

The Church Jesus Loves

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You can tell a lot about a person by what they love. It tells you what they live for, where they find community. Sometimes what we think we love and what we actually live for don't line up. Let's look at God's community, flock, church: what it loves, how it lives. 1) Elders who shepherd the flock 2) a flock that submits to the elders 3) grace makes it work.

Shepherd the Flock

It's common to hear people say something like, *"I like Jesus but not the church. I'm not into organized religion."* Which seems to pose a problem for what we're doing here! You may find yourself somewhat reluctantly here. After all it is *Mothers Day*. What should we say to this objection? Well, anytime someone likes Jesus I'm glad to hear it; he is after all the most admirable person in history. But Jesus doesn't ask us to like him; he requires that we love him. It's what he required of Peter, who wrote this letter. After failing Jesus miserably, Jesus asks Peter three times, "do you love me?" (Jn 21) Jesus is asking the same thing of you. Not, do you *like* me? But do you *love* me? It is possible to like things about Jesus without truly loving him. You might like his idea of grace but not love his claim to the truth. How do you know if you love Jesus? He said to Peter, "Feed my lambs, tend my flock, feed my sheep." **If you love Jesus, you love what he loves.** He loves, above all, the church. He jumped out in front of the train of God's wrath for the church, that's how madly in love he is with her. Now, where do I get that, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed." Peter is witness to the sufferings of Christ that created the church. When he writes to *Christians*, he writes to *an organized church*, "the elders among you." So in his mind, Christian and church are inseparable. Peter and **Jesus cannot conceive of a churchless Christian or an elderless church.** Jesus comes attached to a church and the church comes attached to elders. Jesus is the head of a *body*, the shepherd of a *flock*. So, while Peter writes, in a sense "above the church" as an apostolic "witness of the sufferings of Christ," he also writes as one "among the church," a fellow elder, part of the flock. So now that you're convinced that loving Jesus means loving his church, including the elders (!), what should you expect of **elders**? Elders are to shepherd the flock in three ways: with *oversight*, *willingly*, and as *examples*. Before we consider each one, it's important to understand that *elders are pastors*. Here and elsewhere in the NT, elders are called to do pastoral work, to shepherd the flock. So, even if the elder is non-vocational, unpaid by the church, like Austin Becton and Paul Miller, they should be viewed as full fledged pastors. They are real pastors not trustees, board members, or yes men. Now pastoring looks different on different personalities and giftings. So you have to be cautious about favoring certain elders, or saying they are better pastors, simply because they possess a personality or gifting *that you like*. But elders are pastors who work together to care for you. What should that care look like? First, **oversight**. To have oversight is to possess authority and responsibility for the church. *Peter does not tell the sheep to shepherd the elders but for the elders to shepherd the sheep.* He tells us to lead "as God would have you" and not domineer over "those in your charge." Which means elder authority ultimately comes from God and exists for his people. It should not be abusive but dignifying. We should respect the office and the person who fills it. But what if an elder **fails as all will**? Remember Peter's earlier instruction, "love

