



Sermon Transcript

May 6, 2018

Shepherds and Souls Accountable to God

1 Peter 4:12-5:5

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 6, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
1 Peter 4:12-5:5

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

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

Introduction

“So I exhort the elders among you.” That is what Peter says in 1 Peter 5:1. That word “*exhort*” is a strong word and it can also be translated with the word “*urge*.” *“So, I exhort . . . I urge . . . the elders among you.”* When I think of this word, I think of a coach who is urging his players to compete hard. I think of a military leader who is exhorting those under his command to follow orders. I think of a teacher who is stressing to his students the importance of the subject at hand. I think of a doctor who looks squarely in the eyes of a patient and urges this patient to change some unhealthy habits. I think of parents who urge their children to pay attention to their words and to listen to their instruction. So Peter *exhorts . . . urges* the elders. It is a strong word.

There are other times where Peter uses this word in this short letter and when he uses this word he is not wasting it. He uses this word when he is talking about important things. For example, in 1 Peter 2:11 he uses this word when he “*urges*” them to “*abstain from passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*” There is nothing casual about the daily struggle with our flesh and with whatever tempts us. There are consequences to giving into temptation and so Peter “*urges*” us to abstain from giving in to these passions that can so easily trip us up. He also uses this word at the end of his letter in 1 Peter 5:12 where he is reminding these suffering churches that his message about Jesus is “*the true grace of God.*” And so he “*exhorts*” them to continue in their faith and to “*Stand firm in it.*” Even though their faith is costing them something, even though they are suffering because of it, he “*urges*” them to hang in there and to endure. Why? Because Jesus is the truth! And so when Peter says in our passage this morning, “*So I exhort the elders among you . . .*” he is not coming to them with suggestions to consider or with ideas to ponder and evaluate. Instead, with very strong words, Peter is calling these elders to “step up.” He is calling them into account. They are accountable for how they shepherd the people of God. “*So I exhort the elders among you.*”

Who are these elders? Who is Peter exhorting in this passage? Who are these “*elders among you?*” As we are considering what the Bible has to say about leadership in the local church and more specifically about elders and deacons, I find it insightful that Peter is not writing this letter to an individual church somewhere out there in the middle of the Roman Empire. Paul, on the other hand, often directs his letters to the church in specific areas. Paul writes a letter to the church in Rome, to the church in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and to the church in Thessalonica. And so we have these letters from Paul that bear the names of the recipients of his letters. But in 1 Peter 1:1 we discover that this is a letter that is to be widely circulated and passed from

church to church. Peter writes his letter to the churches in five Roman Provinces, “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” So in 1 Peter 5:1, when Peter says, “So, I exhort the elders among you ... he is talking about elders in all these churches. Wherever you had churches being planted, elders were established to shepherd God’s people who were part of that local church. So in each of these settings, Peter is urging these elders to step up and “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*”

It is interesting to me how Peter begins 1 Peter 5:1. He begins with that little word “so.” It can also be translated with the word “*therefore.*” This little word clues us in on the fact that what Peter is telling us about elders in 1 Peter 5 is linked to what he just told us at the end of 1 Peter 4. 1 Peter 5 is a conclusion to what he just said in the previous chapter. Maybe even better, 1 Peter 5 is a solution to the problem in 1 Peter 4 or an application to whatever he was talking about in the previous chapter. In other words, Peter isn’t addressing the subject of elders because he thought it would be good to remind these churches about elders. Rather, he is addressing the subject of elders in 1 Peter 5 because they are a necessary response to the problem in 1 Peter 4.

Do you know what the problem is in 1 Peter 4? These churches Peter is writing to are suffering and facing hardship because of their faith in Christ. Peter calls it a “*fiery trial*” in 1 Peter 4:12. Their suffering is likened to sharing Christ’s sufferings in verse 13, and we know that was a suffering unto death. Peter himself was only about a year or two removed from his own martyrdom when he wrote this letter. And so here you have these churches—these followers of Jesus—scattered about Asia Minor and feeling the struggle of following Jesus in a culture that is hostile to their faith. It was hard. Where would they find encouragement to endure? Who is able to care for them and help them? Who will remind them that they are sojourners in this world and that there is an eternal glory that awaits them? Look at how Peter ends 1 Peter 4, “*Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*” Who will remind them of this wonderful truth to help them endure? What does the next verse say? “*So I exhort the elders among you . . . shepherd the flock of God.*”

Basically, Peter is saying to these elders, “I need you to step up and I need you to care for God’s people scattered about Asia Minor.” Why? It is not easy to follow Jesus in a world that is hostile to Christ. It is not easy to keep your eyes on what is unseen and what is eternal when this life isn’t working out the way you thought it would. It is not easy to say “no” to worldly passions that are at war with our soul. “*So I exhort the elders among you . . . shepherd the flock of God.*” In other words, Peter is exhorting the elders because they are needed and necessary for the wellbeing of the church.

