

Dear Friends,

In February, 2024, I will begin my sixty-ninth year of ministry. Through these years, Peter's teaching in our study passage for this week has provided me with more wise counsel--and often more wise rebuke--than about any passage I could name. It often encouraged me, and it occasionally rebuked me and nudged me to do more in my ministry, and to do it God's way.

Early in my ministry, I observed a major divide among older preachers. Some men seemed to grow more mellow, loving, forgiving, and gracious as they grew older. Others, just a few, seemed to grow more bitter and resentful as they grew older. The idea of a man preaching for most of his adult life ending his life bitter and resentful puzzled me. Fearfully, I prayed for the Lord to give me wise grace to avoid that end in my ministry. To a man, those preachers who ended their ministry bitter showed a strong disdain for the people to whom they preached. It seemed that their bitter resentment was primarily aimed at those people. They looked down on the people they had served as pastor. Conversely, the preachers who entered their last season of ministry mellow, loving, and forgiving had a high respect and affection for the people to whom they had preached. Time convinces me that both attitudes grew out of their attitude toward the people whom they had served.

Ponder Peter's various descriptions which he exhorts to his fellow "**Elders.**" "**among you,**" (He used this phrase twice) "**willingly,**" "**a ready mind,**" and "**ensamples (examples) to the flock.**"

The second passage that has increasingly nudged me over the years is Jesus' three questions and instructions to Peter in John 21. I am convinced that a man's privilege to preach to people should be measured by his manifest love for Jesus, and that love is validated by his love for the people.

The Lord has preserved His church and His truth across more than twenty centuries, by His merciful grace, not by the church's--any church by any name--benevolence or goodness. The church and truth of the gospel exist today despite us, not because of us. Therefore, we should accept the grand privilege of the gospel humbly and gratefully. When the Lord's people in the first century adopted the idea that the temple was their "House," Jesus rebuked them, reminding them and us that the place and condition of worship and fellowship is always and only **His "House,"** not ours. I love a story that was told about a godly preacher who was confronted by an older preacher who attempted to usurp authority over the younger preacher by referring to him and other younger preachers as "My preachers." This godly preacher responded with shock and conviction, "Your preacher! Your preacher!" He went on to remind the older man that he was the Lord's preaching, not any man's. If we live up to our calling as the Lord's preachers, we shall live that love of Jesus and teach His people kindly and clearly, but always by His revealed word to us, only and always "Book, chapter, and verse." Personal preference or opinion are not valid components of the Lord's house or His gospel.

Lord give us wise grace to respect the amazing blessing we enjoy in the gospel, and to always regard this blessing as the Lord's. We are His servants together in His service. Therefore, we all, pulpit and pew, belong to Him and owe Him our service and devotion in willing and joyful love.

Love in Jesus,

Joe Holder

### **Spiritual Feeding—A Solemn Charge**

**The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.** (1 Peter 5:1-3 KJV 1900)

Contemporary Christians often debate more about the title, “Elder,” than explore the meaning and responsibility in this lesson. Does “Elder” in the lesson refer to an older spiritually mature believer in the church? To a distinct office of administration? Or to a minister? Given Peter’s description of the chief responsibility assigned to men in this position, “**Feed the flock of God,**” I believe Peter referred to preachers or pastors. In a similar passage, when Paul preached his farewell message to the elders at the Church in Ephesus, he used similar language.

**Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.** (Acts 20:28 KJV)

Speaking to the elders of the Ephesian Church, Paul charged these men to “**feed the church of God.**” The most decisive passage in my view is Jesus’ words to Peter to feed His lambs and His sheep. (John 21:15-17 KJV) A church is abundantly blessed if it has a mature and wise man, deacon or not, who always brings a calming, insightful, and wise influence to decisions and issues. Such godly men are to be respected and honored in a church. However, they cannot “**Feed**” the church with spiritual healthy nutritious “Food.” By the internal evidence of our study lesson, I believe Peter addressed his words, his solemn charge, to the pastor and preachers among the believers and churches to whom he first wrote this letter. Occasionally a man will stand before the church, read a passage, and talk about it. They later describe the exercise as “Preaching.” No. They may have taught a beneficial lesson, but they did not truly preach the gospel. As Paul taught in detail (1 Corinthians 12 KJV), no man can serve the church outside the abilities given to him in his spiritual gift. If the Lord didn’t call or gift a man to preach, he can’t preach.

**The elders which are among you I exhort.** Peter described these men as “**among you,**” not “Over you.” The attitude a man exhibits toward the church will mark him as a potentially beneficial

spiritual gift or as an unprofitable one. Paul taught this same truth in that rich chapter on spiritual gifts.

**And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.** (1 Corinthians 12:28 KJV)

The Lord sets every spiritual gift He gives “**in the church,**” not over it. A man can’t “Feed” people when he thinks of himself as being “Over” them in rank or spirituality. In this verse, Paul even placed apostles “**in the church.**” The revealing truth for each of us and our use of our spiritual gift appears in this thought. Do I think of myself in Jesus’ example?

**I am among you as he that serveth.** (Luke 22:27b KJV)

Do we regard ourselves as servants in, to, and for the church? Or do we think of ourselves as John described Diotrephes?

