

Summary: *Feed, protect, lead and discipline – as Jesus did.*

Anyone even vaguely familiar with the biblical narrative will recognize the rather dominant theme of shepherding. I was particularly struck by this while reading Exodus 3 where the text states that Moses was “keeping the flock of his father-in-law.” Moses was shepherding.

I started to think about all the references to shepherding and the number of men of faith who are described in this way. Abel was a shepherd, as was Abraham, Jacob and David, just to name a few of the Old Testament figures with such responsibility. God Himself is called a Shepherd in a number of significant passages¹ which consequently refer to His people as sheep.

Within the pages of the New Testament, the picture continues as Jesus calls His apostles to be shepherds of the church.² The apostles then give this charge to the elders³ of local churches who apparently appoint various shepherds within the congregation.⁴

While certain positions (pastors, group leaders, etc.) carry an inherent responsibility to guard the flock, everyone in some sense functions as a shepherd. We are all called to watch over our families, our own lives, our friends, etc.

Let's be honest, being in the particular context of a suburban American culture, not many of us have much direct experience with shepherding. Not many of us are consumed with thoughts of sheep, unless perhaps we are trying to sleep. Perhaps it would therefore be helpful to give just a brief overview of the responsibilities which comes with this calling. Shepherds are called to feed, protect, lead and discipline the flock with which they have been entrusted.

Feed

Three times Jesus commands Peter to “feed [His] sheep” as proof and consequence of his love. The people to whom we

minister need spiritual food. Some need milk⁵ and others have moved on to solid food. Regardless of one's level of maturity, we have a responsibility to give them that which is nourishing. We must lead people toward truth, both the Son of God and the record of His person and work. Practically, this means that we teach them the Scriptures and introduce them to those who have gone before as faithful witnesses of its content.

Protect

Jesus warns that false teachers will arise as wolves disguised as sheep.⁶ We have a responsibility to recognize such dangers and protect the flock. We must speak out against that which is misleading. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep and thus we too must be willing to sacrifice our own rights for the sake of the good of others. This means that we must be willing to train ourselves to distinguish good from evil.⁷ Practically this necessitates the pursuit of godliness through prayer, study, and community, et al.

Lead

Sheep follow. Shepherds must lead, not only by exhortation, but also by example, pulling rather than pushing toward the Lord. This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1 “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” In other words, watch me and step where I step; follow me. This responsibility carries with it the necessity of a pure and holy life which should be emulated by the flock.

Discipline

Shepherds must be willing to find those sheep who have erred and bring them back into the fold.⁸ I have heard it said that shepherds would occasionally break the leg of a sheep which continuously strays in order to correct its wandering for its own good. I am not sure if this is historically correct, but I do know that the Scriptures command discipline within the body of Christ.⁹ If we love our sheep, we will surely discipline them for their own good.

¹ Psalm 23, 78:52; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:11-13; John 10:11; 1 Peter 2:25

² See particularly Jesus' charge to Peter in John 21.

³ 1 Peter 5:2

⁴ Ephesians 4:11

⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:2; 1 Peter 2:2

⁶ Matthew 7:15

⁷ Hebrews 5:14

⁸ See particularly James 5:19-20 and also read Luke 15:3-7 through this lens.

⁹ Matthew 18:15-20. It is interesting that this passage immediately follows the parable of the lost sheep (18:10-14) in Matthew's gospel.

These are just a few of the natural responsibilities of every shepherd. Each of us should therefore seek to pursue this mantle in the respective spheres of our unique ministries. Let us follow Jesus by being like Him, giving of ourselves for the sake of those with whom we have relationship.

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