

The Love of a Shepherd

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Pastoral ministry requires precision and intentionality on every front. This most certainly includes the pastor's efforts as he weekly prepares to teach God's inspired words with vigor, clarity, accuracy, and passion. But Christ's call for faithfulness in pastoral ministry is not confined only to the pastor's public teaching ministry.

The Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, also demands that His under-shepherds exercise great precision in the way they love and care for His sheep. After all, He has not given His sheep away but merely divided them into smaller pens to be fed, protected, and cared for by His chosen under-shepherds. And while that shepherding care is defined by many virtues, chief among them is love.

Love for Christ's sheep is to be founded upon and sustained by the pastor's love for the Shepherd. It was Christ Himself who taught us this in His restoration of the apostle Peter. In John 21, three times He asks the same piercing question: "Peter, do you love Me?" (v. 15–17). And three times He follows Peter's positive reply with an instructive command: "Tend [or] Shepherd My sheep" (v. 15–17). As our love for the Shepherd grows, so must our love for His sheep.

Far too often, we allow ourselves to repeat the sins of Corinth. Perhaps not their unbridled immorality or their tendency toward division. But we can certainly be guilty of imitating their penchant for elevating gifts over character. We as pastors cannot afford to forget that it is the proper exercise of spiritual gifts that lays the context for Paul's now famous "love chapter," found in 1 Corinthians 13. While we ought to unwaveringly commit ourselves to rightly dividing God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15) and preaching it as a dying man to dying men, if we then walk out of the pulpit and lord our authority over Christ's sheep with harsh, loveless words and demands that go beyond what is written, our preaching is as a "noisy gong or a clanging symbol" (v. 1)! Our Savior is not impressed or amused by such leadership in His church.

How easy it is to quiet our convicting conscience over areas in which our love for Christ's sheep has missed the mark by reminding ourselves of the skillful exegesis and clever illustrations displayed in our last Sunday sermon. But the Chief Shepherd does not concern Himself with only our pulpit ministry! He is concerned with every private interaction with His sheep in the church lobby. He takes note of every counseling session with a struggling or hurting believer. In our most public and private moments, He desires that His love for His sheep be on display in the character of our love for His sheep. And this is true when we receive more praise than we deserve and more criticism than is fair.

Shepherding with love will demand our maximum effort and attention, down to the level of our thoughts, our tone of voice, and even our body language when interacting with Christ's sheep. In each of our interactions, the scratching sound of Paul's pen ought to pierce our hearts: "Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

By God's sustaining grace, may our love for the Chief Shepherd compel us to imitate His character with precision and faithfulness in both our preaching and the loving care of each sheep he providentially herds into our local churches.