“Shepherd the Flock,” 1 Peter 5:1-4 (Ordination of Skyler Flowers, First Sunday After Epiphany, January 7, 2024)

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: **2**shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; **3**not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. **4**And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

PRAY

Today we are ordaining Skyler Flowers to the task of gospel ministry. To “ordain” in this context means “to decree.” Our church is coming together and decreeing, with the authority given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ, that Skyler is qualified to serve as an elder, a pastor, in our church.

When you ordain someone, you ask them to take certain vows. We’ll do that in just a few minutes. So, in that sense, an ordination service is a lot like a wedding service. Whenever I officiate at a wedding, at the very end of the service I ask the couple to take vows, such as, “For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, ‘til death do you part.”

But before I ask the couple to take vows, I charge them. I try and make clear to them the essence of what they are getting into as a husband and wife and what they are to do in that capacity.

Likewise, this morning, I want to *first, give a charge to Skyler.* *Second, I want to give a charge to the church* (because you will take some vows as well). *Third, I’ll talk about the reward for those who serve as pastors.*

First, the charge to Skyler. “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: **2**shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; **3**not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” 1 Peter 5:1-3.

The dominant metaphor Peter uses to describe the work of a pastor is “shepherd.” Pastors are the shepherds; the people of the church are the sheep. Therefore, if we want to understand what it means to be a pastor, we’ve got to understand what it is to be a shepherd.

We don’t have to know much about sheep to get something out of the metaphor. And that’s good because few of us, I’m guessing, have done any actual shepherding. It’s not a common profession in Mississippi.

But at the very least we can say that a shepherd is not going to be any good at his job unless he learns to pay attention to the flock. If a shepherd is always distracted, he’ll be terrible at his job. If he’s glued to his phone, scrolling through Instagram reels, then the sheep can wander off, fall into a lake and drown, or a wolf can come along and gobble them up.

Several years ago, I saw the movie *Lady Bird.* It’s directed by Greta Gerwig, the same woman who directed the Barbie movie last summer. *Lady Bird* is a coming-of-age movie about a high school senior in Sacramento, California named Lady Bird. I can’t recommend it because some of the content but there was one line in the movie that really struck me.

Toward the end of the movie Lady Bird meets with her Catholic high school’s guidance counselor, who is a nun. After reading her college entrance essay, Sister Sarah Joan remarks that Lady Bird clearly loves her city. “You write about Sacramento so affectionately, and with such care,” she says. Which is funny because the whole movie Lady Bird complains about how much she hates Sacramento: how backward it is, how small-minded people are, how there’s nothing to do, how she wants to move to the East Coast where people are sophisticated and worldly. Lady Bird says, “Well, I was just describing it.” Sister Sarah Joan replies, “It comes across as love.” Then Lady Bird says, “Sure. I guess I pay attention.” But to that Sister Sarah Joan says, “Don’t you think they are maybe the same thing? Love and attention?” I like that.

*Here’s my first charge to you, Skyler: don’t get distracted; instead, pay attention to your sheep.*  It is so easy to give your attention to other things besides pastoring your church, because in the moment they will almost always seem more important and interesting.

It’s easy to give your attention to outside speaking engagements. It’s always nice to be asked to speak somewhere else because those invitations imply you’re something an expert. It’s an honor. But I always remember what an older pastor once told me (I think he stole this from Mark Twain): an expert is just some guy from out of town. Don’t make it into a bigger deal than it actually is.

It’s easy to give your attention to ***only*** meeting new people ***instead*** of spending time with people you already know in the church, because meeting new people means your church might get bigger, and a bigger church means people will probably give you more respect.

It will be easy for you to give attention to reading, because you like to learn and add to your knowledge. It will be easy to say “yes” to a lot of mission work outside the church.

Mind you, these are not bad things, ***but you only have so much attention to give! Therefore, you must know that none of the natural pressures of this world will push you to pay attention to your sheep***. You won’t feel pressure to carefully and thoughtfully minister the Word to the people at Grace Bible. Instead, the pressure will be to just borrow sermons from other ministers, or to reuse your old talks, reheat old material in the preacher microwave, because, you’ll think, will anyone ever notice the difference?

There will be no pressure to spend time in prayer for yourself or your people, because will anyone ever know whether you prayed this week or not? You’ll never put it this way, you’ll know better than to say it out loud, but you’ll think, “I am too busy to pray.”

And while there is pressure to be around the sheep (because it will be noticed if you’re always gone you’ll be tempted to check out when around your people and not really listen, to get to know them, and to pray with them.

