

Prayer

In the beauty of this day, teach me something of Your majesty, Lord Jesus. Show me Your smile in the faces of other people and show me Your joy in the glories of nature; show me Your love in the solutions to problems and show me Your generosity in the salvation of the world! I am Yours, Lord Jesus, to teach as You will; You student, forever. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray for the Arab nations of the world; many of them are Muslim, but a wide variety of people including Christians live in them. Pray for tolerance love and understanding.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for solutions in Zimbabwe*
- *Give thanks for the technologies which aid communication*
- *Pray about scientific work on the very edges of knowledge*

Meditation

This is a day of great liberty, O Lord;
You have set me free!

This is a day of amazing miracles, O Lord;
You have healed my soul!

This is a day of glorious service, O Lord;
You have given me my work!

This is a day of infinite opportunity, O Lord;
You have set the world before me!

This is a day of powerful insight, O Lord;
You have opened my mind!

This is a day of divine judgement, O Lord;
You have set Your standards!

This is a day You have given me, O Lord;
Your love will bring me through!

Bible Study - 1 Peter 5:1-5

¹ As a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ who will share with you in the glory about to be revealed, I urge the elders among you ² to tend to God's flock which is in your care, exercising oversight not out of compulsion but willingly, as God requires; and not for personal gain but eagerly; ³ not by dominating those in your care but by being an example to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility in the way you deal with one another, for 'God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.'

Review

These are profoundly important words for the Church of God in any age and place. Peter draws his letter to a conclusion by addressing the leaders of the Church with advice about

the practical maturity they should demonstrate within their work for the Lord; and in so doing, he leaves us with a wealth of wisdom. Not all of us are leaders, but it is important for us all to know what we should expect from those who serve in any capacity within the church. It is God's will that His people are led in an open manner and by people who are prepared to be Christ-like in their attitudes, diligent in their work for others, and careful about their own needs; as this text makes very clear.

This whole passage of scripture does two things. It's words remind us of the difficult heritage of the people of God in Jesus' day who had been badly led over hundreds of years, and were at that time being led astray by the party of the Pharisees who insisted that their interpretation of Judaistic law was correct to the exclusion of all else. The Old Testament tells us about how the leadership of Israel progressively broke down after the time of King David. Kings were supposed to protect the people by acting according to God's instructions (see 1 Samuel 8), but as time went by, kings such as Ahab (1 Kings 21:1f.) and Ahaz (see Isaiah 7,8) persistently ignored godly precedent and the advice of prophets, and they made political concessions to neighbouring states which compromised the religious duties of the Temple priests (see 2 Kings 17:7-23). For these reasons, Peter insists that the leadership of God's people should not be for personal gain (5:2), should be exercised through example not domination (5:3), and that youthful leaders should submit themselves to authority (5:5) and demonstrate humility in their dealings with others (5:5). In addition, Peter gave this advice because he had seen true leadership at work in the person of Jesus Christ, a man who was 'prophet priest and king' for all God's people.

It is easy to give 'lip-service' to such advice, but the dangers of not keeping close to scripture is evident all around us. Although there are many godly leaders, all too often there are others who are self interested rather than focussed on the needs of others, who insist on their own ways, set a bad moral or ethical example, show disrespect for those placed over them, and come across to people generally as arrogant. The world often parodies the apparent false humility of religious leaders, showing them high-minded and isolated, and tragically, it is the stuff of common humour in many countries. Firstly, godly people are cautious about exposing bad leaders because they fear that they will themselves be accused of acting in bad faith, and secondly, good leaders are often prevented from doing what they are capable of because of the negativity of those who are suspicious of leaders, having suffered themselves under bad leadership.

These are serious issues, and I know that they do not apply to all churches. However, I am aware that too many Christians are stifled in their witness because of troubles such as these, and there is only one solution. The leaders of God's people need to be trained and taught according to the scriptural principles embedded within passages such as this. Peter speaks about Christ as the supreme example of leadership, who will come again to judge their work (5:4). Peter singles out the qualities of caring for people (5:2), being a public example to others (5:3), being answerable to Christ (5:4), avoiding domination by accepting the authority of others (5:5) and acting with true humility (5:5). These godly qualities are priceless because they are the true 'imitation of Christ'.

Going Deeper

Peter's words are considered and careful, and what he says boils down to three pieces of advice. Firstly about the mutual sharing which lies at the heart of true leadership (5:1,2), then the true godliness of the example of Christ, the 'chief Shepherd' (5:3,4), and lastly, the submissive attitudes which lead to the proper humility of leadership. All these three themes relate strongly to the rest of Peter's letter.

