

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

First Peter: Truth and Hope for Sojourners

“Christian Leadership”

1 Peter 5:1-7

Take a first look.

I. What is the connection between personal character and public office? Many people on both sides of the political spectrum think that one doesn't really connect with the other. One political leader after another has approved of this artificial separation between *position* and *personal character*, as though one has no effect or bearing on the other. This claim is a lie. In recent presidential elections, we have been forced to vote for policies rather than people of character. Maybe that is our lot in a representative republic. We don't always get virtuous people who aspire for political power.

II. Jeannie and I read the book by Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein entitled *Breaking Down Walls* back in the mid-1990s. It is their personal story of becoming partners in ministry. One man is black, and one is white. Raleigh Washington reported that he had grown up in a church where there was a form of godliness but where the power of the gospel was lacking. He told how there was no challenge to live out Christian ethics, where even the pastor of forty years had begotten two children out of wedlock, one of whom was Raleigh's cousin. That is a crisis of leadership.

III. Peter recognized such a crisis in his own time. He realized that living on the edge between the temporary and the eternal called for the best that Christians had to offer. Let's hear his timely word for us today. It is a timely word about Christian leadership, and it can be applied to the home, the business, and the government, but it is aimed at the Church.

Take a closer look at 1 Peter 5:1-7.

I. CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP NEEDS ENCOURAGEMENT. v. 1

1. Peter appeals to “the elders” among his readers, not in a capacity of oversight as an apostle, but as a “fellow elder.” This is the approach of partnership, not authority. Peter could have used the trump-card of apostleship here. He doesn't. He wants his readers to accept his encouragement man to man.

2. He appeals to them as one who shares their suffering. To be a “witness of Christ's sufferings,” means more than just “I was there when Jesus was crucified.” A *witness* was often one who, through suffering himself/herself, showed the truth of the Christian faith through perseverance. Our term *martyr* comes from the Greek word for “witness”: *Martus*. Surely, what Peter wrote to the Christians scattered about the region in regard to suffering was forged in the crucible of experience. He, too, knew firsthand what suffering was like. Even as early as the story of Acts 5, the apostles were facing serious pain for their witness to Jesus Christ.

Peter's word had even more clout because they had a “Been there, done that” quality. He had seen Christ's own sufferings firsthand, as well as he had seen suffering *for* Christ firsthand. He could identify with their experience personally (see 1 Peter 4:13).

3. Peter appeals to them as one who shares their hope. This makes their frame of reference complete. Peter could identify with other Christian leaders both in his mutual position and calling, in the price he has paid to serve in such a manner, and in the ultimate goal of their mutual faith. He

knew that Christian leadership is discharged on the edge between the temporary world and the eternal world, this present passing age and the age to come which would be permanent.

A—When we are seeking encouragement, for an example of Christian leadership—maybe a personal hero—we should look for one whose hope is surely based on the work and promise of Jesus Christ and who has endured hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

I—I have gained a lot of encouragement from reading books. It may seem to you that I read more than I do. In many weeks, if I can squeeze in two hours per week of good reading time, I feel fortunate. Though I have also read articles and book excerpts by non-Christian authors, most of the books that I have read that have inspired my soul to pursue my best before God have been from solidly Christian writers. C. S. Lewis has shaped my life and perspective at various crossroads of my experience. After reading his story of conversion (*Surprised by Joy: the Shape of My Early Life*) and a lot of biographical information about him, I appreciate his witness even more. He was bereaved of his mother as a boy and neither his father nor his brother responded well to her passing. He lived through trench warfare in WWI, having been wounded during the ordeal. He was passed over for tenure at Oxford University despite the immense popularity of his lectures, solely because of his Christian witness in writing and speaking. Cambridge University welcomed him with open arms when his Oxford peers snubbed him. He took care of an eccentric woman for many years. She was the mother of a friend who died in combat and brought along a daughter who was also a drain both financially and emotionally. He managed somehow to give lectures, tutor students, and write books despite their often-unreasonable demands.

One of my personal heroes is William Wilberforce. From his conversion to serious faith in Jesus Christ at the age of twenty-six until his death, he worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and for the reformation of public morality. He suffered under serious medical conditions (perhaps ulcerative colitis and also a weird issue with his spine that made him unable to keep his head up without a metal brace). He was treated with laudanum (opium) that brought about other problems. Yet, he was doggedly faithful to what he understood was a calling from God. He lived just long enough (1833) to hear on his deathbed that Parliament had outlawed slavery in the entire British Empire. I almost wept as I came to the close of John Pollock's masterful biography of Wilberforce, grieving that such a man no longer walked the earth.

Who else can I mention? Chuck Colson, Nancy Pearcey, Francis Schaeffer, Jay Richards, lately Thomas Sowell, G. K. Chesterton. J. Warner Wallace, Lee Strobel, and others have shored up the foundations of my faith.

