough, say enough biblical verses to you enough.

It's not about our performance. The only way that elders can seek to be examples to the flock is first and foremost for you, brother elders, and for you, the congregation, praying for them, to find our foundation in Christ Jesus. That is the only thing that we can do. Because if we do not have a foundation in Jesus Christ, all we're doing is seeking to be examples by our performance. So how do we see the foundation in Christ? And that's where we have to learn it. How are we brothers, how do we respond to criticism? How are we checking our pride? How are we seeking—God give us grace in your will for this body, because it's yours, not ours. Because our foundation is in You. If You do not go up before us, we cannot go as Moses would say. Lord, unless You go up before us, we, the body, the Israel, cannot go up before you, can follow you. We too, as brothers, remember that every decision, no matter how practical, in all of our discussions, must find first and foremost, their foundation in Jesus, because He is the head of the church and we are His under-shepherds.

And that means, to pick up on these wonderful words from, an American, who is no longer alive, an American author, poet. His name is Renolds Price, who once said—speaking of the Lord—"He says in the clearest voice, that we have a sentence that mankind craves. *The Maker of all things loves and wants me...* In no other book" speaking of the Bible, "In no other book our culture owns can we see a clearer graph of that need, that tall enormous radiant arc—fragile creatures made by

God's hand, hurled into space, then caught at last by a man in some ways like ourselves." We, as brothers, seek to be examples to the flock, because we find our foundation in the one who became flesh. Our foundation must be in Christ. But there is a final thing, and it is this: that we, brothers, and elders, recognize, there is a reward that awaits. The passage says it. It says, "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." There's argument and debate about what this means. Are they gifts, are they rewards...?

I believe it goes back to what I said earlier... is that, the "unfading crown of glory," is to be in the presence of our Trinitarian God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And that we, as brothers, recognize, that Jesus is coming again. That we as brothers, hear the call of Hebrews, when it says "Obey your leaders, submit to their authority, they keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy and not a burden for that would be no advantage to you." We brothers recognize, that we will give an account on the day in which the Lord returns, for our care over the flock.

That is a heavy, heavy reality. But if our foundation is in Christ, we recognize that our shepherding is not about performance, it's not about power, it's not about decision making. Its first and foremost witnessing to Christ, its first—second of all doing it by the means that Christ gives us by his grace in humility, serving, and loving, and pointing others to Christ. But it is also to find our foundation in Christ, because our reward *is* Christ. And that reward will be the one-hundred percent, full 3-D, reality of God's beauty, God's majesty, God's worthiness. May God, brothers, give us grace to walk by faith, to shepherd this body. Brothers and sisters, young and old, being an elder is a daunting thing. Pray for us, and we pray that God would use the likes of us, crooked sticks, to strike a straight line to Jesus, who is our author and perfecter of our faith. Let's pray.

Lord I pray that You would equip us as a body of believers, that You would give to us men who seek to witness and shepherd, and to be examples of our need for Christ. Father, for all my fellow elders, I pray that You would give them the deep strength of grace to rest in You alone and to be faithful witnesses to the grace that has saved them. And Father, for this Body, I pray that You would raise up those who would seek to pray increasingly and faithfully for these elders. Father, I pray that You would make Columbia Presbyterian Church stronger, because we, as brothers, have humbled ourselves in our foundation in Christ, to witness to You, among this, Your people, this Your church, these Your sheep. That when You return, we will be increasingly more and more like Jesus. We give You thanks and praise, in Jesus name, Amen.