**I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not.** (3 John 1:9 KJV)

Are we content only when we get our personal way about issues in the church? When we gain preeminence over other believers? What gives us the greatest sense of peace and accomplishment, getting our way or serving? Peter was an apostle, one of the twelve (Eleven faithful) men whom Jesus chose at the beginning of His public ministry to be His companions during His time and teaching, and to be His witnesses after He ascended. Peter could have properly used that title in our study lesson, using it to magnify himself and his office above others in the church. But instead, he chose to identify himself with those “Ordinary” men who served as pastors and preachers among the people to whom he wrote this letter. The wise and edifying preacher/pastor will follow Jesus, Peter’s, and Paul’s examples of serving and ministering, not feed their ego by self-over-others.

**Feed the flock of God which is among you.** Louw-Nida's dictionary of New Testament words defines the Greek word translated "**Feed**" in this verse as "To shepherd...to lead with the implication of providing for." To "Shepherd" a church involves far, far more than a good Sunday sermon. It means being there when a loved one dies or is ill with comfort and prayer. It means joyfully celebrating with them on happy occasions, as if that happy event occurred in your own family. It also means caring enough to gently tell them when they are wrong. Ancient shepherds lived with their flocks around the clock. I recall an unusual situation I faced many years ago. In a single day, I officiated at the wedding of a young couple and enjoyed the celebration with them and their family and friends. After a couple hours, I quietly excused myself and drove to another home to comfort a woman whose mother just died. Yes, by the end of that day, my own emotions were worn and stretched, but I felt as obligated toward one family as toward the other.

What do we know about the people who were to conduct this "Shepherding" ministry, the elders whom Peter taught?

1. **...which is among you.** As discussed above Peter regarded himself as an "Elder," not as an Apostle. He addressed the elders as being "**among you**," part of the local church where they ministered.

2. **...taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly.** Yes, it is Biblical that a church should regard its pastor as having spiritual oversight and even spiritual responsibility for them and for their spiritual well-being.

**Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account,** that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17 KJV) These godly ministers watched for the souls of the people whom they served, not for their personal gain or profit.

This verse reminds me of a quip I read many years ago, "I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care." If church and pastor, pulpit and pew, indulge in a constant arm-wrestle for supremacy, no spiritual growth can occur. But if the pastors and preachers preach the gospel in love, and the people hear in love and respect for the message and their messenger, both grow strong in their faith and in their heart and ability to serve and to honor the Lord.

3. **...not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind.** As emphasized above, preaching is not to be driven by a desire for personal gain, money or ego. In this point, Peter highlights money. He refers to it as "**filthy lucre**," not a high compliment to money. There is nothing inherently evil about money. It can provide for needed spiritual needs and blessings. The problem with money lies far more in the heart of the person who has it—or is willing to do anything to get it—than in the money itself. Louw-Nida defines the Greek word translated "filthy lucre" as "Shamefully greedy." Many radio and television preachers need this reminder.

Like many young preachers, early in my ministry, I had dreams of being a full-time pastor. However, as I followed what I yet believe to be the Lord's leading to His assignment for me, I found myself serving a small church. They were liberal compared to their ability, but they could

not support a full-time pastor. Therefore, I faced a dilemma. Abandon what I comfortably believed to be the Lord's assignment for me, or seek secular employment. Interesting, in every secular job I held throughout my working career, people who knew me often sought me out for counsel with their problems, and I tried to help them with a kind ear and sound Biblical advice. Perhaps, although I pastored a small church, I ministered to many more of the Lord's hurting children than I thought at the time. Scripture teaches that a church should make every effort to provide for the financial needs of the church, including its pastor. There is nothing evil or bad about a church working to manage its financial burden in a systematic and godly manner. **"Let all things be done decently and in order."** (1 Corinthians 14:40 KJV) Biblical teaching on giving is surprisingly simple. It should be 1) regular ("...**on the first day of the week.**" 1 Corinthians 16:2 KJV), 2) liberally ("...**as God hath prospered him.**" 1 Corinthians 16:2 KJV), and 3) freely, never by coercion ("...**as he purposeth in his heart.**" 2 Corinthians 9:7 KJV) I offer one final reminder of this point. Pastors, this teaching applies to you no less than to the church you serve. **You are to be the church's example.** If you only receive from them and never give, how can you teach them to give? **Give as you teach them to give.**

4. **Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.** Pastors, how do you regard the people you pastor? As your brothers and sisters in the Lord's family? Or as "Dumb sheep" whom you must scold and cajole into the simplest of spiritual duties? When Jesus probed Peter with three questions, He taught us perhaps the single most important prerequisite for every man who occupies the position of pastor or preacher. (John 21:15-17 KJV) Each question probed Peter's love for Him, followed by the commandment, "**Feed my sheep,**" "**Feed my lambs.**" A man who doesn't respect and sacrificially love the people to whom he ministers should not be allowed in the position. According to Peter's lesson, the pastor is indeed to serve the church in an "**Oversight**" role. However, that oversight is to take the form of leading by example, not by arbitrary mandate. Teach them by "Book, chapter, and verse" with simple teaching as if they were beloved and respected members of your family. After all, they are! If you teach them to do something, be doubly sure you practice what you intend to preach to them. In my youth, I actually heard a preacher say in his sermon, "Don't do as I do; do what I tell you to do." He broke his most solemn Biblical responsibility in that comment. His ministerial life sadly proved the point over time. Yes, lead, but lead by example.

Through the years of my ministry, this lesson has more often held my hand and nudged me to choose the path of wise grace than any other single passage. Every man who presumes to preach to the Lord's people should memorize these verses and repeat them to himself frequently. **Church should be the safest place on earth for heart-broken, struggling believers, not the most dangerous. And that climate in a church begins in the pulpit.**

Elder Joe Holder