Ralph Neighor, the author of the *Survival Kit for New Christians*, once spoke at a discipleship conference at California Baptist University while I was attending there in the late 1970s. He said something I have never forgotten: "We will be the same as we are right now in five years except for the people we meet and the books we read." With that in mind, who are we looking to for such clearly Christian example and motivation?

II. CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP NEEDS DEFINITION. vv. 2-3

1. The model of Christian leadership presented is that of the Shepherd, implying the responsibility and commitment required. A shepherd devoted his life to protecting and providing for the sheep. They were not just his livelihood; they were his life. Such a model calls forth a unique responsibility and the commitment that matches such a responsibility. The *overseer* is in a position of relational commitment to those under his charge. Incidentally, in this passage, Peter makes a clear equation between the *elder* and the *pastor* (Shepherd). These are two terms that describe the same office in the Church. The term *elder* emphasizes the spiritual maturity involved in the role, and the term *shepherd/pastor* emphasizes the relational nature of this leadership role.

2. Peter urges the leader to serve willingly, not because he is forced to do so. I once heard a pastor say that one of the tests of a pastoral calling was this: if you could be happy doing anything

else, you weren't called to a vocation in ministry. I'm not sure that that is the ultimate test, but I am sure of this: no one should serve in a position of Christian leadership with a "backed-into-the-corner" attitude. Peter says, Serve "not because you *must*, but because you are *willing*"—good counsel.

A—Attitude check: are we rebelling against the position of leadership that God has given us—in family, business, perhaps government, or Church?

I—As you are probably aware, I took up the game of golf in middle age. When I did, I discovered an opportunity for lower impact recreation that I never thought I would enjoy.

There is something exciting about hitting that little ball with, as Winston Churchill put it, an instrument singularly ill-designed for the purpose, and seeing it fly straight down the fairway (occasionally). There is something truly frustrating about the whole affair when the ball curves left or right in its arial course and lands either in the river or a cow pasture!

It has been said that golf is a game where the ball always lies poorly and the player well. According to the rules of Golf, if the ball is in the tall grass, we hit it from the tall grass. If it is behind a tree, we hit it from behind the tree. If it is in the bunker, we hit it from the bunker. I have learned some hard lessons about life and leadership from this. When given a responsibility, we don't know how things are going to turn out. How are people going to respond to our leadership? What will they do as a result? What will they say? What hazards will we find ourselves near or in? How many tries will it take us to get out of the predicament (or the greenside bunker)?

The test of character in leadership is how we respond to being in the rough or in the bunker or in the water. Will we throw our clubs into the river and vow never to be so foolish as to do this again? Or will we buck up and take counsel and (yes, it even occurs on the golf course) pray? For two hours a week in semi-good weather, if I can get away, I take lessons in character from myself and a small white/yellow ball.

3. Peter urges the leader to serve, not to use the church or other Christians for his own gain. Greed is dangerous whether you are wealthy or just getting by. It takes your focus away from the true goal of ministry and of Christian leadership. Our focus should be, as Paul put it, "that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28), toward the ultimate purpose of giving glory to God (see 1 Corinthians 10:31). The servant-spirit keeps this focus in view constantly, so that no selfish motive can survive for long.

4. Peter urges the leader to lead by example, not by decree. The greatest impact that any of us can make for Christ on others is the power of a Christ-centered life.

A—How is our example of the Christian life, before those who look up to us: children, church members, class members?

I—Have you heard of the Raytheon Corporation? They are the electronics firm known for manufacturing the Patriot Missile. For some time, Tom Philipps was the CEO of the Raytheon Corporation. He was the man who led Chuck Colson to personal faith in Jesus Christ back in 1973. He brought his Christian example to bear on his business, yes on a business with 76,000 employees (my nephew-in-law was one of them for a time). He established an ethics office that reviewed company policies and that offered guidance to managers and employees on a confidential, case-by-case basis. One time, while presenting a message to all employees, he told them that the standard was "absolute integrity." He went on: "Even if you think you are serving your company by bending the rules, let me be absolutely clear: don't do it. Don't even think about doing it." He told them that even more important than winning in their high-pressure realm was playing by the rules. Submit honest bids, nothing inflated. Charge honest hours to the right job. Don't pad any figures for any purpose. Never pay except for services performed. Never give or receive a favor. He cited 2 Peter 1:5 to back his convictions up ("Add to your faith *goodness* ..."). May his tribe increase!

III. CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP NEEDS HOPE. v. 4

1. *Peter offers the ultimate motive for serving: the reward of the “Chief Shepherd.”* This is living for that final commendation in the parable of Jesus (see Matthew 25): “well done good and faithful servant.” That is the desired end of a life of service to God.