Notes on the text and translation

V2 *'exercising oversight'* These words are omitted in some translations because it is uncertain whether this word ('episkopountes') is part of the original text. It is obvious that some would find it incomprehensible in the sentence because it implies that an 'elder' (Greek 'prebyteros') performs the functions of a bishop ('episcopos').

For some in the church, such an idea would be unthinkable! But I have followed what I believe to be the original text.

- V2 *'But willingly, as God requires.' The general sense of this part of the sentence is obvious enough, but some ancient manuscripts lack the words 'as God requires'. In this case, it is uncertain why the discrepancy occurs, but I prefer to keep it in along with most translations.*
- V3 *'Not by dominating ...' The word for dominating is the Greek 'katakurieuo' which means exercising power over. Many translations have 'lord it over them ...' but it seems to me that the best English word to use is 'dominate', because the power wielded is clearly ungodly.*

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ (5:1,2)

Peter spoke to the elders of the Christian communities to which he wrote as one who was also an elder in the church. Of course, Peter was the foremost elder and would have been regarded as one who carried supreme authority, but it is striking that Peter did not throw around his authority as if what he said carried extra weight. He did not say 'I urge you as your leader in Christ ...' and then ask people to listen to him because of the pre-eminence of his office. Instead, he recalled his personal testimony of Christ (5:1 - in Greek, his 'witness'), and consequently, people recognised the godliness of what he said, to the point of including his letter within scripture.

The point was this, Peter appealed to the leaders of the communities to which he wrote on the common ground of their mutual suffering for Christ. Yes, everyone knew that Peter had suffered for the Lord and had also made of a fool of himself (as in the story about his walking on water – Matt 14:26f.), but he made no more of this than claim to be a 'fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ who will share with you in the glory about to be revealed.' (5:1). In this way, Peter spoke as if on equal terms with those to whom he wrote, and by so doing, he demonstrated the selflessness and humility of one whose words were consistent with his deeds. He had become a true leader in the style of Christ.

The details of what Peter said next are important, and can be summarised in this way. Elders (in Greek 'presbyteros') were to 'tend' those of Christ's flock in their care. They are not the flock of the leader, but the flock of Christ. For this is the reason I feel uncomfortable when church leaders talk about 'their' church' or 'my' congregation; I can understand that they have been ordained and commissioned to this leadership, but as I understand it, not one of us who are ordained possesses anything in the household of God! We are merely given responsibilities to perform for our Lord, and as we struggle and suffer to do these duties (5:2) we are personally encouraged through the sharing of the task with others. The leadership of God's people is not an obligation with lists of things which must be done (such lists will naturally be generated by themselves!) but it is a matter of being sensitive to what God requires. This is the reason why a church minister or leader who does not pray and talk to God personally cannot do the task; they will not be in touch with God's will!

Lastly, Peter says that eldership must not be for personal gain. This does not mean that full time leaders, ministers, pastors, etc. should not be properly paid, rather that they should not make personal gain from the exercise of ministry which of itself might create a hierarchy of eldership. Pride, esteem, underhand gifts, benefits and favours are not the stuff of practical ministry amongst the people of God!

Christ the 'Chief Shepherd' (5:3,4)

There is a great deal in scripture about the image of God as a shepherd of His people. Some would say that it is built upon Psalm 23 and the experience of David as a shepherd, which he applied to his leadership of God's people in his later years as King of all Israel and Judah. In the centuries before Christ when the line of Kingship in Jerusalem had become tarnished, the people hoped in a Messiah who would fulfil the promise of David's 'line', and it was natural that people such as the prophets (see Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah

11) should interpret the Messiah as one who was a perfect 'shepherd of the sheep'. Isaiah went further of course, and had a great vision of the Messiah as a sheep Himself, led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53).

Peter called on those who had responsibility for the congregations of the church who heard his letter to act as good shepherds of the people with all this in mind. It is highly indicative of what Peter regarded as good 'shepherding' that he identified one negative and one positive characteristic which made a Christian leader like the Master; lack of domination of 'those in your care' (5:3) and the quality of being a good 'example' of faith to the flock. Put together, if the shepherd identifies with the sheep, then the shepherd will be worthy of an 'unfading crown of glory' before the 'Chief Shepherd' (5:4).