In the first sermon of this series we identified four things God has given to the church to help the church—be the church. He has given us Jesus as the head of the church and so we follow Jesus. He has given us the Word of God as our authority and so we teach the Word of God. He has given us the Holy Spirit who is dynamically at work through us. And God has also given us elders who shepherd and care for God’s people. Elders are needed. So with very strong words, Peter is calling these elders to “step up” because the church needs them. *“So I exhort the elders among you . . . shepherd the flock of God.”*

This morning, as we continue our series on Shepherds and Souls, I want us to consider four ways that elders are accountable for the responsibility given to them.

Elders are accountable for who they serve.
Elders are accountable for why they serve.
Elders are accountable for how they serve.
Elders are accountable to whom they serve.

In each case they are being urged to “step up” to the role God has given to them.

Who They Serve

First of all, elders are accountable for who they serve. Peter says to these elders who are serving in these various churches spread throughout Asia Minor, *“shepherd the flock of God that is among you.”* Naturally, elders are responsible to care for the people who are “among them.” They are responsible for the people in their local setting. But who are these people? They are *“the flock of God.”* In other words, elders are to see the people they serve as belonging to God.

Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church is not “my” church. As the pastor of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church, I am often in settings where I am asked, “tell me about ‘your’ church.” While I understand the question, technically Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church is not “my” church. Instead, Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church is a local assembly of followers of Jesus who belong to God and I am here, along with the “elders” to serve you and shepherd a group of people who are precious to God.

When Peter opens this letter to these churches scattered about these five Roman Provinces, he refers to them in 1 Peter 1:1-2 as *“elect exiles . . . according to the foreknowledge of God.”* In other words, they were chosen by God. Peter Davids reminds us that the word *“foreknowledge”* does not mean that “God simply predicted their

conversion” as though he looked down the corridor of time and knew who would believe in him and who wouldn’t believe in him. Rather, he writes, “the cause of their salvation was not that they reached out to a distant God, but that God chose to relate to them and form them into a people, his people.”¹ It is alright if in our finite minds we can’t fully comprehend the electing love of God for us and how that meshes with human responsibility. But do we not all freely confess, “*we love him because he first loved us*”? Paul adds to the wonder of God’s electing love by telling us in Ephesians 1 that God chose us before he even created the world. The church is precious to God. Nowhere is that more evident than the cross of Jesus. When Paul assembled the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:28, he gave them these parting instructions—“*to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*” You were chosen by God. Jesus purchased you by his own blood. You are precious to God. The shepherds—the elders—must never lose sight of this truth and need to remember that the people they serve belong to God.

Peter gets it! Look what he calls the church in 1 Peter 4:12. He calls them “*Beloved.*” Beloved by who? You have been loved by God before the foundation of the world and by Jesus who bought you from slavery to sin and death through the shedding of his own blood. And so, as one of your shepherds—a lead elder—a pastor, this is no small thing for me to remember as I respond to the strong urging of Peter to “*shepherd the flock of God among you.*” I must take the humble position of a servant and I am to love you because you are fiercely loved by God.

Isn’t it interesting that as an elder is being called to “step up” his first step up is a “step down” by taking a knee and assuming the humble posture of a servant. He is to recognize what Jesus says in Matthew 25:40 at the end of the parable of the Separation of the Sheep and the Goats: “*as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.*” That is how closely Jesus identifies with his people. It is good for an elder to remember that the people he shepherds ultimately belong to God.

I have no problem confessing to you this morning that as a pastor, a leader in the church, it is not hard for that line to get blurred. It is easy for a pastor to view the church as being there to serve the ambitions of the pastor. When that happens it is easy for the elders—the pastor—to fall into the temptation Peter warns us of in 1 Peter 5:3. He warns elders to not be *domineering over those in your charge*. I find what helps keep this in check is to remember that the church belongs to God. We are accountable as elders to serve the people we are among. We are among you, Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church. You are deeply loved by God. You were chosen before the foundation of the world by God. You were bought from sin and death through the precious blood of

Jesus. You are “beloved” by God. And so as one of your shepherds and one of your elders, I want you to know that I love you . . . to love you is one of my highest callings.

Why They Serve

Secondly, as I consider this strong urging from Peter for the elders to “*shepherd the flock of God among you*” I can’t help but notice the setting where this command has been strategically placed. We already observed that this charge to the elders is Peter’s response to the suffering that these churches were experiencing because of their faith. But what strikes me about the suffering that Peter describes for us is the normalcy of it. He says in 1 Peter 4:12, “*Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*” In other words, it should not catch us by surprise if following Jesus cost us something. In fact, Peter echoes what Jesus says in the final Beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount. Peter says in 1 Peter 4:14, “*If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed.*” Can’t you hear the words of Jesus here? “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets before you.*” And so Peter says, “don’t be surprised by this as though something strange were happening to you.” It is all rather normal. But it doesn’t make it easy. A “*fiery trial*” is after all still rather “*fiery*.”