covers a multitude of sins.” Does God hunt you down for your every failure? No, he is patient and gracious. Elders are to be treated similarly. But, they are not above correction, and should be corrected gently, “*not rebuking an older man but encouraging him as you would a father,*” with the respect of a Dad (1 Tim 5:1). What if a pastor **falls** into unrepentant sin? St. Paul says they should be rebuked in the presence of the church, as was recently done with Darrin Patrick of The Journey Church in St. Louis. We must take heed lest we fall. And if a pastor falls, we may lose some respect for them but we should not lose love, nor should we read a single pastoral failure into all pastors, or churches for that matter. In fact, it is because the office is held so high that there are provisions for pastoral removal. Our oversight, then, is not *derived* from seminary, denominations, or even the local church. Our authority is derived from Jesus, the chief Shepherd, and his Word. So, the main way elders exercise oversight is through preaching, teaching, counseling, exhorting, discipling, not from personal opinion, but from the rigorous study of God’s word. The speech of your Creator and Redeemer explained and applied for you. And you should hold us to that. Second, elders are to serve **willingly**: “*not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly*” (2). Over the years we’ve had elders step down or candidates not go forward. Often this has been, not because they lack character but because they lack the calling. They don’t sense God’s call. You shouldn’t serve as an elder out of sheer duty. There has to be desire, but not any desire, godly desire that what this phrase “as God would have you” means. Not for shameful gain. There is gain—reward, service, noble work—but not for ungodly gain. What might that be? To prove your theology, get a title, get respect in the community, to impress yourself or others. For some it can be tempting to use ministry to build a platform to stand on and say, hey look at me; instead of a place to kneel and say Look at Christ! Elders should serve eagerly, with desire to please Christ and bless his church. Does this mean we will always be motivated by joy, unflagging in passion? No, the whole letter assumes seasons of difficulty and suffering, but its worth it. **An eager elder is an elder who keeps his love trained on Christ.** He does it not for acclaim but for awe, devotion, worship of the risen Lord. Finally, an elder is to be an **example**. Two things are tucked away in this word. First, an elder is to have Christlike character. 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 contain a list of qualifications for elders; 90% are character. Second, that character should be imitated. Any kind of leader, especially an elder, should be able to say, “Follow me as I follow Christ. Imitate me as imitate Christ.” People should be following you. So an elder has character that is passed on. We sometimes call it discipleship. Who are you an example to? Who’s imitating you? Be an example to the flock.

Submitting to the Elders

Now to the church’s part. Peter says, “*Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another*” (5). The word likewise refers back to the exhortation made to elders. Similarly, Peter exhorts the “younger,” meaning those who are younger in the faith, not the elders who possess seniority in the faith. What does he exhort you to do? Be subject. He’s saying put yourself **under the authority** of elders. Why? Because they reflect the authority of Christ, the head of the body. Because its good for your soul. Hebrews 13:17 says it like this: “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*” Submitting to elders is an expression of your submission to Christ.

It's good for you because your elders are men who are soaked in God's word, and they want the best for you. If you know Christians who aren't actively in submission to elders and engaged in a local church, encourage them to love what Jesus loves, *love his sheep and submit to his shepherds*. Submission to elders also means you want to be a church member who **invites elder instruction**. Proverbs 10:17, "**Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray.**" Heeding biblical teaching keeps you on a path that flourishes. Those who reject it and say, ah I don't need to hear sermons to be a Christian lead themselves and others astray. And to reject one instruction is to favor another. No one is instruction-less. Some people have absorbed this teaching "*I like Jesus but not the church.*" Put themselves under its authority. Over years of ministry, the people I see do this veer away from the path of life, and often end up making very poor decisions in life. Why? Because they chose to submit to the instruction of tiny Me not to the expansive wisdom of God. Of course, it's not enough to just show up to a service or even podcast a sermon. That's not active submission. That can easily devolve into information gathering untethered to biblical authority or community. You can't podcast church or electronically submit to elders. Submission is inviting instruction and living in it with God's people. Finally, submission means you are **open to correction**. Be a person who invites the care of elders and leaders not bristles against it. Peter says, "**Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another.**" Humility is the only way this thing works. When people are humble before God and one another, grace flows. A humble person is always open to correction. But a proud person puts up walls, insists on privacy, saying there are lines the church shouldn't cross. But Jesus erased the lines to create a whole new community of grace. **Faith in Christ is not private because Jesus is public.** He didn't hide his wounds; he showed them to the world. Peter put his failures on display for all of history. **Jesus doesn't invite you into a private relationship; he saves you into a public community.** Now, if you have been wounded in the past by some Christians, it's understandable that this would be hard but try not to project one set of Christians onto the whole or create church in your own private image. *A community that is open, honest, godly, and invites correction is a community through which grace can flow.* And this really is Jesus' vision for you. **God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.** You want grace? It doesn't come from detaching yourself from God's word and his church; it flows through them. You have to get downstream of individualism and tiny Me, open yourself up to God, his elders and his church. **Grace flows down to the humble not up to the proud.** The proud try to forge an identity apart from the church—in work, cultural interests, family—but the humble forge an identity within the church—sheep and shepherds, church and elders, old and young all under Christ. A proud church filled with private individuals shows nothing to the world, but a humble church led by exemplary elders giving willing oversight to a submissive flock, that's a witness to the world, a witness to the Chief Shepherd and the flock he creates. Do you love Jesus? Love his church and give his grace to the world.