It’s ok if you don’t like all the people in your church, and it’s impossible for you to be best friends with everyone, but we are ordaining you this day to the task of shepherding the people of God in this church, and that means giving them your attention and, in so doing, love them.

*The second charge I’m giving you is to lead the flock by example.* Pastors have probably never been held in lower esteem in our country than they are right now. Every week it seems there’s another story of a pastor having to resign because of a moral failure. One of the top podcasts in the country a couple of years ago was about a pastor who destroyed his church by being a total jerk. I read one poll recently which said that Americans view pastors less favorably than doctors, teachers, military personnel, and scientists. In fact, it’s so bad that pastors are now tied with lawyers in the favorability ratings, at the very bottom of the poll. I’m a pastor and I used to be a lawyer, so I don’t know what that says about me, but it’s not good.

Therefore, Peter says in verse 3b we are to be “examples to the flock.” Skyler, the attention we give to our people will not matter at all if they don’t have any respect for us because of how we live. We must be examples to them.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” And how are we to imitate Christ? By bearing the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Therefore, when some crisis comes and everyone else starts saying it’s the end of the world, you exhibit the joy we have in the Lord. When everyone else wants to pick a fight, you mediate the peace of God. When you’re tempted to be short with people, show patience. When wickedness and harshness abound, devote yourself to kindness, goodness, and gentleness.

Where you find lack of discipline, display self-control. And, above all, where people are unfairly mean or even cruel to you, pay back with love.

That’s my charge to Skyler. Now,second, my charge to the church. “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer [or pastor, those words refer to the same office], he ***desires a noble task***.” 1 Timothy 3:1. You need to know something, church, before I give you this charge, and that is that Skyler wants to be a pastor. As verse 3 puts it, he’s not doing this under compulsion, but willingly. He desires to shepherd the flock of God.

But it is a task. It is hard work. There are guys in the ministry who don’t want to do the work and are in it just to collect a paycheck. It is possible to get on the staff of a bigger church and kind of hide, get lost in the shuffle of all the activity. Get paid, punch the clock, but never do much. It’s also possible to go to other churches, usually smaller, and just coast, and never really get after the task of shepherding people, and get away with it because while the members don’t like it they don’t want to have to go through the hassle of finding a new pastor.

Skyler’s not one of those; he desires the task. He’s not lazy, nor is he doing this for (as verse 3 again puts it) “shameful gain.” I promise you that with his talents and his brains he could make more money in other professions. He wants to make a living and provide for his family from the gospel (as he has every right to do according to what Paul writes in the New Testament), but he’s not looking to get rich.

Therefore, here’s my charge to you, church: make it easy for Skyler (and the rest of the pastors and elders at Grace) to shepherd you.

That means we need you to do a couple of things: *first, just be around.* It’s virtually impossible to shepherd people who never come to church. So, part of my charge to you is to attend as many of the stated services of the church as you can, both Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. There’s an obligation on shepherds to spend time with the sheep, but that implies a reciprocal act on your part to make yourself available so that Skyler can do the work of shepherding.

*Second, be interested.* By that I mean be interested when we teach. We put out these preaching cards five times per year, three for Sundays and two for Wednesdays. It would be wonderful if some of you made a commitment this year to read the text and reflect on it during the week leading up the sermon and come to church on Sunday ready to hear the Word of God.

Be interested in the business of church. Look around at some area of church life that looks like it needs some attention, pray about it, and if you feel so led come to one of us and say, “I’d like to volunteer my time and my talents to seeing this part of church life prosper.” Few things are more encouraging to pastors that for a church member to, of his or her own accord, take ownership of some area of church life and say to us, “I’ve got this. You don’t worry about it.”

Be interested enough to do evangelism. The single biggest compliment I think you can give us as pastors is when you invite one of your friends to church. We know that’s a big deal. We know you’re sticking your neck out when you do that. We know you have to trust us if you’re going to expose your friends to us. But I’m confident that few things will lead to new Christians and cause our church to grow like those invitations. That’s my charge to the church.

Third, the reward for ministry. Occasionally someone will come up to me and say, “J.D., I don’t know how you do it because I couldn’t handle the pressure of being pastor. It seems like such a difficult job.”

I appreciate those comments, but I don’t know that being a pastor is any tougher than many other professions. It’s not easy being a teacher, working with students who aren’t motivated, or dealing with parents! I don’t think their jobs are easier than mine. As I said earlier, I used to be a lawyer, and that’s not easy. It’s not like clients only call their lawyers when there is good news or when they want to buy you lunch. It’s tough to be a contractor or a banker or a realtor when it seems like everyone in town is fighting for the same business. There’s pressure on everyone.

