

# Servant Leadership



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Pet. 5:1–10, Acts 6:1–6, Jer. 10:21, Matt. 20:24–28, Prov. 3:34, Rev. 12:7–9.*

**Memory Text:** “Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (*1 Peter 5:7, NKJV*).

Studies of growing churches almost always highlight the importance of effective leadership. This leadership takes its vision from God and His Word and provides opportunity for everybody in the congregation to exercise his or her own spiritual gifts in pursuit of the gospel commission.

But church leadership is highly challenging. Volunteers, who often give of their time even though they already are busy, largely run churches. Members can “vote with their feet” by ceasing to attend if something happens that they cannot support. Furthermore, an effective Christian leader also must be deeply spiritual. And we shouldn't forget that Peter is writing to churches that are experiencing persecution. The church leader is particularly vulnerable at such times. Who, then, is equipped for this task?

In 1 Peter 5:1–10, Peter addresses the matter of Christian leadership on the local church level. In these verses, he writes about some of the crucial characteristics needed, not just in the local leaders but in members, as well. His words are as relevant for us today as they were then.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 13.

## Elders in the Early Church

**Look** up the following texts: *Acts 6:1–6, 14:23, 15:6, 1 Tim. 5:17, 1 Pet. 5:2*. What insights do these verses give us regarding the challenges facing the early church and the role of its leaders?

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A large group of people becoming believers and joining the church is a great blessing from God. Yet, as the experience of the earliest Christians illustrates, rapid growth can bring problems.

For instance, Acts 1–5 documents the leading of the Holy Spirit and the conversion of many to Christianity. Acts 6:1–6 shows the result: the group became too big for its leadership, and it needed to put structures in place in order to manage the day-to-day functions of the church.

The issue that brought this weakness in organizational structure to a head was a complaint of discrimination. The Greek-speaking group complained that its widows were neglected in the daily distribution of food. As a response, a group of people, the deacons, were especially appointed to assist the 12 apostles with the management of the church's resources.

It is true that the early church was led by the Holy Spirit in a special way. But even then there was a need to set up church structures. One key group of church leaders needed very early was the elders, who were established for each local congregation. In fact, appointing elders to lead these newly formed groups of Christians was something that Paul and Barnabas did as they went to places that had yet to hear about Jesus (*Acts 14:23*).

Elders were given many different roles in early Christianity. As leaders of their local community, from time to time they acted as instructors in teaching new converts. They preached, and they ensured the necessary things were done for the well-being of the community (*Acts 15:6, 1 Tim. 5:17, 1 Pet. 5:2*).

**What are ways that you can learn to work better with the leaders in your local church, even when you don't always agree on things?**

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## The Elders

**Read** 1 Peter 5:1–4. What attitudes should leaders bring to their roles in the church? How can these principles apply to any of us, regardless of our role?

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Peter begins his instructions to elders by observing that he himself is a fellow elder. He then notes two things about himself: he is a witness of the suffering of Christ, and he is expecting to share in the glory to be revealed. In saying this, Peter highlights the first characteristic that should be found within an elder: an elder should understand the importance of what Christ has suffered in our behalf and what great hope He offers us.

Peter likens the role of an elder to a shepherd tending the flock of God. His comparing a church to sheep suggests that, like sheep, members can sometimes go off on their own. Thus, they need the shepherd to guide them back to the group and to help them work in harmony with it. The elder also should function as a humble example of how a Christian needs to act.

**What** warning do we find here for those who are shepherds? *Jer. 10:21, Ezek. 34:8–10, Zech. 11:17.*

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An important role of Christian leadership is to work with the people in the church as patiently as shepherds must work with their sheep. Elders must gently bring them together for worship and for sharing the message of Jesus with those who need to know Him and the salvation found in Him.

Peter also observes that elders should exercise oversight willingly and not under compulsion. It is not always easy to find people willing to take on the challenges of leading out in the church. This is particularly evident around nominating committee time. For a church to function well, there are a number of distinct roles that need to be filled. There are reasons that many people are reluctant to take on leadership roles. Some of these roles require a considerable investment of time, and people suitable for such roles already might have many commitments. Others may feel that they are not prepared well enough to take on the role. But Peter's word is that if asked, we should willingly take on leadership if it is at all possible.

## Servant Leadership

**Read 1 Peter 5:3 and Matthew 20:24–28. What crucial principles of Christian leadership are found in these texts?**

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In Greek, the key word in 1 Peter 5:3 is *katakuriuontes*. The same word also is found in Matthew 20:25 and means to “exercise dominion” or to “lord it” over someone. Thus, the instruction to elders given in 1 Peter 5:3 might be translated, “Do not lord it over those in your charge” (*NRSV*), and reflects the words of Jesus in Matthew 20:25.

Matthew 20:20–23 provides the context for the sayings of Jesus in Matthew 20:24–28. The mother of James and John had approached Jesus with the request that, when Jesus came into His kingdom, one son should sit at His right side and the other at His left.

“Jesus bears tenderly with them, not rebuking their selfishness in seeking preference above their brethren. He reads their hearts, He knows the depth of their attachment to Him. Their love is not a mere human affection; though defiled by the earthliness of its human channel, it is an outflowing from the fountain of His own redeeming love. He will not rebuke, but deepen and purify.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 548.

Jesus explains that this position of honor is one that is granted by the Father, not Him. But then He goes on to explain that a key difference between His kingdom and those of the Gentile nations is the type of leader that will emerge in His kingdom. Those who wish to lead in the kingdom where Jesus is King must become servants because the leaders in Jesus’ kingdom will be like Jesus. “‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’” (*Matt. 20:28, NRSV*).