This is another way of saying the same things that Peter has already said; true leadership is a matter of following the humble Christ, not a matter of taking the world's model of financial and economic leadership from the boardrooms of companies and running churches on the basis of some version of financial meritocracy or autocracy. If we expect Christ to return, then we should expect Christ to come and show such leadership up for what it is, different forms of manipulation of people according to the religious desires of those who put themselves in positions of power. All of this will be destroyed by the Lord because they are incompatible with the faith, let alone the godly principles of leadership.

The path of humble submission (5:5)

It is the fashion today for churches to look to young people for churches to promote youth leaders and youth 'elders' who have the responsibility of promoting the work of the church amongst young people and leading youth events and meetings which will shape the church of the future. There are good social arguments for this, but there are no scriptural arguments for it, and so it is something which the Lord will either guide into a more scriptural model of leadership, or He will judge it and dismiss it; I hope for the former rather than the latter.

The reason why I seem rather pessimistic about this is because Peter talks about the need for all leadership in God's church to be mutually respectful. The words 'you who are younger must accept the authority of your elders' (5:5) is a straight scriptural command which implores young people, whether elders or not, to act in a submissive way to the general leadership of the church of God and not in a unilateral manner. It is indeed quite possible for godly young people to act in accordance with what scripture says here without compromising the need for them to pursue the mission of the church in a way which relates to young people, and the Lord will bless all such leadership which is essentially humble and serving. Unless young people see the evidence of humility within their leaders, then experiments in 'youth leadership' are likely to have difficulty. The same standards of leadership apply to those who are younger (5:5) as those who are older, and by the very nature of things, those who have a greater experience of life will know more of what it means to be humble before people, the world and God, than those who are new to the faith, whatever their potential in Christ. True submission means that those with less experience need to learn from those with more, and assumptions by young or old about what others might know, shows the opposite of godly submission.

I write this because I do not believe that Peter mentions the 'younger' in verse 5 unless something like this was important in his own day. How terrible it was for Peter to see any division within the body of Christ, and how terrible it is when we see it now, whether it be on the basis of belief, church practice, history, age or race. All God's people, especially leaders, are to 'clothe yourselves with humility in the way you deal with one another.' The warning is clear, God blesses those who hear His voice as given to us through His servant Peter within scripture; but He places barriers against those who do what they want without listening to His Word. Scripture is very clear about this!

Application

Like many who are part of God's people, the Church, I long to see it grow and to know that the Kingdom of God is maturing in our midst. It would be possible to spend one's entire life and ministry being positive about what is happening and doing one's best to encourage good practice; and to a certain extent, what more could be asked of us than that? However, this passage of scripture from Peter's letter warns us that we must be direct in dealing with what is wrong within the leadership of the church and expose the false assumptions which lie behind some of the leadership practices which are to be found within the church even now.

Here, Peter is desperate to get his message across to those who have the responsibility of handling his letter and reading it out to churches. He addresses them directly both with sharp words about what is ungodly and with warm words about what is godly. What else should we expect from scripture? The manner and style of leadership amongst growing churches across the world today is a big issue today, and many leaders need to make sure that the humble words of this text are embedded in them if they are to ensure that the great ministries with which the Lord has entrusted them are to succeed, and the Kingdom is enabled to grow.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What are the key principles of leadership identified in this passage of Scripture, and how can they be put into practice?
2. To what extent have you observed or not observed the principles of leadership identified here, within your church?
3. How can the church safeguard against false leaders who lead congregations astray?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

If you are a leader within a church, then you may feel that within the study I have taken a negative view of what happens in many churches today. If you are not a leader, you may be surprised at what has been said, or sadly agree. Unfortunately, our experience of the church can be very different. My own deepest concern is that problems within the church continue because ungodly practices go unopposed, and there are times when they need to be challenged. This scripture seems to be to be a good basis for understanding sound leadership.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If you are not a leader of God's people, take the opportunity to find ways of supporting the leadership and ministry of your church. If something has gone wrong in your past involvement; bring it into the open, deal with it, and move on.*
- *If you are a leader of God's people in one way or another, make this passage of scripture a priority for the next week or so, and allow it to inform your prayers and your practice of ministry. See what a difference it can make!*

Final Prayer

Protect us, Lord Jesus, from those who seek to manipulate God's people for their own ends, either from within the church or from without. May such evils be exposed for what they are, and may all Your people live according to the Gospel and in the freedom of Your Holy Spirit; AMEN