

Introduction:

A. A few years ago our elders were thinking about the direction of our church. One of our brothers said, “*VCL is a shepherding church.*” And we all agreed. Jesus has instilled in this congregation a kind of shepherd’s patience and grace. It seems that often wounded people come to recover here and feel safe. We feel like God uses this whole church to nourish people, and to stand guard against spiritual predators. We give students a model of a shepherding church, and help the pastors-in-training learn from our elders and staff how to be good shepherds of God’s flock. Shepherding is essential to our ministry at Village Church.

B. So it especially important for those of us on the pastoral staff to be deeply committed to being good shepherds. **Today, Jamie and Melissa, as you begin your ministries here at Village Church I want to challenge you with the words of 1 Peter 5:1, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care.”** As you both know, being shepherds is central to our expectations of you. You were called here because we believe you share that desire. You also know that this is a subject especially dear to me and that I’ve written much about. [*Pastoral Graces*: p.12]

Doctors enter the practice of medicine. Lawyers, the practice of law. Pastors enter the practice of grace. But practicing grace is not much like the professions of medicine or law. ...

Pastors, like all believers, are agents of grace. But we dispense the grace of Christ as no other believers do. We are shepherds. Search as we might for a word more suited to our contemporary culture, shepherd is the only word that will do. If we hope to understand what we’ve been called by God to do, we have to step into a foreign world of sheep and pastures, folds and staffs, night watches and wilderness searches. Look hard at the timeless figures “keeping watch over their flocks by night.” Patient, long-suffering, committed to the often lonely routines of care. That’s how God wants us to see ourselves. In fact, that is one way God seems himself.

No one is born with the aptitude for being one of the Lord's shepherds. No one starts planning their career thinking, I guess I'll go into the practice of grace. But when we are called, God gives us a miraculous instinct for the work. We commonly call it "a shepherd's heart." While I suppose that some pastors have personalities that give them a leg up, no one has the makings of a shepherd apart from God's grace. You think you're headed for a career in business or education, a trade or an art, and the next thing you know, you're standing there in some pasture with a shepherd's crook in your hand, surrounded by sheep. It's a career comedown unless you know about grace.

- C. Turn to **1 Peter 5:1-4**. This is a passage specifically to church elders. In the NT elders are chosen to oversee churches. Whether or not you hold the *office* of elder, you are *functioning* as elders when the church entrusts you with the oversight of the congregation, as we do with both of you today. So let's look at these verses in 1 Pet. 5.

I. GOD'S SHEPHERDS SHARE A COMMON MOTIVATION (5:1)

- A. I love the company of fellow pastors. I draw a unique strength, humor and sense of safety from my fellowship with other shepherds. So I love the warm camaraderie in Peter's appeal in v.1a: "I appeal to you as a fellow elder." Not as an apostle or the Rock. It is as though he pulls up a chair, as an older shepherd to a younger, and says, "*I've been where you are. It's a challenge leading a church, isn't it? Can I remind you what's most important?*"
- B. But it isn't just that we've had the same responsibility. His appeal continues in **v.1b**, "*and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed.*" Peter saw Christ die and saw him resurrected. And he waits with us for his return. Our kinship as Christians and as church leaders is tethered to Christ's cross behind us and Christ's second coming out ahead of us. Kind of like a zip line! (Which is not a bad metaphor for the pastoral experience!) **There is no stronger appeal for faithful service than this: Jesus died for us and when he comes again we will reign with him.**

What is it he appeals for us to do? **V.2a**, “*Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them...*” The first word is actually a verb not a noun: “*Shepherd God’s flock...*”

II. OUR ESSENTIAL TASK IS TO SHEPHERD GOD’S FLOCK THAT IS UNDER OUR CARE

- A. The first thing leaders had better always remember is that this congregation is “God’s flock,” not ours. It is God who has sent his Son to save these brothers and sisters. It is God’s Spirit who is within them. It is God who will complete the work of making them holy which he has started. It is God who hears their prayers—and their silence. It is God who knows all their names and who has prepared a place for them.
- B. “*Shepherd God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them.*” Church leadership is measured by two intertwined duties —shepherd and oversee or *watch over*. You both have learned how tempting it is to measure ministry by the wrong yardstick. Both churches and pastors often have an unbiblical measure of success. **Dallas Willard** wrote, “*Pastors [and I’d include churches] need to redefine success. The popular model of success involves the ABCs—attendance, buildings, and cash. Instead of counting Christians, we need to weigh them. We weigh them by focusing on the most important kind of growth...fruit in keeping with the gospel and the kingdom.*” [Leadership Journal, Summer ‘05].

Peter has already used these two words, shepherd and overseer, in this book. Look at **1 Pet 2:25**, “*For ‘you were like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*” Same words: **Shepherd and Overseer**. Jesus is our Pastor. So pastors and elders look to Jesus Christ as our model and mentor. We intern under him. We are his under-shepherds, his under-overseers, his assistant pastors.

- C. Did you notice the mention of the soul: “*you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*”? Do you remember what it says of the Lord our shepherd in **Ps 23:3**,

“*he refreshes [restores, reorients] my soul.*” It is easy to forget with all the stuff we have to do and all the stuff a church expects that a pastor’s main work is to attend to these young and old souls—in preaching, visits, counseling, ministry meetings, and prayer. [Here is a classic slide sequence from my pastoral counseling class.]