One of the things we learn about suffering from the end of 1 Peter 4 is that suffering tests our faith. It has a way of growing us and purifying us. That is why James can be so bold as to tell us to even “*Count it all joy . . . when you meet trials of various kinds.*” How can he say that? It is because it has a way of perfecting us. That is what Peter is getting at verses 17-18. This suffering is couched as a form of judgment, it is a purifying discipline that the Christian and the church goes through and it is not easy. It is so hard that Peter says that “*the righteous is scarcely saved.*” Or as Jesus puts it, “*the road is narrow.*” In general I think Peter is saying that there is a persevering faith that endures through the trials and the sufferings associated with following Jesus. Surely it is a journey that comes with ups and downs. It comes with a mixture of doubt and faith. Sometimes you can’t see the hand of God at work until you are through it. But by God’s grace you get through it still believing and still following Jesus.

This is exactly why Peter urges elders to *shepherd the flock of God among you*. This journey of faith is a journey filled with testing and trials and God’s people need encouragement to keep their eyes on Jesus. Do you know what is interesting about this

passage addressed to elders at the beginning of 1 Peter 5? It is actually sandwiched between two passages that talk about suffering. We have already seen what comes before this passage, a reminder that they should not be surprised that they are suffering as though something strange is happening. But then after this passage they are encouraged to “cast all their anxieties on Jesus because he cares for them” in 1 Peter 5:7. And then in the next verse, 1 Peter 5:8 they are reminded at how the devil is like a roaring lion seeking whom he can devour. Peter Davids suggests that it is not an accident that this passage to elders is sandwiched between these two passages on suffering.² Strauch adds, “when churches experience suffering, it falls primarily on church leaders to provide help, comfort, strength, and guidance. So the spiritual wellbeing of the house of God depends significantly on the elders.”³ This call for elders to “step up” is a needed exhortation because following Jesus in this world is hard and the elders are there to provide encouragement and help and direction. Thus Peter says, “*So I exhort the elders among you . . . Shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*”

How They Serve

Thirdly, elders are accountable for how they serve the church. In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter identifies himself as “*a fellow elder.*” In other words, he is one of them. I love the example he is to elders who are called to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*” Elders are called to be an example. That is what Peter tells elders at the end of verse 3 and it is what we heard Paul say to Timothy last week. But elders also need examples of what it looks like to be “an example.” Peter is an example for elders to follow. He shows them how to serve. As he exhorts the elders, he says of himself that he is *a fellow elder*.

First of all, he is an example of what it means to be a witness for Jesus out in the real world. Here is how he introduces himself in 1 Peter 5:1, “*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.*” When he says he is “*a witness of the sufferings of Christ*” he is not saying that he was “an eyewitness to Jesus dying on the cross.” We are not even sure where Peter was when Jesus died. Luke describes the scene of the cross in Luke 24:49 by saying that some of “*his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.*” Was Peter even there? We don’t know. Rather what Peter is saying here is that he bears witness to the cross, the suffering of Christ for the atonement of our sin. He is an example of someone who is a faithful witness of Jesus.

We know from the book of Acts that Peter was the first to bear public witness to the message of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. We know his bearing witness landed

him in jail on several occasions. I love what he says in Acts 4:19-20 when he was ordered to stop preaching the message of Jesus. He said, *“Whether it is right in the sight of God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”* Then they met up with the believers and prayed for more boldness to bear witness in the face of opposition—and out they went again. We know that Peter understands what it means to suffer. We know that Peter will soon be martyred for his faith, crucified upside down. And so when Peter writes to these churches in 1 Peter 4:14, *“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed”* they know Peter understands what he is talking about because he leads by example. His words are credible.

I’m struck by the similarity between 1 Peter 5:1 and 1 Peter 4:13. In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter says that he is *“a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed.”* In other words, he bears witness to Jesus even if it causes him to suffer, but his eyes are focused on eternity. This eternal focus is what helps him endure suffering. And that is what he says to these suffering churches to encourage them to hang in there as they too are bearing witness to Jesus in difficult settings. He says in 1 Peter 4:13, *“But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”* In other words, as an elder—an elder of elders—Peter practices what he preaches and he leads by example. This is a basic leadership maxim: “you can’t call others to do what you yourself aren’t doing.”

