

LESSON ESSENTIALS

PASTORAL BASICS

LESSON 1: THE ROLE OF A PASTOR

The Bible likens those who spiritually guide and care for others to shepherds. The people who oversee the flock of God may be elders, appointed leaders of the church or older Christians looking out for others – all of them are pastors. To those who are pastors: what are the implications for you in your role as ‘shepherd of the sheep’?

To those who are not pastors: what are the implications for you as ‘sheep in need of a shepherd’?

A pastor is entrusted with the care and teaching of God's people. The Lord has given you the authority to speak the Word of God to your congregation, to encourage and to edify them, to love and support them, and to humbly correct and disciple them.

The pastor is only a shepherd of the sheep, not the Creator of the sheep.

In the Bible, we are often given word pictures to help us understand how the Lord intends for us to live and how we ought to view the work that He gives us. To pastors, the Bible paints the picture of a shepherd of the sheep.

This is an interesting analogy. In our day, pastors are typically held in high esteem, and choosing to serve as a pastor is considered a position of honour. However, culturally speaking in Bible times, shepherds were viewed as a lower status and a devalued group of people. For the Lord to compare pastors to shepherds ought to be a humbling state for the pastors to be in. But the analogy to being a lowly shepherd helps pastors to keep their pride in check, remembering the image that a shepherd conjures up in the mind.

At the same time, being a pastor is a high calling indeed. This is a calling with great responsibility (see James 3:1 for some insight into the gravity of the calling). Serving the Lord is always an honour, and godly pastoring should be honoured by the congregation. Still, pastoring needs to be considered in light of the humility required to be compared to a lowly shepherd.

This word picture has something to teach the congregation as well. The congregation needs the picture of a shepherd and his sheep so that they rightly honour the pastor. There can be an idolatry of pastors in certain members of the church. When a pastor does his job well, members can sometimes forget that the teaching and compassion they receive from the pastor is truly an equipping from the Lord. Whatever good the pastor does is from the Spirit of the Lord at work within the pastor. After all, the pastor is only a shepherd of the sheep, not the Creator of the sheep.

Meanwhile, there may be some members of the congregation who feel they do not need a pastor. They may see the options online of available audio and video sermons, and they may feel confident in their own ability to understand the scriptures and so they may look down upon the idea of needing a pastor. Perhaps they feel like they are doing the Christian life fairly well and do not need a pastor to keep them in check or to speak into their lives. These people need to look at the Biblical analogy too and realize that if pastors are compared to shepherds, then the congregation is being compared to sheep: an animal that is not known for its intellectual prowess! The fact that the Lord calls His people sheep in need of a shepherd should keep members of the congregation humble so that they do not think that they are above the authority of their local pastor.

If you are a pastor, you will in time – trusting in God – learn to do your job well. Learning how to study the Bible, how to preach, how to counsel: all of these skills are incredibly important to handling the job well. But the primary focus needs to be on how to consider your calling. You must find that balance between confidently walking in authority over your congregation, but not trying to supplant the authority of God over them and willingly becoming an idol in their lives. Being the shepherd of your people is a great responsibility and honour, but the mental image of a literal shepherd of the sheep should help you remember that it is also a humble position.

If you have a pastor, you will need to find that balance of learning how to honour your pastor, and how to submit to his authority without elevating him above God as the true spiritual authority over your life. A godly pastor is a good gift from the Lord for whom you should be thankful! But do be sure to keep your gratitude for your pastor in the realm of thanksgiving, not idolatry. And while you may have opinions about how the shepherd is doing his job – whether you think he is succeeding or failing – remember: God calls you are a sheep in needs of a shepherd! The Lord has put the pastor in that position over you for this season, and how the Lord intends to use him in your life is more important than your opinion of how he is doing, or what you need.

The Church needs godly pastors. The Lord has chosen to use pastors to care for His people. It is a position of great honour! And yet, as the Bible teaches, the Lord uses the lowly and the weak to do great things in His kingdom. Therefore, pastors, as you consider your role, hold that tension of great honour and great humility, always seeking to put Christ at the centre of your ministry.

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IN REVIEW

- Pastors are likened to shepherds: a job that has great responsibility and necessity, but also great humility.
- Congregations are likened to sheep: a gathering that receives great care and attention and love, but also should view their great need as great humility.
- As always, the role of serving as a pastor will only be successful if Christ is the focus and the goal of the ministry.

HAVE YOUR SAY

- How do you view your pastor? Are you tempted to fall into idolatry because of your godly pastor? Or are you tempted to undermine or to reject his authority over you because of pride? Pray to the Lord and ask Him to give you a heart of appropriate respect and humility in your interactions with your pastor.

- How do you view your role as pastor? Are you tempted to elevate yourself as the chief spiritual authority over your congregation? Or are you tempted to shrink back in fear at the grave responsibility you have been given? Pray for a right perspective on your role, and pray for the Lord's guidance and help as you seek to serve Him by serving His people.

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