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1 Peter 5:1-4

Seventeenth Message

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LEADING FROM THE BOTTOM

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

As it faces a hostile world, the church in America is in a state of crisis. Every arena of secular life—whether it is government, the schools, or business—is taking an aggressive stance against Christianity and the absolutes it represents. The difficulties we face are enhanced by the deplorable lack of godly Christian leaders to confront this challenge. Eugene Peterson, a pastor of a church in Maryland, laments this state of affairs. In his book, *Working the Angles*, he wrote,

American pastors are abandoning their posts, left and right, and at an alarming rate. They are not leaving their churches and getting other jobs. Congregations still pay their salaries. Their names remain on the church stationery and they continue to appear in pulpits on Sundays. But they are abandoning their posts, their *calling*. They have gone whoring after other gods. What they do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn't the remotest connection with what the church's pastors have done for most of twenty centuries.

A few of us are angry about it. We are angry because we have been deserted... The people I thought I would be working with disappeared when the work started. Being a pastor is difficult work; we want the companionship and counsel of allies. It is bitterly disappointing to enter a room full of people whom you have every reason to expect share the quest and commitments of pastoral work and find within ten minutes that they most definitely do not. They talk of images and statistics. They drop names. They discuss influence and status. Matters of God and the soul and Scripture are not grist for their mills.

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeepers' concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.

Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations... The marketing strategies of the fast-food franchises occupy the waking minds of these entrepreneurs; while asleep they dream of the kind of success that will get the attention of journalists. "A walloping great congregation is fine, and fun," says Martin Thornton, "but what most communities really need is a couple of saints."¹

In response to similar concerns in his day, the apostle Peter in his first letter sets out the qualifications necessary for biblical leadership in the church. During a time of impending persecution and crisis, Peter affirms the need for leadership which transcends the worldly model that is based on charisma and control. Humility is the one quality he desires for those who lead in the church.

In contrast to Peter's own human failings, the image of our Lord as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 42-53 comes into clear focus as the apostle exhorts Christians to clothe themselves in humility. Now that we have transformed hearts and possess new insight, the apostle instructs us to seek God's glory (verses 1,4,10). Humility is the only path to glory, and it must be cultivated by God's people in every sphere of life if we are to impact the world and develop the kingdom of God. In this context, the apostle will reveal the qualifications for leadership, the basis for authority,

the motivation for leadership, and finally, the rewards of leadership. May humility be ours in the fullest measure!

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Pet 5:1-4 NASB)

I. The Qualifications for Leadership (5:1-2)

In verses 1-2, Peter defines the qualifications necessary for Christian leaders, using three biblical terms for leaders in the church: pastor, elder, and overseer. Each of these words refers to the same individual seen from different points of view.

A. Gift: Pastor-Teacher

First, Peter describes the work of elders, using the verb "to shepherd," meaning that leaders must be gifted to teach. The primary work of a shepherd is to lead believers to green pastures, where they will be fed and strengthened by meditating on the word of God, and they will be surrounded by walls of protection and rest.

Peter knew only too well the consequences of not strengthening himself on God's truth. Once, he arrogantly attempted to introduce the kingdom of God by force, as he tried to defend Jesus by cutting off the slave's ear. Then, fearful and anxious, he denied the Lord three times, quickly forgetting his boast of allegiance to his Savior. Later, in John 21, when Jesus asked him three times if he loved him, the Lord magnified the three denials and his forgiveness. Jesus then charged Peter with the responsibility, "Feed my lambs." This emphasizes that the primary work of pastors is to teach sheep where to find sustenance.

To accomplish this, God has given elders a divine gift "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12). These qualities are not earned; they are not learned in school, nor are they conferred by any man. These are gifts imparted by the Holy Spirit according to his sovereign will. Our body has a multitude of shepherds who work in Sunday School, women's ministries, home fellowships, Backyard Bible Club, etc. They are gifted to impart the Word to those whom they lead, and they come from a broad category of people.

