

The Activity of Shepherds December 1, 2017

[The first few minutes of the message are not in the recording. Readings were in Acts 20; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13; and I Peter 5.]

Now again, we have an unfortunate translation from the King James Version in verse seven, "Remember them that have the rule over you." Number one, it is not rule, and number two, it is not over. It is remember your leaders or your guides. Never in the original translation are overseers spoken of as being 'over' an assembly. Look at verse seventeen, "Obey them that have the rule," obey your leaders, "and submit. For they watch for your souls." And then just for completeness sake, verse twenty-four, "Salute All them that are your leaders with all the saints." One final portion. So we've collected so far three different, four different titles. We've looked at elders, overseers or bishops, shepherds, and leaders.

One final portion to show the consistency of this. First Peter, chapter five, and verse one. "The elders who are among you I exhort, who also am an elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker of the glory that should follow, feed—or shepherd—the flock of God which he purchased with his life, which is among you, taking oversight." So again we have elders, shepherds, and those who are practicing oversight.

So four different terms, all referring to the same men who are given the tremendous responsibility of leadership in God's assembly. Why four different names? (And you maybe it may even be able to justify a fifth that we haven't looked at.) But why these four different names? Well each of them is stressing a different quality, or characteristic of those who would be leading the flock of God. When you think of an elder it's his spiritual maturity. He's not a novice. It doesn't necessarily refer to chronological age, but someone of spiritual maturity, someone who has developed and has mature years behind them.

When you're thinking of the shepherd it's not his maturity but it's his activity. Wherever you read of him he's feeding, he's caring for people. So it's his activity that's in view.

When you're thinking about guides, those who lead, it's their dignity. They are walking before the flock. They are leading the way as examples. And it is their dignity that is in view. And when you think of the overseer, it's his alacrity, his attentiveness; he's watching over, he's looking over and caring for others. He's alert is the idea. He's alert to the needs and the potential for danger in the flock. So looked at another way as far as the elder it is his worth. He's a man of sterling character and worth. He's been through the experience of years. He's developed spiritual maturity. It's his worth that's in view.

When you're thinking about the overseer, it's his watchfulness. He's watchful. He's looking after the flock. When you're thinking about the shepherd it's not now so

much his worth or his watchfulness, but it's his work. It's a work to feed the people of God. And when you think about the leader or the guide, of course you're thinking about his walk. He's walking in such a way that others can follow him. He's leading the way, not just by what he is teaching, but by his example, by his very life he is leading the way. So all of these names are brought together so that the Bible does not know of a pastor with an elder board under him. The word of God does not know of a bishop over a group of churches in a locality and under shepherds who serve under him. The bishop is the overseer is the shepherd is the elder is the guide.

All the same as far as names. Now critical also is not just the names but the numbers. They are always in the plural. Paul called for the elders of the church at Ephesus. Peter writes to the elders who are among you. The only time 'elder' or 'overseer' is used in the singular is where it's describing the character or requirements for the man who would seek to give himself to that work. He's given that as a standard against which to judge his own life and his own fitness.

So the names and the numbers; and now we'll come to the nature of his work. So let me just talk for a few minutes here about the making of a shepherd. As in many instances in the word of God, there are two things that converge. There is what we read of in Acts chapter twenty. Paul there, speaking to the overseers, speaks about "over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers." So there is the work of the spirit of God.

But now turn to First Timothy chapter three. You will forgive me if I seem to be correcting the King James Version manuscript all the time here. But again here we have a very glaring problem in the translation in verse one, "If any man desires the office of a bishop he desires a good work." Now there is no word in that verse in the original for the word 'office'. Again, it was satisfying the needs of ecclesiastical individuals back in 1611. But there is no word for office. The verse more literally means, if any man lays himself out for the work of overseership he is desiring a good work. So there is the desire implanted in the heart of a man. And there is the work of the spirit of God in bringing him to fitness and to ability to be useful. Now we don't have time to look at all these qualifications. You can look at them in First Timothy chapter three.

You will see that there is training in the factory in the place of work. There is the trials in the family. There is the testimony and the fellowship, and there is testing in the world and in the field. So God is going to use his place of work. He's going to use the family. He's going to use the assembly. He's going to use his interaction. All of these things brought together, not only where he must have a good testimony, but all of these things are going to begin to mold and shape this man to be the kind of man who can lead the people of God.

Now maybe we should just mention here hurriedly, a simple truth. When you're looking at First Timothy chapter three and looking at the list of what I would call qualifications, there's nothing there about gift. Everything is about character. Character always trumps gift. Forgive the word 'trump'. Character is always more important than gift. Now that does not mean that a man who leads the people of God is unable

to open the word of God and to teach from it. But the stress that the word of God places upon leadership is on character more than capability as a preacher. So character is what is stressed.

