

## ***Pharisees Don't Make Good Shepherds***

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Many years ago, right after graduating from Bible School, I was offered the opportunity to travel for a year, ministering on behalf of the College. They had a music ministry team called *FAMILY* (very much like our AFLBS *Ambassadors* music team). We traveled around the western US, doing concerts, retreats, and sharing in nursing homes and Churches. It was a rich experience which had a huge impact on my life in many different ways.

One of the first events I remember actually took place before our ministry began. It was during the commissioning service, which kicked off our season of outreach for the school. As our Supervisor was about to pray over each of us, she explained that she had chosen a bible passage for us, which she was going to read before praying. She had written them down on 3x5 cards, and handed them to us as she prayed. Of course, I was curious, and began to think of all the various passages she might consider – and then she began to read this portion of Hebrews:

**Heb 5:2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness;**

As I looked at that card, I was encouraged...focusing primarily on the first portion of the passage. I had sensed God's call on my life for many years. I knew that God had a plan for me, most likely in ministry, though I wasn't sure what form that ministry would take. And to see that God might use me to reach and care for those who were wandering in darkness and confusion, ignorant and misguided, was really an exciting confirmation. After all, I wanted to be part of what God described to the prophet Ezekiel:

**Ezek 34:11-16 For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 "As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. 13 "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. 14 "I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 "I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. 16 "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment.**

But there was a problem. You see, I had grown up with every spiritual advantage, in a pastor's home, with godly friends, and a fairly strong personality which wasn't afraid to confront injustice and wrong attitudes. You might say, I had become a perfect Pharisee in the church. As some might say, "God's perfect candidate for giving direction to those struggling and lost in the darkness of sin." And they'd be right. Except for one thing - they'd be missing one very critical consideration. You see, Pharisees don't usually make very good Shepherds.

From childhood, I was surrounded with religious privilege. My life revolved around the church, its activities,

its members, and its self-righteous perspectives. Now don't get me wrong, my parents set clear boundaries of right and wrong, and corrected any obvious condescension or prideful behaviors which may bring offense to others. But there is a quiet and ever so subtle conceit that creeps into the heart of a person who lives cloistered in spiritual safety, and who won't allow the soil of this world to taint their clothing. Like a good Christian boy, I made sure that my friends were *good* friends, and that my behaviors were consistently exemplary. I was, after all, a pastor's son.

Now back to my time on *FAMILY*. It was during that year of travel and outreach that I came face-to-face with myself, and with God. I was the youngest of a seven-person team, and was frequently the "odd man out." Which left me with lots of time to consider my life, and my walk with Christ. I had time to ponder where I'd come from and where God may be leading me. And I had time to evaluate the consequences (good and bad) of my past decisions and relationships. And by the end of that year, I had plenty of time to consider the full impact of my "verse," especially the entire context - and its broader application to me personally.

**Heb 5:1 For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; 2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; 3 and because of it he is obligated to offer {sacrifices} for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.**

You see, there is a common tendency which develops in life-long Christians. It is the selective blindness which keeps us from seeing our own failures in their true seriousness; and the convenient amnesia which allows us to preach boldly in public against that which soils our souls in private. It is these tendencies which keep us from "dealing gently" with those who are ignorant and misguided, for we never really see ourselves as "beset with weakness."

It was that critical truth which God had to drive home in my heart that year. God had chosen me for a wondrous calling, but I would be ineffective in reaching the "ignorant and misguided," until I first understood my own sin and failures. Grasping this truth is what would make me an effective high priest, or under-shepherd. R.C. Sproul has made that point repeatedly in his videos on the Holiness of God.

That's ultimately what God is wanting in His disciples, especially those called to be leaders. He wants shepherds who have been molded in His own fashion; His own likeness. He isn't looking for Pharisees or CEO's, the bosses who confidently charge ahead, either barking orders or proclaiming great motivational orations. Jesus is longing for disciples who are able to confront and direct the ignorance and confusion of lost souls with gentleness, because it flows from a sense of their own frailty. And this can't happen without a clear understanding and honesty about one's own sin.

