

The Shepherd Knowing His Flock

Introduction

A good shepherd must have an intimate knowledge of the flock that has been placed in his care. The ultimate shepherd and the perfect example for all other shepherds, is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is called that “**great shepherd** of the sheep” in Heb. 13:20. He is called the “**chief shepherd**” in 1 Peter 5:4. This Good Shepherd has a deep personal knowledge of all His sheep. He knows their strengths, weaknesses, fears, doubts, and all their needs. He knows them inside and out. This knowledge is an intimate and profound knowledge of love and affection. He “ calleth his own sheep by name.” (John 10:3). He knows the name and nature of each sheep. This perfect example has said in John 10:14, “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.” This is a knowledge of experience and loving fellowship.

While it is true that no mere man can know the sheep that have been entrusted to his care to the extent that the Good Shepherd can, those who have been called to this holy calling must, nevertheless, do the best they can to follow this perfect example. The best way to do this is to constantly and prayerfully read the four Gospels and study the dealings of Christ with His flock.

Acts 20:28

That men have been called to this office of shepherding God’s children is plainly seen in Acts 20:28, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” This was spoken to the elders of the church at Ephesus. We can first see that it was the Holy Spirit who made these men overseers. The Spirit is omniscient and knows just which men will be suitable to oversee each particular flock. This is why both churches and pastors need to be very prayerful as to whom will pastor a certain church. This is an awesome responsibility because these men were to pastor the sheep of God who had been purchased at great price. A Christian pastor must never lose sight of this fact. Sometimes God’s children act in ways that could provoke a pastor to anger or discouragement. If, however, he realizes to whom he is ministering he will be patient and tireless in his endeavors.

“Take heed” is *prose,cw* (*prosecho*)-It means “to turn the mind to, attend to, be attentive.” The pastor is to be attentive to “all” the flock. He must not neglect certain ones because they may not be as prominent or influential as others.

“Overseer” is *evpi,skopoj* (*episkopos*)-It means “a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian or superintendent; the superintendent, elder, or overseer of a Christian church.” An overseer is not a dictator, but he must know everything that is going on. He must be “on top of” things. This is the same word translated “bishop” in 1 Tim. 3:2. From part of this word we derive the English word “scope.” When we use a scope, whether it is a microscope or a telescope, we are viewing something very carefully. A Christian bishop, overseer, or pastor should view each member of his flock in a very careful manner. He should be very observant and know the

strengths, weaknesses, and needs of each of those under his watchcare.

The great English Baptist, John Gill, in commenting on this verse, wrote, “to feed the church of God”; with knowledge and understanding; and discharge the whole office of faithful shepherds to the flock, by feeding the flock and not themselves, strengthening the diseased, healing the sick, binding up the broken, bringing again that which was driven away, and seeking up that which was lost...”

1 Peter 5:2

In a very important portion of Scripture for anyone in the pastoral ministry, Peter said in 1 Peter 5:1-4:

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.”

There is a New Testament Greek word translated “feed” which means primarily “to provide nourishment.” That word is *βοσκειν* (*boskein*). That is not the word that is used here. “Feed” here is *ποιμαίνω* (*poimaino*)- It means “to feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep.”

Commenting on this verse, John Gill writes “an acting the part of a bishop or overseer of it, as the word signifies; looking diligently to it, inspecting into the various cases of the members of the church; using diligence to know the state of the flock, and performing all the offices of a careful shepherd; as feeding the flock; and not themselves; strengthening the diseased; healing the sick; binding up that which was broken; bringing again that which was driven away, and seeking that which was lost; watching over them that they go not astray; and restoring of them in the spirit of meekness, when they are gone out of the way; and overlooking both their practices and their principles; admonishing, reprovng them for sin, as the case requires; and preserving them, as much as in them lies, from wolves, and beasts of prey; from false teachers, and from all errors and heresies...”

“Taking the oversight” is *επισκοπεω* (*episkopeo*)-It means “to look upon, inspect, oversee, look after, care for.” This is the verbal form of the word translated “bishop.”

Jeremiah 23:2

Sometimes we can learn something that is positive by seeing its opposite negative. We can do that as

we see God's denunciation of some of the leaders of His Old Testament people. The Lord called these leaders pastors. New Testament pastors must also heed these solemn words as they consider their responsibility to the flock of God.

The Lord spoke these words by His prophet in Jeremiah 23:2, "Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD."

