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BEING A SHEEP

1 Peter 5:5

One Main Thing

In order for the Lord to truly function as our shepherd, we must embrace the role of being His sheep.

Introduction

One of the great psalms of thanksgiving states, "Know that the Lord Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Ps 100:3). David begins the well-known Ps 23 by stating, "The Lord is my shepherd." From Old Testament times, God has been referred to as a shepherd and His people as sheep.

Jesus incorporated this same metaphor into His ministry. In John 10:11, God the Son said, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." Later in the New Testament, as the

inspired pattern is revealed for leadership in the church, 1 Pet 5:2 used this metaphor when church elders are instructed to “shepherd” the flock.

And so, in both the Old and New Testaments, it is evident that people who intend to be in a relationship with God are referred to as sheep. But what does it mean to be sheep? Is it necessary to embrace this role?

Application

What does the Bible say about being a sheep?

In order to understand and embrace Christian living from the perspective of being a sheep, it is first important to be reminded of some characteristics of sheep. An online search for “characteristics of sheep” reveals that sheep are...

- ~ Fearful and easily panicked. They will run from what scares them and herd together for safety.
- ~ Followers. They will typically follow the leader; even when it is not wise.
- ~ Not very smart as animals go. They do not always discern well in choosing food or water.
- ~ Social. They need to see other sheep around them.

From this brief list, it is easy to see why sheep depend so heavily on a shepherd. But does being referred to as a sheep sound like a good thing? Being compared to sheep, after all, is counter-cultural. People today

are more educated than ever before, and with that education comes a high degree of self-reliance. In addition, our post-modern world has produced people who are highly skeptical, ready to challenge authority, and who live with the Burger King mentality. You probably remember the slogan, "Have it your way." In other words, culture promotes an independent, self-reliant mindset; not one of humbly having to depend on someone else.

The Importance of Humility

Developing a spirit of humility is a necessary first step in successfully embracing the role of a sheep. As 1 Pet concludes, chapter 5 begins with Peter sharing some instructions for shepherds. But then in verse 5, he turns his instruction to the sheep and, more broadly, to everyone. He states, "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." The following verse goes on to reveal that clothing oneself with humility is really to humble oneself before God!

It is worth noting that the command for sheep to be in subjection to elders and for everyone to be clothed with humility is not stated with qualifiers. In other words, Peter does not provide a list of exceptions for times when this instruction can be ignored. It is further worth noting that humility is to flow in all directions. Verse 5 says, "and all of you, clothe yourself with humility toward one another..." That means the entire

body, both shepherds and sheep, are to operate with a spirit of humility.

Commenting on this section of 1 Pet, Duane Warden states, "In order for elders to lead, there must be people who are willing to follow." He continues, "If it is true that pride and arrogance are fundamental to an anti-God frame of mind, it follows that humility and submission are prerequisites for a God-approved frame of mind."¹ This God-approved frame of mind is necessary if sheep are going to do obedience and subjection well.

Obedience and Subjection

Peter's instruction in 1 Pet 5:5 is for the younger men to "be subject to your elders." It is the idea that sheep are purposely and willfully placing themselves under the authority of church leadership. That may not always be easy, but it is the biblical plan.

The first part of Heb 13:17 states it this way: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account..." This verse is powerful because, along with the instruction, it provides the reason for the command. Elders have been entrusted with a responsibility to shepherd the flock, and this verse indicates that they will give an account for the way in which they have fed, protected, and nurtured the sheep.

1. Duane Warden, *Truth for Today Commentary: 1&2 Peter and Jude* (ed. Eddie Cloer; Searcy, AR: Resource, 2009), 271.

Notice that the second part of the verse expands the instruction being given to the sheep by saying, "Let them [elders/shepherds] do this [shepherd the flock] with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you [sheep]." This part of the instruction calls every member of the body to self-examination with the question being, "As it relates to me, am I making the work of my shepherds a joy, or am I causing them grief?"

The Role of Trust

Obviously, sheep will follow a shepherd because there is a relationship of trust. Sheep recognize and trust the shepherd. In the church today, sheep must trust the shepherds that are leading the congregation. Elders are still human and, therefore, imperfect. However, when the church is diligent to install qualified men as shepherds (see 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1), and when these men shepherd according to the instructions provided in 1 Pet 5:1–3, a relationship should naturally result where sheep trust the shepherds.

Practical suggestions for being a "good" sheep:

Live in peace with one another.

How do we treat the people for whom we have great respect? In 1 Thess 5:12–13, Paul answers this question. He writes, "But we request of you brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another."

The instruction calls for sheep to assign high value to the shepherds. Paul is calling on the sheep to love the shepherds. He concludes by saying that one of the ways to demonstrate this is for sheep to get along peacefully with each other. Think about it: shepherds can more effectively focus on protecting the flock from outside threats when the sheep are at peace with each other.

So how can sheep succeed? What if each sheep could be less concerned about having his/her own way? How would that impact the flock? Everything discussed in this chapter is easy when sheep agree with each other and with the shepherds. But what needs to happen when a decision results in disagreement?

Disagree in a biblical way.

Even though having his/her own way should not be super important to a Christian, at some point there will be disagreement. In those hopefully brief moments, how should disagreement be handled? Following are some ideas that will bless those moments of disagreement:

- ~ Avoid the temptation to just start talking to anyone who will listen. The temptation is to voice disagreement and to discuss the disagreeable situation with everyone around. This harms rather than helps—and it should be avoided—because, often, the information being spread may actually be misinformation. 2 Corinthians 12:20 is just one of the New Testament passages that condemns gossip.

- ~ Have a conversation with the shepherds. Good and effective shepherding involves strong communication with the sheep. Shepherds who are leading well will have an open door for answering questions and communicating. If the disagreement is over a matter of opinion or expediency, most shepherds want the sheep to share feedback. If there is a concern that the disagreement may be about something that is at odds with Scripture, the Matt 18:15 aspect of taking a fault directly to a brother comes into play here.
- ~ In the end, love and peacefully submit. Unless a decision has been made that is in violation of scripture (which should be re-verified through joint Bible study with the shepherds), sheep should love each other, the elders, and then peacefully submit. Shepherds have a great responsibility and are often operating with an overall knowledge of a situation (some of those things possibly not being appropriate to share) that leads to the decision being made. Again, sheep trusting their shepherds is so important.

Conclusion

The big question becomes, as a sheep, will I allow God, through the elders He has ordained, to lead me? Christians are, after all, the sheep of His pasture. It's a big question and eternity may well hang in the balance.

Discussion

1. What are some of the reasons that a Christian in the 21st century might have a difficult time embracing the idea of being a sheep?
2. Why are terms like “obedience” and “subjection” not always popular?
3. How could shepherds facilitate a more trusting mindset among the sheep?
4. What would be the impact both inside and outside of the church if every member could embrace the command to “live at peace with one another?”
5. Why is it often difficult to peacefully submit?