But then Peter is also an example to these elders of what it looks like to watch over a group of people who belong to God. In 1 Peter 5:2, Peter tells the elders to *“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.”* The word *oversight* simply means to “watch over.” They are to care for the souls that are given to their charge. They are responsible for the well being of the people they serve. I wonder if when Peter gives this charge to the elders if the words of Jesus are still ringing in his ears. Do you recall what Jesus said to Peter when they walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee after Jesus had risen from the dead? This seems to be the first heart to heart conversation Jesus has with Peter after Peter had denied Jesus three times. Gently, Jesus restores Peter by charging Peter to *“Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep.”* It is not just what Jesus said that is important here. But it is how Jesus said it. He gently restored Peter. He treated Peter with tender care. He was giving Peter an example of what it looks like to “watch over” the people of God.

And so Peter gives these elders an example of what that looks like. He calls the church *“Beloved.”* He reminds the elders that “watching over” souls is not about domineering over those who are in your charge. Peter is an example of what it looks like to encourage

people under his charge. He reminds the elders how they set the tone in the church for a spirit of humility. In 1 Peter 5:5 he says, “*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*” The elders set the tone for that kind of spirit in the church. They are to be examples of humility. Peter extended the same grace and humility that Jesus extended to him.

The example of being a witness and the example of humility is an example that reminds us that the role of elders is to *shepherd* people. It is to care for people. It is to watch over the needs of people. It is to encourage people. There are two things that last forever in this world: God’s Word and people. This is the focus of an elder.

To Whom They Serve

The final thing I want to say about elders and accountability is to recognize that they are ultimately accountable to God. In 1 Peter 5:4, Peter says to these elders, “*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*” In other words, when you stand before Jesus and give an account, you will be rewarded for being faithful to the charge given to you.

If I can be candid with you this morning, it is not easy being an elder—a pastor—a shepherd of God’s people. Whenever you deal with people there are challenges to that. In saying that, as a shepherd, I also recognize that I too am “a people.” A shepherd is no different than the sheep in that he too is a work in progress. And then there is the sacrifice and the investment that a shepherd makes in people and sometimes you wonder if God is doing anything through your ministry. One of the affirmations in our “Way of Life” really speaks to this struggle. Daily I affirm that I will live with the conviction that God is at work through my life whether I see it or not. But someday I want to appear before Jesus and I want to hear him say, “well done.”

In his book on elders, Alexander Strauch sums it up this way: “What a time of victory vindication, and joy Christ’s appearance will bring to lowly, unnoticed elders who have faithfully shepherded God’s flock. Hard-working, selfless shepherds may not have many earthly goods to show for a lifetime of toil. But some day the Chief Shepherd will come and fully reward his undershepherds. Their work will no longer go unnoticed or unappreciated, for he will reward them publically before the hosts of heaven. He will bestow on them heavenly honor and glory. All elders are to keep their eyes steadfastly fixed on his appearing, for reward day is coming.”⁴

This is what encourages an elder to keep going and to be faithful and to even do the hard things. He knows that he is ultimately accountable to God.

Conclusion

With a sense of urgency and a sense of importance, Peter exhorts the elders to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*” They are needed in the body of Christ. In exhorting the elders, he is calling the elders to account and to step up to this high calling.

They are accountable for who they serve: precious people belonging to God in this local church.

They are accountable for why they serve: the journey of faith is hard and God’s people need encouragement and support.

They are accountable for how they serve: they are examples who with humility practice what they preach.

They are accountable to the Chief Shepherd: the one who sees their faithful service and will reward them.

I am excited for the journey we are on and I believe this church is filled with these kinds of shepherds. May God raise up willing and eager examples for his people here at Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church for generations to come.

¹Peter H. Davids *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 48

²Ibid., 174

³Alexander Strauch *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth, 1995) 240

⁴Ibid., 250

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What was the best thing that happened to you this week?
2. If you had this week over again, what would you do differently?
3. What is one thing that stood out to you from the sermon this past week?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Peter 4:12-19. What do you find challenging in this passage? What words of encouragement do you find in this passage?
5. Read 1 Peter 5:1. Looking back on 1 Peter 4:12-19, how does Peter model what it looks like for an elder to “watch over” those under his care?
6. Read 1 Peter 5:2-3. How should knowing that the church—the flock of God—belongs to God impact how you treat people in the church? What do you observe and learn about the task of elders from this passage?
7. Read 1 Peter 5:4 (and 4:13, 5:1). What are the benefits of keeping our eyes fixed on eternity?
8. Read 1 Peter 5:5. How can you contribute to creating a spirit of humility at WEFC?

Taking It Home

9. From your discussion, what is one thing you want to thank God for and what is one thing you want to ask God for help. As a group, go around the room and offer these one sentence prayers:
God, I thank you for _____
God, help me _____