

Shepherdly Oversight

Nov. 22, 2015

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I have a movie clip I want you to watch; it's from the movie *Hoosiers*. Coach Dale has been kicked out of a game; his assistant coach is now in charge. His name is Shooter. But Shooter lacks confidence and he's scared. He knows basketball really well, but he doesn't know how to communicate that to others. But his fear doesn't change the fact that the kids need a coach; they need a leader. Watch the interchange between Shooter and the kids (CLIP).

Did you see how eager the boys were for coaching? I'm struck by their eyes; they all are gazing at Shooter, just waiting to hear the plan. Tell us what you think we should do! Someone needed to be in charge and naturally, of course, on a team it's the coach. And the boys were hungry for it. Now, his plan might not have worked. Maybe the boys could have picked a better play to run. You might think that, too; you might think, "The picket-fence may have worked in the 50's, but it wouldn't work today!" Sure, all of that might be true. But at that moment, the team needed a leader; someone needed to be in charge. And Shooter was the man.

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter 2. In this passage, Peter is encouraging Christians to remain faithful to Christ even during sufferings. Christ suffered, Peter says; he suffered to give you an example to follow when you go through your sufferings. And take heart, even when you suffer Jesus is looking out for your soul; he's ready to take care of you. Look how Peter describes the care Jesus provides in vs. 24-25 (READ).

Jesus cares and comforts his people by being the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls; he is the True Pastor of the church always leading, guiding and comforting. We are in such good hands. Jesus himself claimed this shepherdly image. In John 10 Jesus says (vs. 14-15), "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." In this section, Jesus is warning his disciples about those who would rob, steal and kill the sheep of God, these wolves who are to come. But he will lay down his life for his sheep; that's why the Father loves him, Jesus says.

But Jesus ascended to heaven and this shepherdly oversight is still needed for God's people. Where will the church get this kind of pastoral care? Flip a page or two further to 1 Peter 5 and read with me vs. 1-4 (READ). Do you think it's an accident, my dear brothers and sisters, that after Peter calls Jesus the great Shepherd and Overseer of God's people in chapter 2 that Peter calls the elders to shepherd and oversee the church in chapter 5? Absolutely not! What's happening? With Jesus now in heaven sitting at the right hand of God the Father, Jesus continues his pastoral ministry to his people through the appointed elders of the church. And because Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide the disciples and apostles into all truth, the elders and church body have this power and grace necessary to fulfill the ministry that Jesus began because of the ongoing help of the Holy Spirit.

Elders are to teach the truth of God to the people of God. They do this together along with the other teachers God has given his church. But that's not the only task given to the elders. We see here in 1 Peter 5 that there's this shepherding responsibility, too. Peter clarifies this shepherding ministry by calling it oversight. Look at the construction of vs. 2, "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." So, to shepherd the flock elders exercise oversight.

It seems that this oversight is the general care and leadership of a church that it requires. The tandem of oversight and shepherding is found in another passage; keep a finger here and flip to Acts 20. Let me set the stage for you. The Apostle Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem. Jesus himself met Paul in a vision and told him about this destiny. But he wanted to swing as close to Ephesus as he could because he wanted to see the elders there one last time. Paul spent a total of 3 years serving the church in Ephesus. There's no doubt that Paul cared deeply for the Ephesian Christians. When he could no longer minister to them himself, he sends his up and coming protege, Timothy, to serve this church. In chapter 20, we have this scene of Paul meeting the Ephesian elders on the sea shore before Paul sets sail to Jerusalem. He first tells them about his mission and example to them. After that, he gives some final words of direction to the elders. Let's read those starting in vs. 28 (READ vs. 28-32).

Those two dominating images (shepherd and oversight) are found in the words of Paul just like the words of Peter, right? Vs. 28 is the money verse: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the *flock*, in which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*." The congregation is a flock. And what do flocks need? Shepherds. And in what capacity do they watch the flock? As *overseers*. Here, they don't exercise oversight, they *are* overseers. So, this ministry of oversight is so critical and important we call elders overseers (I'm praying you're seeing how this all fits together; and we're not done).

So, what do elders/shepherds/overseers do with this ministry of oversight? Finish vs. 28; pay careful attention to the flock as overseers "to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." Care for the church. Watch over it. Give it guidance and leadership. Provide the comfort and direction it needs. Why? Look at vs. 29, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." We've come full circle, haven't we? This shepherdly oversight even includes the teaching of sound doctrine to guard the church from error.

So, what is oversight? What does that mean? What are the specific responsibilities? And what's the manner of the oversight? I want to first touch on that. There is way elders should exercise oversight; a manner. Peter spells it out in 1 Peter 5 so I want to briefly talk about that before I get into the responsibilities of oversight.

I sum up the manner of oversight this way: an elder is to be a glad, sacrificial servant - that's the manner of his oversight. Now, I got those words (glad, sacrificial, servant) from vs. 2-3. Notice how Peter says elders should give oversight (READ vs. 2-3)

I get the word *glad* from the phrase "not under compulsion, but willingly." The word willingly is set as a contrast to compulsion. Sometimes we might say we are willing to do something even though we don't want to do it. We might feel pressure from family; we feel compelled by a supervisor or boss so we do it, but we don't want to. Peter says elders should want to oversee the church; in 1 Timothy 3 he says those who aspire to be overseers desire a noble task. Aspire. Desire. There ought to be gladness and joy in overseeing the flock. Not because you're forced. You're glad to do it.

