

Humility and Resistance (1 Peter 5:1-14)

1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

5 In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,

'God opposes the proud
but shows favour to the humble.'

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

12 With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.

13 She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. 14 Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

1. So, we reach the last chapter and the final session of our study of 1 Peter. Some of the familiar themes reappear before Peter signs off, but there are some important new themes as well.

2. Do you remember how, earlier in the letter, Peter first addressed specific groups in the exile-community – slaves, wives, husbands – and then exhorted all his readers to show similar virtues? He does the same here.

3. First he addresses the older members of the community (vv1-4), then the younger members (v5), and then everyone (vv5-6).

4. At the start of the letter Peter introduced himself as an apostle (1:1); now he speaks as a fellow elder to those with pastoral responsibility in the community. He is going to tell them not to lord it over the community, and so he chooses to identify himself with them as a fellow-elder.

5. Do you remember the encounter between Peter and Jesus on the beach after Jesus was raised from the dead? Three times Peter had denied Jesus; three times Jesus asks if Peter loves him; and three times Jesus tells him to care for the sheep.

6. Peter is surely thinking of that conversation as he writes this letter. Leadership in the Christian community, he writes, is a shepherding role. He and the elders of the scattered communities reading his letter are shepherds – or actually under-shepherds, for Christ is the chief shepherd.

7. How are they to exercise this responsibility?

(a) They are to guard the flock (v2) – to watch out for the community, be attentive to individual needs, to the health of the community and to attacks on the community.

(b) They are to do this willingly, not grudgingly (v2).

(c) They are to act with integrity and not to seek their own advantage (v2). They are to see themselves as servants of the community.

(d) Although they have a teaching role, their teaching should primarily be by example (v3).

8. There are many references to shepherds in both Testaments and ‘shepherd’ is one of the terms most often used to describe leaders in God’s community. Bad shepherds who do not care for the sheep are criticised and all leaders are warned that this is the main task – not managing, preaching, performing, governing or organising.

9. Peter then has one word to say to younger members of the community – submit to your elders, honour and respect them. Peter wrote earlier (ch2) that the exiles were to submit to the civic authorities and slaves were to submit to their masters, even if these were oppressive. But ‘submit’ does not mean unthinking or uncritical subservience: it is possible to disagree respectfully. Christian leaders make mistakes and sometimes need to be questioned and challenged. But there is a way to do this.

10. Peter then does what he did before, moving from addressing particular groups to addressing the whole community, and the main theme is humility. Everyone, older or younger, is to humble themselves before God and one another (v5-6), backing this up with a quotation from Proverbs 3:34.

11. We might easily miss the challenge of this. We probably think of humility as a good thing. Even though boasting and putting on a show are prevalent in our culture, most people acknowledge that humility is a virtue. But in the Roman empire in which the exiles lived, it was perceived as folly and weakness. Humility was a distinctively Christian virtue in that era.

12. Then we encounter another of Peter’s favourite words: ‘be alert’. It is not just the elders who are to watch over the community but everyone needs to be on their guard (vv8-9). Why? Because the community has an enemy.

13. Throughout the letter Peter has advocated non-resistance in the face of opposition and abuse, loving their enemies, but in these final verses he calls for almost military-style discipline and resistance. What has changed?

14. At last the real enemy appears – not persecuting civic authorities, unkind slave-masters, oppressive husbands or intrusive neighbours, but a prowling lion, the devil, their adversary. Behind those who appear to be their enemies is the real enemy, a force of spiritual evil, which is to be resisted vigorously.

15. The New Testament consistently urges non-resistance and enemy-loving towards human ‘enemies’ but spiritual warfare against the ultimate enemy and his destructive and deceptive activities. The tragedy of church history over the centuries is that these enemies became confused and Christians fought those they should have loved and did not resist the real enemy.

16. Maybe exiles in a minority community can recover Peter’s perspective, which of course he learned from Jesus.

17. Resisting the real enemy might involve suffering – it did for Jesus. It might mean choosing to forgive and bless those who hurt us. It might mean resisting temptations to behave badly. It might mean gently challenging those who are being unkind, unjust or racist, for example, and receiving abuse for this. And it certainly means being watchful and standing firm. But we need not be anxious (v7), because we have the assurance of God’s grace that will strengthen us and the hope of *glory* – another of Peter’s favourite words (v10).

18. The letter ends with a reminder that the exiles are not alone. Their brothers and sisters elsewhere are enduring similar struggles. This takes us back to where we began – throughout the world our brothers and sisters are suffering in all kinds of ways. We face our own struggles, of course, but let’s not forget those who are suffering for the sake of Christ in ways we do not experience.

19. Finally, there is a last encouragement to ‘stand fast’ (v12) and then greetings from Peter, Silas, Mark and ‘she who is in Babylon’. This is likely a reference to the exile-community in Rome – Babylon was code for the imperial capital and also a reminder that there are parallels between the Israelite exiles in Babylon and their situation.

20. Peter urges them to express their unity with a kiss of friendship (no coronavirus to worry about then!), and ends as he began with a blessing of peace.

21. ***You might want to reflect on what you’ve read already or pick up other things from this passage but here are three questions to ponder:***

(a) Can you think of examples when you have confused the real enemy with supposed human enemies?

(b) How can we balance respect for our leaders with the need sometimes to challenge what they do or say?

(c) Looking back over these six sessions, what are the main things you have learned, and how will these impact your life?