Paul tells us that the elders who are especially gifted in this area must be set aside fulltime to study and preach. "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17). Thus, Peter tells elders to shepherd the church "of God." We must never forget that the church is God's possession. The New Testament demonstrates that the apostles were seldom planted anywhere permanently. For example, it is recorded that different people preached at various times in Corinth. As a result, no one could claim ownership of the people. Although the situation is the opposite at Peninsula Bible Church, the principle is the same. Because the Silicon Valley and its high-tech industrial base is in a constant state of flux, it is

the pastors who remain planted while the congregation changes. This is a good reminder that people are not to be considered property to control, but are here to be served for a short time. Although we want to be faithful to teach you, we emphasize that you belong to the Lord.

B. Experience and Character: Elder

Secondly, the word “elder” refers to experience and character. Thus, there are some shepherds who are more experienced than others. The word for “elder” in Greek is where we get the word “presbyterian,” referring to experience and godly character (Titus 1:5-9). The Old Testament refers to the “gray hairs,” the elders who sat at the city gates and acquired their wisdom through life experiences. In the New Testament, with the giving of the gift of the Spirit, we meet a mature young man. Timothy was disciplined by the apostle Paul for about sixteen years. In his mid-thirties, he functioned as an elder by experience and gift. Paul encourages him, saying, “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (1 Tim 4:12).

In the church, there is a process which a man must go through to reach this point of maturity. First, he must elder his own life and grow in his personal piety. Then he must elder his home, leading and teaching his wife and children by his humble example. Throughout this time, he is to develop a good reputation in the world by his actions at work and in the community. Lastly, he is to elder the church. Eldership in the church is last because the flock of God is precious, having been purchased by the blood of his Son. God does not want a neophyte overseeing and feeding his church.

C. Calling: Overseer

Thirdly, leadership requires calling. This is described by the term “overseeing,” found in most Greek manuscripts. The word expresses the shepherd’s call to watch over and guard the flock of God, to protect his people from evil forces that would hinder their growth in the Lord. A leader must care for his charges by guiding them to good pastures where they can feed on the Word. “Overseer” is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe God himself. He watches over Israel, his flock, with tender care, and then intercedes from heaven to “visit” his people with salvation or judgment (Ps 17:3; 65:9; 89:32; 106:4; Jer 29:10; Luke 1:68; 7:16).

In Acts 20, Paul says to the elders in Ephesus, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). This verse establishes that it is the Spirit who chooses people out of the pool of shepherds who are gifted and experienced, and then calls them to a particular flock. We have many people in our church who have spiritual gifts and godly character, but God has called them to other ministries. It is only those whom God has called to elder who serve the people in that capacity.

Thus, the qualifications for leadership is gift, experience and character, and calling. In PBC, none of our elders are serving because they are ambitious. They want to find the mind of the Lord, to cultivate a pasture where we can feed on the life of Christ and grow up in grace. Twice a month they meet for several hours at a time to pray and seek the mind of the Lord for this body. It is not an easy task because they also have the demands of their jobs and families, and yet they have the important task of leading the church. Please be committed to pray for them.

II. The Basis of a Leader’s Authority (5:1)

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed.

A. Relative to the Past: “As a Witness of the Sufferings of Christ”

The basis of Peter’s authority is in the context of the past, the present, and the future. Regarding the past, he says he was “a witness of the sufferings of Christ.” Thus, Peter has authority to speak about humility as the road to glory as he himself was an eyewitness to the sufferings of Christ. Since no one can replace these apostolic eyewitnesses, the authority of elders today comes by submitting to this apostolic teaching and authority. No elder is free to regard himself as equal to an apostle; he must be subject to their teaching. Only one generation of eyewitnesses saw the sufferings of Christ. Subsequent generations must feed on the foundation of that temple.

The earliest church fathers give testimony to this attitude. Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis (c. A.D. 130) wrote,

I shall not hesitate to set down for you, along with my interpretations, all things which I have learned from the elders with care and recorded with care, being well assured of their truth. For, unlike most men, I took pleasure not in those that had much to say but in those that teach the truth; not in those who record strange precepts, but in those who related such precepts as were given to the Faith from the Lord and are derived from the Truth itself. Besides, if ever any man came who had been a follower of the elders, I would enquire about the sayings of the elders; what Andrew said, or Peter, or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples; for I did not consider that I got so much profit from the contents of books as from the utterances of a living and abiding voice.

After 1800 years of building on that foundation, it is ludicrous to think that God would deny his work by using someone like Joseph Smith or Mary Baker Eddy to create a whole new foundation to the building. We do not listen to anyone’s teaching if it does not line up with apostolic truth. It has no authority in our lives.