Secondly, elders are to oversee *sacrificially*. I get that from the phrase, "not for shameful gain, but eagerly." To exercise oversight for shameful gain means I serve as an overseer of the flock for what I can get rather than what I can give. That is completely out of step as a steward of God's varied graces. A person or a group of elders can twist the high and sacred calling of an elder for their own gain. The gain of status, the gain of power and influence and the gain of finances are 3 shameful reasons to aspire to the office of an overseer. God will judge such people who seek to lead for these reasons.

On the contrary, rather than for their own gain, elders oversee for the gain of others in an eager way. How can I serve for the gain and reward of others? How can I be an instrument of blessing in the life of God's church? That's the manner in which elders oversee.

Finally, they are *servants*. I get that from the phrase "not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples of the flock." There's a way leaders can make ugly demands, right? I'm going to get what I want in my way; it's all about me. And because a leader has influence and power, he can force his way a lot, can't he? That doesn't sound much like Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. The manner an elder should oversee is glad, sacrificial service.

But there's also the task of oversight. The Bible is explicit about 3 tasks: management, teaching and prayer. We discussed teaching in detail so we want talk about it at all now; go to fbcmedford.com and listen to last weeks message. Let's talk about management and prayer.

Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3 that an elder must manage his own household well, "for if someone doesn't know to how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" The care he speaks of is obviously the care of managing the body of Christ.

Management is a funny thing, right? No job description can sum up all the responsibilities of a manager. Because at the end of the day, a manager, a steward must meet the demands of his task. There's not someone else, right? A manager can't say, "Oh, someone else will do that; someone else will worry about that." No, that's what a manager does.

Someone, some group, needs to manage the body. And this management is most certainly at least the origin or foundation of the decisions and actions of a church. How are we going to minister to our youth? When are we going to have morning services? Who's going to pick out the curriculum for our children's Christian education? What is the best way to handle this conflict? What are the qualifications for directing these various ministries? Who's going to be on the pastoral search team? All of these decisions and action steps need to be made and taken and Jesus has granted this authority and charge, this management of his church, to the elders.

Sometimes, and very wisely, elders delegate these decisions to others. The church of Jesus Christ is filled with gifted and godly people. Leaders wisely utilize all the resources God has given his church. So, elders ask so-n-so to manage the church grounds. The elders appoint these godly Sunday school teachers to help review the curriculum. Elders empower the staff to do X, Y and Z. You can see how through delegating elders can give oversight. At other times, and again, very wisely, they make these decisions themselves.

With either of those approaches, delegation or direct action, elders possess this charge or responsibility. They are the principle shepherds and overseers of the church. Listen again to vs. 2-3, "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." You have a charge, elders. You have an assignment; that's the idea. God has given you these people to lead, guide and shepherd. Do so well. They are in your charge; you will be held accountable. So, don't drop the ball. Don't ignore the needs. This management is a primary responsibility of the elders of a church.

We see another responsibility in James 5 so turn with me to that passage (READ James 5:13-15). The responsibility or task is one of prayer. Go to you elders for prayer and they will ask God on your behalf. What's really interesting about this responsibility is that it again matches the model and work of Jesus Christ for his church. What has Jesus and what does Jesus currently do for his church as the chief Shepherd? He intercedes for his people. He makes appeals and requests for us. He advocates on our behalf. There's this great verse; Hebrews 7:25, "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." He's always doing it for us, isn't he? What an awesome thing to remember! Jesus is interceding for his people.

The elders of Christ's church, those entrusted to carry on the shepherding and overseeing ministry are to do this as well; they are to follow the example of the Great Shepherd and Overseer of our souls; to pray for the people of God. Maybe you're wondering, "Well, how come our leaders never came to me and prayed with me? I had surgery last year; my mother was sick. No one came to pray with me" We want to do that for you. I'm happy to report that when your leaders gather together we pray for the needs that we know of. And don't forget your part in this: look at vs. 14, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." Make the call, FBC.

That's a step of faith, isn't it? To make a call to your elders saying, "Would you come and pray for me?" is to believe it matters. It's to believe it makes a difference. Making the call is faith; it's a faith that says, "I do believe the prayer of faith heals." This verse doesn't say elders go and pray; it says to the church "call the elders to pray" and the will come.

I was in Medford in 2005, but my mother told me about how she and my father called the leaders of their church to come and pray for them as Dad was struggling with cancer. They came. They gathered together in one of the visitor lounges on my Dad's hospital floor; I think my mother said some other family were there. And the leaders pleaded to God for my dad and mom. They prayed for healing, they prayed for mercy. There were tears from my parents and from the elders. And God was good. It's such a neat picture of faith; the faith of a follower of Jesus to ask for prayer and faith by the elders to come and ask God to do his miraculous work.

So, here are these tasks, these responsibilities of the elders of a local church. They are to give oversight, leadership and management to the body of Christ. That includes the task of teaching sound doctrine so that the church of Jesus Christ receives and experiences God's salvation. They are to pray for the body just like Jesus intercedes for them. The elders have a lot of work to do, Amen? And they are to do this a certain way, in a certain manner. Gladly, sacrificially with an aim to serve others and not themselves.

Now, there's just one more question to cover: How should the church and her elders relate? How do they work together? What are both of their responsibilities? When we put that together the church of Jesus Christ will be humming along to the tune of God's glory.

Key Verse: Acts 20:28 ~ Pay careful attention to yourself and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Questions for the week

- Have you given much thought to the reality that Jesus is the Great Shepherd and Overseer of your soul? What does that say about him and how does that encourage you?
- Do you think it's significant that elders are also called to "shepherd" and "oversee" the church? How so?
- What elder task are you most appreciative of? Why?