- D. Back to the two key words. “**Shepherd God’s flock that is under your care.**” Ezekiel told Israel’s shepherds that means **strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back strays and search for the lost.** He tells us it means providing **nourishing pasture, keeping sheep from biting and butting one another** (which not only happens with the lambs in the nursery!), and **protecting the pasture.** We know from David that it means the **skills of staff and rod, leading on paths of righteousness and through death’s valley,** and the **celebration of God’s feast and the promise** that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And we know from Jesus that the Good Shepherd **lays down his life** for his sheep. There is our model.
- E. **The other intertwined assignment is to oversee God’s flock**— “*watching over them.*” What do you think that word ‘oversee’ involves? Maybe three tasks: **presence, vigilance and authority.**

Presence: In order to shepherd well we have to be *around.* A pastor friend years ago called it “*the ministry of walking around.*” We have to be among the flock. We shepherds need to be here and to know names.

Vigilance: Overseeing means, too, that we have to keep our eyes open, **we have to see spiritual signals others might miss.** The restless stirring. The hint of spiritual sickness. The fighting. The one that’s missing. The lurking danger or predator. The time to move and the time to rest.

Authority: We carry the authority to speak God’s Word to our flock; to confront sin and error and to affirm God’s forgiveness to those who repent; to lead God’s people on “paths of righteousness.”

- F. You've heard of the seven deadly sins. Well for pastors there are three more: vv.2b-3... The three deadly pastoral sins: **grudging service, fleecing the flock, and domineering leadership.** You have no idea how enticing those sins can be for a pastor! I suspect you *do* have a pretty good idea how damaging they are, because you've probably seen them poison a church.

Put positively, watching over our flock means pleasing God with our willingness, eager to serve, and being examples of humility to the church. You and I know how easy it is to grow weary of doing good. We serve a wonderful church but sometimes it is hard to be *willing* to do what we *must* do. Sometimes it's hard to remember that our reward is service. And when it is tough to get things done, or when we want recognition, it is easy to subtly "lord it over" people instead of being examples of humble service.

Finally, there is the reward: v.4...

III. THE LORD PROMISES HIS SHEPHERDS A CROWN OF GLORY (5:4)

- A. Being a shepherd of God's people is often very rewarding but it can also be terribly difficult—brutal even. Pastor Paul wrote of the burdens of shepherding, "*Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*" Let's face it, pastoral work is *not* always rewarding.
- B. Our real reward—the sure thing—is "the crown of glory that shall never fade away." In v.1 Peter speaks of "sharing in the glory to be revealed." I'm glad when the work is rewarding now but the real reward is ahead. All believers will be crowned with glory when Jesus returns but Peter has something particular in mind. I don't think it is *greater* glory than other saints but perhaps he does envision something *distinctive* for shepherds. I wrote this about v.4: (*Pastoral Graces*, pp.169-170)

I know this is kind of a silly picture, but imagine us all gathered in heaven, thrilled to finally be together with all our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Then someone says,

"Let's get a picture of all the shepherds here." Some agreeably begin to bunch together, the tall ones pushing the short ones forward. And then Jesus comes to us. "I want to be in this picture," He says. "Shepherds are my kind of people." So we proudly scrunch in close around him—all who have borne this calling over the centuries—all those plain, ordinary, unremarkable folks who have shepherded equally ordinary flocks. And I imagine Him pointing at me and saying, "Come on Lee . . . You are one of my shepherds! I want you in this picture with me."

Pastors are also promised, "You will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." Shepherds don't usually wear crowns. But then there was King David and King Jesus, shepherd kings. All believers will be given crowns in heaven—signals of our reigning with Christ. I hope ours has a little shepherd's staff logo on it or something. Revelation 7:17 says, "For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." If Jesus remains our Chief Shepherd forever, I wonder if somehow we might continue to shepherd with him.

CONCLUSION

I'm so excited to have you both to shepherd this flock along with me and our elders. I'm so thankful for those who've served before you—Pastors Jared Smith and Michael Mauriello, and for Susan Eclov who has been a shepherd to children and who continues to shepherd us all through worship. It is a wonderful privilege to serve—to shepherd—this flock. You know full well how many others would love to be where you are today.

So now we want to commission you to this work. We want to take up the ancient custom of laying hands on you, on behalf of this church, and praying for you. In so doing, we convey to you the elders' authority to shepherd this flock that is under your care.

Illus.: **Dr. Tim Laniak**, an Old Testament professor at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, Charlotte, interviewed a Bedouin shepherd in Jordan some years ago.

Q. How many sheep and goats do you have?

A. 2000. I have the biggest flock in this area...

Q. How many did you start with?

A. I began with one in 1984. And I still know every one of them. They are like family to me.

Q. With that many, you still know every one of them?

A. Yes. I am with the flocks every day. Although I have homes in the village, I stay out here with them during the summer [migration]. I must personally supervise the care of the sheep or I shouldn't be a shepherd... **It's a thing of the soul; it's not a business.**

Q. Have you ever lost any sheep?

A. Yes, but I always looked for the ones that were lost until I found them—alive or dead. There is only one sheep that I couldn't find and it still bothers me every day.

Q. How long would it take to teach me to be a good shepherd?

A. **Do you have the heart for it?**