When Sheep Bite

29 September 2016



I love shepherds. I accept that there are some who abuse the privilege, but the vast majority of those that I meet really love Jesus and serve their socks off for their flock. As a church leader, there are times when we expect gratitude from the ones we love and serve, but instead, these very people can grievously wound and betray us. When we are treated in this way, how should we respond? Well, if we can learn anything from the prophet Samuel, it is that ingratitude is not a reason to give up caring.

1) Forgetful Ingratitude is the Way of Man

'But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights."' (1 Samuel 8:6-9)

When people repeat unhelpful patterns of behaviour and forget all that's been done for them, this is basically how Israel and man has always treated God. God comforts Samuel by reminding him *'it is not you they have rejected*'. Peter told them plainly where their ingratitude is directed: *'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.'* (Acts 2:36). Forgetful ingratitude is the way of man.

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2) We Don't Give Up

'For the sake of his great name the Lord will not reject his people, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.' (1 Samuel 12:22-24)

We don’t give up on people because God never gives up on nor rejects anyone. In fact, it is a special privilege as a leader to pray for people and to teach, something Samuel learns from God in this moment. Our motivation is simply to serve faithfully *‘with all your heart’* as we *‘consider what great things he has done for you’.* What God has done for me is sufficient reason to avoid complaining and to continue loving others.

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3) We Serve and Trust God Alone

‘It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.’ (Romans 9:16)

The temptation to give up is actually a matter of lack of trust in God. I must trust and refuse to be discouraged, because Romans 8:28 says, *‘And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.’* The outcome is not dependent on my actions, but God is interested in shaping my character as I learn to trust Him. Our role is not to expect thanks but to avoid sinning against the Lord by failing to pray, persevere and trust Him. Ultimately, He is God and everything depends on His mercy, not on me feeling appreciated.

If we church leaders depend on approval and gratitude, then we will certainly be disappointed. If we serve and pray faithfully, considering what great things God has done for us, we will know peace. John Wesley said, ‘Have you any days of fasting and prayer? Storm the throne of grace and persevere therein, and mercy will come down.’ In those moments of ingratitude we should always remind ourselves of Paul’s wise counsel to the Galatians: *‘And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.’* (Galatians 6:9).

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