But there are unique pressures that fall on men who serve in full-time gospel ministry, especially in the church, and it’s wise for all of us to be aware of them.

First, the pastor’s rhythm of life is just different from everyone else’s. Typically, the pastor goes to work when everyone else rests, so it’s an inherently isolating profession. As one of my friends in ministry put it, when a pastor takes his day off on Friday, his peers are working, and it can feel like you’re stepping out of your house saying, “I’m free now!” but no one is there to hear it. When a three-day weekend rolls around the pastor probably won’t be going anywhere. When an invitation comes for a Saturday night event (think out-of-town Ole Miss football game or a concert), the pastor wonders how he could attend with church early the next morning. When others attend a wedding or funeral, they set their work aside, but it ramps up for the minister.

As a pastor, it’s exceedingly difficult to see the fruits of your labor. Pastors can go through months or even years of teaching and never know how the Lord has used it. It’s why I like cutting my yard so much. I can immediately see the results of my work.

And the ministry can be tough on you personally. Being a pastor can feel like living in a fishbowl. Years ago, an older pastor told me that when he would go to the video store to rent a movie (kids, if those words made no sense to you, ask your parents after the service about it), people in the store would watch him to see what kind of movie the preacher was checking out. It can be hard on the pastor’s family, as some might expect his children to be exceptionally well-behaved and to answer all the questions in Sunday school, while it’s thought the pastor’s wife must serve on every committee (though I must say that Grace Bible might be the best church in the world when it comes to making it easy on the pastor and his family).

There are unique pressures on the minister. You almost certainly could make more money with the same education and experience in other fields. So why would anyone want to do it? Because thankfully there are unique privileges to being a shepherd.

*First, there is a privilege that comes with ministering the word.* The other day I was reading a book written by a pastor, and he described how he was able to minister to a woman in his church named Sarah. She was in her forties, and she was a vibrant woman, full of life, a loving and devoted wife to her husband and a doting mother to her two teenage sons. She was also a dedicated nurse who lavished care on her patients.

But then she fell ill with an aggressive form of lymphoma. This pastor wrote, “Throughout those long months [after her diagnosis] I tended Sarah and her family with the only tools I had been given: the firm sure promises of the word of God and his precious sacraments. In public worship together with the congregation they regularly received forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation even though death was casting a longer and ever-darkening shadow …. When she could no longer attend services in God’s house, it was my honor to visit Sarah and her household with these same gifts: to pray with them, to laugh with them and weep with them … but above all I held out the promise of the God who had promised in his sure and certain word: ‘Thus says the Lord: … Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are mine.’” He was able to be at Sarah’s side when she died, having just read to her from Psalm 23.

Then he writes, “Do you see what I love [shepherding] so much? To be able to bring the one thing needful when all other things fade away, there’s nothing quite like it. To have something to give when everyone else [when the teachers, the bankers, the lawyers, the counselors, and even the doctors] stand by helplessly, to be able to say something of eternal significance when all other speech, however well-intended, rings hollow on the ear – that is an experience that humbles every pastor …”. Skyler, we get to minister the Word of God to our people. It’s not that others can’t do it, but we are set apart for this task, and when in the moment you see God’s Word doing its work, it is a holy privilege.

And second, *of course there is a heavenly reward.*  “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” 1 Peter 5:4.

What is an “unfading crown of glory”? It is an honor that lasts forever. It is an award ceremony that never ends, and it never gets old, it’s never awkward, it never feels forced.

Why would shepherds be singled out for this reward? Those of you who have children, especially older children, know what it’s like to have someone help them out. Maybe it’s the person who gave them their first job. Maybe it’s the coach who gave them a chance to play when no one else would. Maybe it’s the teacher who tutored them in a difficult subject. When that happens to one of your kids what do you feel? You feel extreme gratitude, because that person helped your child successfully navigate a challenging portion of his or her life.

Skyler, you know what Peter is telling us in verse 4? That’s how God feels about you, because you’re helping his children home to heaven, and when Jesus appears he will make sure you know his gratitude. He will pull you aside in heaven and hand you a crown and say, “Thank you for shepherding my people. Thank you for leading through difficult times. Thank you for feeding my sheep,” and ***the praise of the praiseworthy is beyond all reward.***

Therefore, Skyler Flowers, I charge you to shepherd the flock of God, and if you do one day the Chief Shepherd will appear and reward you with eternal glory. AMEN.