B. Relative to the Present: “As Your Fellow Elder”

In the present, Peter says that he is merely a fellow elder. In this capacity he steps out of the role of apostle and walks among his brothers as an equal. In the New Testament church there was a plurality of leadership who sought the mind of Christ together; they never invested it in one man. As an apostle, Peter indicates that he does not violate the unanimous voice of the elders. That is an important principle when we remember there were times in Peter’s life as an apostle when he drifted. Then the brothers rebuked him and called him back to the mind of Christ for the local church.

Acts 15 records one of these incidents. The letter from the leadership of the church in Jerusalem to the church at Antioch sets the stage for us: “it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul...for it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well...they went down to Antioch...they rejoiced” (Acts 15:25,28,29,30,31). In Galatians, Paul adds, “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned...he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in the hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy” (Gal 2:11-13).

Thus, Peter understood that being an apostle did not give him authority to act alone. As an elder, he acted in accord with his brothers to find the mind of Christ.

That is the same principle by which we are guided at Peninsula Bible Church. First, the elders pray that they will find the mind of the Lord. When that happens, they too must submit to it. Acting out of that circle, they are merely older brothers working together, with no authority in

themselves. This is a guiding principle by which this body has been well served for the past forty years.

C. Relative to the Future: “A Partaker of the Glory to be Revealed”

The goal of leadership is not to create an empire, where one person dominates and controls the body, but rather to serve the flock so that the life of Christ might flood into their lives. By coming alongside those who are suffering, leaders enter into the glory of Christ by entering into his suffering. Peter must have been reminded of the incident when James and John asked the Lord to let them rule in glory (Mark 10:35-45). Contemplating his crucifixion, Jesus said, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” Similarly, when Peter was ordained after the resurrection, Jesus told him that he also would be crucified. This is to show that a leader’s greatest encouragement to his flock is that they can enter into glory together through the process of suffering.

Thus, an elder gains authority by submitting himself to apostolic teaching. Then, as a more mature brother, he comes alongside the flock to encourage them in their pain so that they might enter into the glory of the age to come.

III. The Motivation for Leadership (5:2)

A. How an Elder is Motivated

shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.

Peter exhorts elders not to be motivated under compulsion. When ministry is prompted by obligation rather than from the Spirit’s initiation, there is no lasting impact on the flock. Elders must allow the Lord to move them from the heart. Otherwise their actions will be routine and void of love.

Likewise, profit or earthly rewards must not be a motivation, but elders must serve with a full heart. In Psalm 110, David looked ahead to the Ascension of the Messiah when he would inaugurate the New Covenant. He wrote, “Thy people will volunteer freely in the day of Thy power” (Ps 110:3). This demonstrates that we must be ready to serve with a willing heart, rather than holding back to see first if there is an earthly reward (such as money or prestige). If we understand our reward comes from the Lord on the last day, then we will be able to cultivate a ready heart to serve from pure motives. The apostle Paul affirms, “The love of Christ constrains me” (2 Cor 5:14).

The elders of this church have ruled that no can speak or sing here if they demand a financial payment in return. There are some ministries today that demand a specific honorarium before they will minister in a church. We say to them, “Come and serve. As the Spirit moves our people to give in response to your ministry to them, they are to give freely to you.” We may take care of their expenses to come, but we will never guarantee anything except what the love offering yields. If they are not willing to serve on that basis, then we are not interested in having them come. We desire that people serve you out of pure motives for ministry.

B. How an Elder Motivates Others

...nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

Just as the shepherd is not to be driven to obedience by external coercion, the best way to influence the flock is to motivate them from within. The most powerful force to accomplish this is by example. It is not spiritually profitable for the leader to impose duty on people, because there is only one Lord in the church; the rest of us are merely brothers. The text is a play on words: You cannot lord it over the flock because you are not the Lord. Even Jesus, who was Lord, never coerced his disciples into obedience; he motivated them by his love, which eventually led him to

the cross. Thus, leaders must never boss, command, dominate, manipulate, coerce, or use their leverage to accomplish their purposes. Rather, example is the most powerful way for leaders to influence others. Jesus said, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them...But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-43).