2. *He offers the hope of an unfading wreath of victory, in contrast to the temporary rewards of human leadership alone.* People in business or government desire to rise to the top for a variety of reasons: often, the motivation is simply to make more money and have more power. These things die with a person, and others take control of the money and power.

A—The ultimate reward of faithfulness to the call of God upon our lives is the lasting reward that comes from God Himself.

I—Never forget the example of Jeremiah. He served for forty years, speaking the truth in love to his people, the nation of ancient Israel. Few listened. The nation went down to ruin. Only a remnant survived. Did he fail? No! He was faithful to his calling to the bitter end, even though no one responded as he had hoped. The record is clear. He fulfilled his calling in every way and received the blessing of God’s reward in the end.

IV. CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP NEEDS SUPPORT. vv. 5-7

1. *In following Christian leadership, we should show respect for age, experience, and responsibility.* Age, experience, and responsibility often go together. The “elder” was often an older person who by virtue of experience and the maturity that comes with experience was given leadership. Those who were younger were urged to submit to such people.

A—Who are those mature Christians that we can look to for guidance and wisdom?

I—In the history of Israel, a dramatic example of failing to learn from older more mature and experienced people brought about a God-planned division between the northern and southern kingdoms. The story is told in 1 Kings, chapters 11 and 12. Solomon had just finished his reign over Israel. It had been glorious: the building of the temple, the amassing of great wealth, the gathering of the wisdom of the world. But in his later years Solomon’s heart had turned away from God, and he had fallen into idolatry because of his many foreign wives. God told him that the kingdom would be split and that only Judah would remain under the control of the leadership of his descendants. When his son Rehoboam came to power, the people came to him and asked him to lighten their load. They were worn out from building the temple and the great cities of the nation. Rehoboam did two things. He consulted with the elders, the advisers who had counseled King Solomon, his father. He also checked with his peers, those guys in his own generation with whom he had grown up. The elders counseled him to lighten up. His peers told him to get tough. He followed the advice of his peers, and ten tribes pulled out of the nation. Surely this event was in line with the purposes of God, but take note: God used *generational pride* to bring it to pass.

2. *We all must practice humility before each other.* This is a general word of encouragement to the whole church. The primary attitude that should be shown between Christians is an attitude of humility—the servant-life expressed in practical action. We must put this on like clothing.

3. *We must ultimately humble ourselves before God.* This is where the power of the servant-life comes from, a heart that is ultimately bowed in reverence before God.

4. *We must learn to wait for His timing.* The promise here is directed in this way: “that he may lift you up in due time.”

A—Is power or position our main ambition? If so, we will fail to wait for God's timing and will push others aside and step on their heads to advance ourselves. We will also overlook our own struggles as though they don't exist. We will want the position more than the character that equips us for the position. And we will then be no better than those political leaders of the modern era whom we justly criticize for separating their positions of leadership from their personal character.

5. *We must "cast our anxiety" on God.* Suffering brings anxiety. Leadership can't solve all our problems. Anxiety *can* ultimately drive us to God.

A—Will we allow God to express His presence in and our lives and His love for us by trusting Him with our current worries?

I—Perhaps it is time to stopping fretting and start praying. On a gloomy day in 1857 a man in New York City by the name of Jeremiah Lanthier scanned the morning newspaper as he rode to his office. He was distressed to read that the depression gripping the nation was causing fear and panic among the people. Factories were stopping production and thousands were unemployed. Although Lanthier was not a big industrialist, but only a clerk, he had one important distinction. He was a man who had great faith in God!

Concerned with the grim economic situation, he sent a note to all his business acquaintances, telling them that each day at noon a prayer meeting would be held in his office. With high hopes he arranged twenty chairs in a circle, but the first day no one came. All alone he prayed fervently that God would bring about a change in him and in America. The second day he was encouraged, for a few friends joined him. It wasn't long before all 20 chairs were occupied. A short time later a similar gathering was started on Wall Street, another on Williams Street, and finally a fourth on Broadway. Then like wildfire the movement spread to all parts of the country. The moral tone of the nation was affected, and there was a great upsurge in the spiritual life of the people. Some historians say that this effort of united prayer and faith was an integral part of the improvement in the economy which soon followed.¹

Sometimes anxiety-producing circumstances will drive us to the Chief Shepherd Who alone can bring about His eternal ends.

Take it home (applications).

I. What is our attitude toward our present responsibility?

1. Grudge?
2. Acceptance with the servant-spirit?
3. Striving to provide a good example to those who look up to us?

II. Do we have older or more experienced Christians that we are looking to as mentors in the faith and in Christian leadership?

III. How are we responding to the leaders that God has placed in and over our lives?

IV. What is our spirit toward God today: proud and self-absorbed, or humble and grace-filled?

¹ Check out articles from Christian History Institute, www.christianhistoryinstitute.org.