The Hebrew word translated "visit" here is *paqad*. According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, "The basic meaning is to exercise oversight over a subordinate, either in the form of inspecting or of taking action to cause a considerable change in the circumstances of the subordinate..." The word is translated "visit" 57 times in the King James Version. When it is translated that way it almost always has the idea of "making a visitation." This visitation is for the purpose of making a change in the person visited. It is easy to see that the idea here is the same as that of the overseer, bishop, or pastor of the New Testament. God intends for His shepherd to "make visitations" to His people for the purpose of producing change in them. This scripture is very similar to James 1:27, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." The word translated "visit" here is *evpiskeptomai* (*episkeptomai*). It means, "to visit in order to see how one is."

Proverbs 27:23

There is a verse in the Old Testament that speaks of diligence on the part of shepherds and herdsmen. Christian pastors can learn much from this verse as they apply it to the people of God who have been committed to their trust. Proverbs 27:23 says, "Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds."

Applying this verse to Christian pastors, John Gill says, "then it must become the indispensable duty of pastors of churches to take heed to the flock of God committed to them, and to look into their state and condition, and provide for them, and feed them with knowledge and understanding."

I would like to make a **very practical suggestion** as to how pastors can know the state of those under them in the Lord. I would suggest that each pastor **pray over the membership list** of the church he pastors at least once a week. As you go over the prayer list, bringing each member **by name** before the Lord, you will be compelled to reflect on each of their needs and conditions. Do not be in a hurry as you do this. Ask the Lord for wisdom and insight as you deal with each member of the flock. Take the time to write down what the Lord shows you. Think about each member at length and consider ways that you can help him or her to grow spiritually. Hebrews 10:24 says, "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works..." The word translated "consider" is *katanoew* (*katanoeo*). It means "to consider attentively, fix one's eyes or mind upon." Pastors must employ this kind of diligent attention to each member of their flocks if they are to be effective. In this particular instance the pastor is to consider attentively how to motivate the particular brother or sister to love and good works. What

may work with one person may not work with another.

The Ox

All that we have considered is very serious. To be an effective shepherd of God's flock, a man has to be very diligent and hard working. The Bible often refers to Christian pastors as oxen. Instances of this can be found in 1 Cor. 9: 9, 10, and in 1 Tim. 5: 17, 18. It is a great blessing when the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ have such men as pastors. When we do our best to be diligent, we have the confidence that the Lord will bless His people and give them a measure of spiritual prosperity.

David's prayer for the people of God as expressed in Psalm 144:14 was "That our oxen may be strong to labour; that there be no breaking in, nor going out; that there be no complaining in our streets." May that be our prayer today!

As we come to the end of our way may we be able to say with the shepherd, Jacob, as he expostulated with Laban in Genesis 31:38-40, "This twenty years have I been with thee; thy ewes and thy she goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten... Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes."

May we know our flocks well enough to be able to say again with Jacob in Genesis 33:13 "... My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die." It is a wise pastor who knows how to lead his flock to green pastures, but who does not drive them at a pace which is beyond their capacity.

May we know our flocks well enough that we will consider their condition and skillfully deal with them as individuals. Some sheep need strong exhortation and rebuke. Some sheep need tender care and comfort. As Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men." The word translated "unruly" means "disorderly, out of ranks." Such individuals are to be confronted and warned or admonished. The word translated "feebleminded" means "fainthearted." They are to be comforted. They are to be encouraged and consoled. The "weak" are infirm or feeble, either in body or spirit. They are to be "supported." The very rich word which is translated "support" means "to keep one's self directly opposite to any one, hold to him firmly, cleave to, paying heed to him." In this case we are quite literally holding one up, and keeping him from falling. As shepherds of God's people we must be "patient" toward those in every condition. The word translated "patient" here means "to be of a long spirit, not to lose heart."

20/20 Vision

To know those we labor among we must find some time to spend with them, both at church and in other

settings. Maybe we can meet the men for lunch on occasion. We need to be in their homes whenever possible. Several years ago my dear brother-in-law, Elder Jimmy Fulmer, preached a very moving sermon he entitled *20/20 Vision*. He used Acts **20:20**, “And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you **publickly**, and from **house to house**...” Much can be done at church. We see our people at least once a week if not more. It would be a good practice to try to have meaningful conversations with at least one member each time we meet. The **telephone** can be a very valuable tool for contacting members; so can letter writing. It would be a good practice for each pastor to call members or write letters of encouragement and instruction to them as the Lord brings their needs to mind while you are praying for them.

A Glorious Promise

The number one incentive for us to be good shepherds is that we love and want to please our Chief Shepherd. Peter has written by divine inspiration to faithful pastors that “when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.”

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