When one of our pastors shared this concept at a pastors’ conference, a pastor asked, “If you lose control, who is going to keep the people straight?” I will never forget how our pastor responded: “Who keeps you straight? It is the Lord who keeps his people straight.” None of us is Lord. We cannot pull all the strings, be at every meeting, etc. The only way we can lead is by being an example of godly character.

I have never taken a course on how to study the Bible, but have been led by watching godly men as they spent time with God in prayer and study of his word. Once, when our pastoral staff took a ministry trip together, I was inspired by the example of a man named Bruce Waltke. In the midst of a busy hotel lobby one day he opened his Bible to the book of Proverbs and spoke from his understanding of the Hebrew text. I felt my heart burning, just as the disciples’ hearts burned when they were with Jesus and they heard him teach the word. I made a vow that day that I was going to learn to study like Bruce. When I roomed with him, I saw that he was not merely a scholar, but he had a deep piety which informed his intellect. At night he would pray humbly, on his knees by his bed. When I heard him praying for his children, I was deeply affected. I knew then that I wanted the Lord to give me a spirit like that.

An elder can also teach us how to suffer by his own example and transparency in suffering. Murmurers and complainers are silenced by such godly conduct. Many people in this body may not be aware that one of our elders has suffered from a tropical disease for over fifty years. For most of that time the medical profession did not even have a name for it, but it has paralyzed him and deeply affected him. He now has kidney failure and is uncertain of the future. His wife is not in good health either, yet I have never heard this man complain about his circumstances. His sweet spirit rebukes me, and is a great example of a deep and lasting faith in our sovereign Lord.

Thus, the very thing that motivates us, the Spirit moving on our hearts, is the way we are to motivate others. This is an important model for leadership, whether it is in the church, the community, or the home.

IV. The Reward for Leadership (5:4)

And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

There are rewards to leading, but they will not be realized in this life. Is it difficult to serve when no one notices and there is no earthly reward? Christ, the head of his church, is the one who rewards leaders, not men, and his reward is an unfading crown of glory. At the banquet feast on the last day, the Lord will hand the faithful a crown and say, “I want you to reign with me. You can now do it with the unadulterated flow of my life through you. It is pure, holy, and perfect. I give you this aspect of the universe to rule.” That is our reward.

This year, four of our elders retired from the PBC board. Between them, they faithfully served as elders a total of 130 years, but they did not expect or desire earthly rewards. When we honored Ray Stedman for his forty years of ministry to this church, we asked him what we could give him. “A week in Carmel,” he replied. After forty years of service, a week in Carmel! That kind of humility describes the man who will be greatly rewarded when the Chief Shepherd appears.

We see in this passage the model for Christian leadership. Leaders must be gifted, humble servants who motivate by example. They are looking for the crown of glory, with no thought of earthly reward in this

life. In contrast, the greatest danger to leadership is pride, because its motive is self rather than love of the Lord. That is why Paul warns that an elder should not be a new convert lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

V. The Corruption of Leadership

A. Historically

Despite the model for servant leadership in this letter, Peter's words were disregarded by the middle of the first century. Facing the intense persecution of Rome, the church adopted a hierarchical model. They took the three names for the same individual—pastor, elder, and bishop—and applied them to individual offices. At the top of the hierarchy was the bishop, who ruled the elders, who in turn ruled the pastors. The pastors then ruled the deacons, and the deacons ruled the flock. A document from A.D. 107 describes the corruption of the biblical model at that time:

It is evident that we should look upon the bishop as we do upon the Lord himself...It is necessary, as in your habit, to do nothing without the bishop [that means, no ministry without the bishop being there], and that you should be subject also to the presbytery, as to the apostles of Jesus Christ...Let all of you follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ [follows] the Father; and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons as the ordinance of God. Without the bishop let no one do anything connected with the church. Let that Eucharist be accounted valid which is [offered] under the bishop or by one he has appointed. Everywhere the bishop is found, there let the people be; as wherever Christ is, there is the catholic church. Without the bishop it is not lawful either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast (Ignatius).

It was not long before there were leading bishops in cities like Caesarea and Rome competing for the control, and this led to the Papacy. Finally, the pope was not only given ultimate spiritual authority, but he grasped at secular power as well. By failing to follow the biblical model for leadership, power-hungry men corrupted the church and its influence in the world. It was not until fifteen hundred years later, during the Reformation, that Martin Luther returned to the scriptures alone as the basis for ministry.