There is a biblical character who was much like me. A bold, self-confident man, who had the honor of traveling with Jesus, sitting under His instruction, and witnessing His miracles. He had grown close to Jesus, and was considered one of the privileged three in Jesus' inner circle. And though Peter had come from common stock, he had somehow

forgotten his simple past, and closed his eyes to his own limitations. He even proclaimed before the whole company, that though everyone else abandoned Jesus, he never would! Well, the upshot of that ignoble promise, was a colossal humiliation; a public embarrassment after three denials.

But the glorious result of that shameful event was a transformed Peter; a kinder, gentler under-shepherd who had a deeper understanding of the struggles of his flock. He experienced a personal revolution so complete, that it allowed him to write the words we read just a bit earlier:

**1 Pet 5:1-3 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as {your} fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, 2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to {the will of} God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; 3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.**

Strong-willed Peter, the man who was quick to make a decision and move into action. Peter, who seldom missed an opportunity to assert himself. Peter, the unofficial spokesman for the twelve, the one disciple with the courage to walk on water, and who cut off the high priest's servant's ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. Broken, softened, and molded into a tender shepherd, but one who still leads with the strength of his convictions and character intact.

You see, we sometimes confuse gentleness or meekness with weakness. We think that for a shepherd or leader to be compassionate, he has to be soft or compromising in his convictions or objectives. We sometimes misinterpret passages which seem to reinforce this misconception - like our gospel for today:

**John 21:15 So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus \*said to Simon Peter, "Simon, {son} of John, do you love Me more than these?" He \*said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He \*said to him, "Tend My lambs." 16 He \*said to him again a second time, "Simon, {son} of John, do you love Me?" He \*said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He \*said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." 17 He \*said to him the third time, "Simon, {son} of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus \*said to him, "Tend My sheep."**

Jesus pulls Peter aside, as John records their final interaction. He addresses Peter using his familial name, "*Simon, son of John*," rather than *Peter*, the new name given by Jesus. He then takes Simon back to his arrogant boast by asking the question, "*Do you love Me* (Agape' – completely, sacrificially) *more than these?*" Jesus isn't asking if Simon loved Him more than fishing, or even more than he loved the other disciples. He was referencing Peter's own boast that he loved Jesus Himself more deeply and completely than any other disciple; a love that would lead him to death if necessary. But now, in his shame, Simon Peter can't even bring himself to use the same word for love, and only offers up a lesser but respectable, "*You know I have great affection for you.*"

*"Peter had learned much since his fall. The loud protestations of that former hour have vanished, a deep humility bows Peter's soul. He silently takes back the proud*

*comparison he once made. He doesn't even venture to assert a love for Jesus such as ἀγαπᾶν indicates. Even now, with bowed head, he realizes that his love has been anything but the high love of the true understanding of his Lord..."*

- Lenski

Back and forth they go, Jesus asking if Simon loves (agape') Him, and Simon only able to offer his lesser conviction of affection (phileo). Until finally, Jesus meets him at his own admitted level of understanding. "*Simon, {son} of John, do you have affection for Me (phileo)?* To which Simon could finally answer, "*Lord, You know all things; You know that I have affection for You.*" Three questions of love and commitment, flashing back to three denials, each with ever-greater increasing levels of passion and conviction.

The shame burned in Peter's heart. This once proud and condescending disciple, now stood broken before his Lord and the Shepherd of his soul. But Jesus' point wasn't to rub Peter's nose in his past failures. Jesus was challenging Simon to be the shepherd He knew he could be when He first called Peter to be a "fisher of men." And we see this loving restoration in Jesus' gentle admonitions, "Pasture my lambs," Shepherd my sheep," and "Pasture my dear little sheep."

Something happened within Simon that day, and in the days to follow. We see an amazing change take place in his life and ministry. Oh, he remained the same bold, outspoken Apostle Peter; but he now possessed the gentle heart of an under-shepherd who had a clear understanding of his own frailty. And he now realized that he was on assignment by the Chief Shepherd, who would one day evaluate his service.

**1 Pet 5:4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.**

As I had to learn:

**Heb 5:2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness;**