

No Longer a Goat

20 July 2017



It boggles the mind to think that before anything was created, in the infinite blackness and void, God was dreaming. Of all the beautiful works of His creation, it is significant to note that God considers His church, His “Bride”, to be the most beautiful of all. It’s His people that truly catch His eye, which may come as a surprise to us if we think about how often the church of Christ is so easily disregarded and denigrated to insignificance. It may seem like a curious place to start, but I’d like to begin in Matthew 25 for insight into what Jesus loves in His church.

Sheep and Goats

*‘But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people **as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats**. 33 He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world.’” (Mat 25:31-34)*

This ‘sheepfold’ analogy is such a common metaphor that as you read the passage you may not even have stopped to ponder, ‘Why are the righteous like sheep, and why are good leaders good shepherds?’ In one of the most surprising plot twists in any historical narrative, Jesus demonstrated both what a righteous sheep looks like and how a godly shepherd leads!

I am going to consider these questions closely, because I believe much of the pollution in the Church today is as a result of Christians who don’t think of themselves as sheep anymore and leaders who don’t lead like shepherds.

What is it about goats that make them such an apt animal analogy of people who deserve judgement?

First let’s consider this pickle about the goats. What is it about goats that make them such an apt animal analogy of people who deserve judgement? Does the Bible give us any clue about what

'goat-like' quality makes people unqualified for the kingdom? I believe it does in Romans 10, when Paul is trying to explain why it seems that God has rejected the nation of Israel, *'...concerning Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."*' (Romans 10:11)

A dictionary reveals that an 'obstinate' person is someone stubbornly refusing to change one's opinion or chosen course of action, despite attempts to persuade one to do so. Maybe you're not familiar with goats and so it is not immediately obvious why this nasty stereotype would fit their natural disposition. If so, then check out this clip and I'll let you make up your own mind.

The most frustrating thing about goats is that you cannot lead them to any place they don't want to go. When we make a decision for Christ, He takes hard, rebellious hearts and gives soft, humble hearts which love to follow Jesus. We undergo a remarkable internal transformation from being 'goat-like' to being 'sheep-like'.

How Does Jesus Lead Us?

To those who have the desire to follow Christ, Jesus makes a beautiful promise: *'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.'* (John 10:27) We may take this for granted, but it is actually a uniquely New Testament promise that each individual sheep will hear the Shepherd's voice. Because the Spirit has now been poured out on all flesh, we now all enjoy this blessing.

We find that very often, when God speaks about leadership in Scripture, He uses 'shepherd language'. God describes Himself as the Shepherd (Psalm 80:1) first and foremost, but when speaking about human leadership in the church, He also uses shepherd language.

In Numbers 11 there is an insight into church government which holds a significant interpretive key for leadership in the church today. God anointed the seventy elders with the same Spirit that was upon Moses, to administrate Moses' leadership more effectively. Moses is a *type of Christ* for us in the New Covenant, and so there is a beautiful fulfilment of this picture as God takes the same Spirit that is upon Christ (the '*anointed one*') and places it upon the elders of the local church, empowering them to administrate the leadership of Christ. Man's leadership in the church does not replace God's leadership. God administers His leadership through these men.

What Godly Elders Look Like

Before Jesus left, He instructed Peter to *'feed my sheep'*. We know that He took this responsibility seriously, leaving us with this very beautiful exhortation to the kind of 'shepherd leadership' which God loves:

'So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.' (1 Peter 5:1-4)

We find in this passage, and in many others like it, that leaders in the church are referred to as '*elders*', '*shepherds*' and '*overseers*', and these titles also give us valuable insight into their function.

- **Elder** – *'I exhort the elders among you'*

In the Old Testament context, the title literally meant 'older'. In the New Testament, it is spiritual maturity that is implied. We know this because when Paul wrote to Timothy (a young man), he told him that one of the qualifications for being an elder is that he *'must not be a new convert'* (1 Timothy 3:6). It is only reasonable that if the people of God are expected to imitate their leaders, that their leaders be men of spiritual maturity and worthy of following!

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Of the other qualifications for an elder in 1 Timothy 3, we notice that most of them have to do with spiritual maturity and character. This is perhaps a healthy reminder for us as a modern church, which is prone to promoting men with impressive academic qualifications or charisma over character. Peter seems to be the first shepherd Jesus chose to lead His people, but he certainly wouldn't meet the requirements for leadership in many modern churches!

- **Shepherd** – *'shepherd the flock of God'*

Through the system of "middle-management" that God employs, He is able to bring much-needed direction and vision to His sheepfold through the eldership team (1 Timothy 5:17). God also expects His pastors to protect His precious people in the same way that He does. This protection might be from false teachings (1 Timothy 1:3) or even from people within the church who are persisting in unrepentant sin and now pose the risk of infecting others with it (1 Corinthians 5:2).

As Jesus emphatically made clear to Peter, shepherds have the responsibility of feeding the sheep! A good shepherd leads people to *'green pastures'*, meaning that he keeps leading them to the nourishing truths in Scripture which enable people to develop into healthy Christ-followers. This includes the responsibility of leading people away from the pastures filled with poisonous plants that might cause people to grow spiritually sick, or even die. Bad teaching and false teachers have plagued the church from its inception, and in our modern era, the Internet has given rise to more platforms for bad teaching than ever before, which presents a huge challenge for both the modern-day sheep and for the modern-day pastor!

A good shepherd leads people to *'green pastures'*...to the nourishing truths in Scripture

To both the shepherd and the sheep, I would commend this strategy for "safe grazing" in the modern era. Every follower of Christ, whether in leadership or not, needs to be a very savvy sheep. You need to be equipped to recognise the truth and develop the skills to discern what is false. In order to be able to achieve this, you need to be daily immersed in the Word of God and equipped with the skills to study it as the measure of all truth. Secondly, your local church and the reputable Bible teachers in close partnership with your church need to be your go-to grazing grounds for Bible teaching. Then, after years of good, healthy Bible study and Bible teaching, when you hear teaching from other grazing grounds, you will have your 'grid' for measuring truth set properly. In this way, you can ensure that you have been rooted in a proper understanding of Scripture so that you can then judge whatever else you hear by what you already know.

- **Overseer** – *‘exercising oversight’*

Leaders in the church have the responsibility of ‘watching over’. But what exactly do they watch over? Hebrews tells us that we should, *‘...obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account’*. (Hebrews 13:17) This is a matter of entrustment and responsibility. Elders are responsible for the well-being of every soul entrusted into their care by Jesus. This has a direct bearing on the often-repeated question, ‘Where is church membership in the Bible?’ The simple truth is that it would be unfair to the overseers of a local church for them to have to give an account to God for the well-being of people’s souls who have not even asked them to do so!

Godly leadership is local and relational.

Godly leadership is local and relational. Paul, who was a travelling apostle, could still say with confidence *‘You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord’* (1 Thessalonians 1:5,6). A true shepherd is there to care for you in every season, every trial, every celebration of your life. A true shepherd is there right at the end, to bury you after a race well run. The modern day “online ministry” era knows nothing of true shepherding, and until we get it back, we will not be the healthy church family of which Jesus dreamed.

When Jesus called His disciples, He said, *‘...come, follow me’*. That is still His call to you and me today. I encourage you to let Christ rule in every area of your life and to acknowledge your need for the grace that is administered through local, godly leadership. Commit your soul to the loving oversight of men who demonstrate the same spirit to shepherd as Jesus Himself carried.