B. In the Present

Most churches in America today are led by a "pope," but his title has been changed to "senior pastor." He or she controls the church, goading the people to service rather than modeling humility and motivating people to serve from a full heart. Unfortunately, that is the state of Christian leadership today. It is deplorable that a godly man like Eugene Peterson continues to hope for a mentor who follows the biblical pattern of leadership.

Occasionally, however, we see a rare jewel who models servant leadership against the backdrop of arrogance and wrong, authoritarian models. I will close by reading a letter, written by Chuck Swindoll, which describes such a man. This man is a mentor in Chuck's life, a unique elder who models according to the biblical standard we have just been discussing.

A MENTOR

There we sat, a cluster of six. A stubby orange candle burned at the center of our table. Flickering eerie shadows crossed all our faces. One spoke; five listened. Every question was handled with such grace, such effortless ease. There was no doubt that each answer was drawn from deep wells of wisdom, shaped by tough decisions and nurtured by time. Like forty years in the same church. And seasoned by travel. Like having ministered around the

world. And honed by tests, risks, heartbreaks, and failures. But, like the best wines, it was those decades in the same crucible year and year that made his counsel invaluable. Had those years been spent in the military, he would have a chest full of medals.

His age? Seventy-two. His face? Rugged as fifty miles of bad road. His eyes? Ah, those eyes. Piercing. When he peered at you, it was as if they penetrated to the back of your cranium. He had virtually seen it all; weathered all the flack and delights of the flock. Outlasted all the fads and gimmicks of gullible and greedy generations, known the ecstasy of seeing many lives revolutionized, the agony of several lives ruined, and the monotony of a few lives remaining unchanged. He has paid his dues. And he had the scars to prove it. What a creative visionary!

But this is not to say he's over the hill. Or to suggest that he has lost his zest for living, his ability to articulate his thoughts, or his keen sense of humor. There we sat for well over three hours, hearing his stories, pondering his principles, questioning his conclusions, and responding to his ideas. The evening was punctuated with periodic outbursts of laughter followed by protracted periods of quiet talk. All six lost contact with time.

As I participated, I was suddenly 26 years old again. A young seminarian. No children. A pastoral intern, existing in a no-man's land between a heart full of desire and a head full of dreams. I was long on theological theories but short on practical experience. I had answers to questions no one was asking, but a lack of understanding on the things that really mattered. In momentary flashbacks, I saw myself in the same room with the man thirty years earlier, drinking at the same well, soaking up the same spirit of his style. Back then I was merely impressed...last week I was deeply moved. Thirty years ago he was a model; last week I realized he had become a mentor. Thoroughly human and absolutely authentic, he has emerged a time-warped, well-worn vessel of honor fit for the Master's use. I found myself profoundly grateful that Ray Stedman's shadow had crossed my life.

In a day of tarnished leaders, fallen heroes, busy fathers, frantic coaches, arrogant authority figures, and eggheaded profs, we need mentors like never before. Such rare finds are guides, not gods. They are approachable and caring souls who help us negotiate our way through life's labyrinth without shouting or dictating. Mentors know how to stretch us without insulting us, affirm us without flattering us, make us think without requiring their answers in return, release us without abandoning us. They're always right there, even though they may be a thousand miles away. They become invisible partners, whispering hope and reproofs on the journey toward excellence.

As we said good-bye to Ray, I walked a little slower. I thought about the things he had taught me without directly instructing me and about the courage he had given me without deliberately exhorting me. I wondered how it had happened. I wondered why I had been so privileged to have had my "face" reflected in his "water" or my "iron" sharpened by his "iron." A nostalgic knot formed in my throat as I forced myself to realize that, at age 72, he doesn't have much more than a couple decades left, if that. I found myself wanting to run back to his car and tell him again how much I love and admire him. But it was late, and after all I'm a 55-year-old man. A husband. A father. A grandfather. A pastor. To some, a leader, and perhaps to a few, maybe even a hero.

But as I stood there alone in the cold night air, I suddenly realized what I wanted to be most when I grow up.

As we contemplate the sad state of church leadership today we can be grateful that one has gone before us who has left a godly legacy. Pray that by God's grace the leadership of Peninsula Bible Church will remain on course.

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1-2.

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