Thus, Peter is calling church leaders to the same ideal: the surrender and self-denial seen in Jesus must be revealed in them, as well.

**Read Philippians 2:4–8. How does what Paul says here coincide with what Peter wrote? More important, how can we do the things that we are called to in these verses?**

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## Clothed With Humility

Society was very stratified in the ancient world in which Peter lived. The ruling elite had what today might be called a “commanding presence.” Around them were clustered people of lower rank, and the lowest rank of all belonged to a slave. Humility was the proper attitude of those of lower rank toward those of a higher one. The Greek word for humility carries the meaning of “lowly,” “insignificant,” “weak,” and “poor.” It describes people without status and power in society. In the world outside of Judaism and Christianity, the word *humble* was associated with those of low status, and to act humbly would not necessarily have been commended as appropriate conduct of free people.

**Read 1 Peter 5:5–7.** Given the context and time in which they lived, what is so remarkable about what Peter wrote here?

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In the Bible, humility is seen in a different light from how it was seen in the times and culture in which Peter lived. Peter quotes Proverbs 3:34 from the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), a verse that is also quoted in James 4:6. In the Old Testament, part of God’s work in history is to lay low the high and mighty (*Isa. 13:11, 23:9, Job 40:11*).

One’s proper attitude toward God is humility. “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time” (*1 Pet. 5:6, NKJV*). Humility, rather than pride, should characterize the Christian’s relationship, not only with God but with others (*1 Pet. 5:5*).

Christians, even Christian leaders, are aware that they are sinners saved by God’s grace. In this most important sense, then, we are all equals, and before the Cross we should all be humbled. And this humility must be revealed in our relationship with others, especially those over whom we have charge. Sure, anyone could be humble before God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Also, it’s relatively easy to be humble before those who are above us, who have power over us, and who are “higher” in status than we are. The true test comes when we reveal humility toward those who are “under” us, who have no power over us. That’s the kind of humility Peter is talking about here.

**What is it about the Cross and what it represents that should always help keep us humble?**

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## Like a Roaring Lion

As we have seen already, Peter wrote against the backdrop of persecution. The great-controversy theme wasn't just abstract theology to his readers; they were experiencing it in a way that many of us have not, at least for now.

**Read 1 Peter 5:8–10 and Revelation 12:7–9. What do these texts teach us about the origin of evil and the work of Satan in our world?**

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The book of Revelation reveals that Christians play a part in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. In Revelation, the forces of good are led by Jesus, who is the Word of God, the King of kings, and Lord of lords (*Rev. 19:13, 16*). The forces of evil are led by the devil, also called Satan and pictured as a dragon (*Rev. 12:7–9; 20:7, 8*). Though popular media and even some Christians deny the reality of Satan, the fact is that the devil is a powerful being who has only evil intentions for us. Yet, the good news is that the devil will ultimately be destroyed at the end (*Rev. 20:9, 10*).

Peter does not diminish the danger the devil represents. The devil is like a roaring lion that is looking to devour all whom he can (*1 Pet. 5:8*). Peter points out, too, that his readers can see the power of the devil in their own present suffering. Yet, this suffering will end in eternal glory (*1 Pet. 5:10*).

**Read 1 Peter 5:10 again. What is Peter saying to us there?**

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Though we don't know the exact nature of their trials, what we can see is the hope that Peter expresses. Yes, the devil is real. The battle is real, and our sufferings are real. But the "God of all grace" has defeated the devil. So whatever we are suffering, if we remain faithful—even unto death (*see Heb. 11:13–16*)—victory is assured, thanks to Jesus.

**How can we learn to hold on in faith, enduring to the end, regardless of what comes our way?**

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**Further Thought:** A great example of the servant leadership of Jesus is found in His behavior at the Last Supper. At that time, Jesus was fully conscious of who He was (the Son of God) and that He was about to return to His Father (*John 13:1*). After the meal He washed the feet of the disciples. He then said, “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (*John 13:14, 15*). Each time the followers of Jesus wash one another’s feet, they not only reenact this scene, but they remind each other that to be a leader in Jesus’ kingdom one must become as a servant. No doubt, for the rest of their lives, especially after they better understood just who Jesus really was, the disciples remembered this act of humility on the part of their Master. No doubt, too, it was in Peter’s mind when he called on church elders not to lord it over others but to be “clothed in humility.”

“In consenting to become man, Christ manifested a humility that is the marvel of the heavenly intelligences. The act of consenting to be a man would be no humiliation were it not for the fact of Christ’s exalted pre-existence. We must open our understanding to realize that Christ laid aside His royal robe, His kingly crown, His high command, and clothed His divinity with humanity, that He might meet man where he was, and bring to the human family moral power to become the sons and daughters of God.

“The meekness and humility that characterized the life of Christ will be made manifest in the life and character of those who ‘walk even as he walked.’”—Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 81.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Jesus began His ministry by confronting the devil. Weakened by 40 days of fasting, He was able to resist the devil’s temptations by quoting Scripture (*Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12, 13; Luke 4:1–13*). What does this tell us about how we, too, can resist the devil in our own lives?
- 2 What are examples you have seen of what appeared to be true humility in others? What can you learn from those examples?
- 3 In class, answer this question: Besides what Peter taught in the verses for this week, what are the qualities of a good Christian leader? How might those qualities overlap with good qualities in secular leaders? How might they differ?
- 4 How would you answer the claim that Satan is not real but just a symbol of the evil found in human nature?