The second thing that needs to be said about First Timothy chapter three and Titus chapter one is just this. Those lists of qualifications were not given for everyone else to sit back and say, well, that brother doesn't meet the qualifications so I'm not going to listen to him. And that brother doesn't meet all the qualifications so I don't think I'll respect him. Those qualifications were given for the man who leads the assembly to judge himself, and for those who would desire to be a help in God's assembly to use as a standard for their own lives. It's not given to us as a checklist to disqualify and to choose to not listen to those who we don't think fit the bill entirely. When a man is given a role of responsibility in the assembly it's not for me to judge him, and to say I will not listen.

Listen to what the Lord Jesus Christ said, because I can get no better authority than this. The Lord Jesus Christ spoke to his disciples and he said, the scribes and pharisees, they sit in Moses's seat. They have been given a place of responsibility. Now, he said, you do as they say, but don't do as they do. In other words, they are in a place of responsibility. You bow to their authority. But don't follow their example. In other words, failure on the part of leaders does not excuse me from bowing to the scriptures they hold. That's vital to see. The authority is the word of God. A man's character is vital. I am responsible for my character, and for being as careful as I can that my character is consistent with the word of God. But the authority resides in the word of God.

So we are reminded here then that the making of a shepherd is a personal exercise. It's something the spirit of God puts in a man. And then the spirit of God makes him an overseer through the experiences of life through family life. He learns first of all how to rule in his own house, and as a result of that he can now learn to take care of the church of God. He's learned to blend authority with compassion in his own home as he raises his children, and he now is able to take that responsibility of compassion and authority and apply it to the church of God.

We'll look in a moment at the significance of what it says in First Timothy chapter three, "If a man know not how to rule in his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" And I'll just mention it now and come back to it later. Others are familiar with it. Older ones are familiar with it. I'll just mention it for the sake of younger ones now. The only other place the expression that is used in First Timothy, "taking care," is found in the word of God is found in Luke chapter ten. And it's a Samaritan who takes care of someone who was beaten on the Jericho Road. And when he leaves after taking care he gives the innkeeper two pence and says, "take care of him." You continue my work. Take care of him. And when I come again, and so on.

So taking care is used in Luke chapter ten of the care for a broken, wounded individual who was brought to a place of safety and a place of security. And if we have time, we'll touch on that later because it is significant. The making of a shepherd.

It will be nice, wouldn't it, as you think about the making of a shepherd, if we had some model to follow, some example of a perfect shepherd. Well, turn to Isaiah chapter forty for just a moment, and let's see if we have an example. Two places in the old testament to turn to, Isaiah chapter forty first of all, and verse eleven. "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. He shall gather the lambs with his arm, carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. That's the shepherd who will one day come to the nation of Israel. And this is what he will do. He will feed them. He will lead them. He will carry them. He will tend them. Tremendous truths just in that one verse that we could dwell on.

Turn though to another portion, Ezekiel chapter thirty-four.

Just a couple of books over, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel. I don't know if you've ever read Ezekiel. You're going to have to look at him some day in heaven, if he comes up to you and says, hey, did you ever read my book? And you say, well, would you please autograph it for me here. That's too late then.

Now, just to save time, as a background. In the old testament, God frequently referred to the kings of Israel as shepherds who were shepherding his people. Now here in Ezekiel chapter thirty-four, God is going to castigate, literally, the kings of Israel for their failure to shepherd the people of God. And God says in verse fourteen that he will be their shepherd. Now notice what he will do as shepherd. "I will feed them in good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be. There they shall lie in a good fold and in fat pastures shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock. I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek those that were lost. I will bring again that which has driven away. I will bind up that that was broken, strengthen that that was sick, and I will destroy the fat and the strong and I will feed them with judgments," and so on.

That's how God shepherds. He feeds. He seeks. He restores. He binds up. He cares. So we do have a model shepherd. It is selfless. It is sacrificial. It is sensitive to need. It is scriptural. He is conscious of the other varying needs. One size doesn't fit all. And so we have here something then of the of the model shepherd given to us.

What about the mandate, then, for shepherds. We've already mentioned character and First Peter chapter five reminds us of the need for unity among shepherds. Disunity among shepherds means disorder among the flock. And starvation. So there is a need for unity, there is a need for harmony and leadership. There is as well the need for vigilance.

But I want to just stress something. We have read it so far in four places, and we could go to at least two other places. So let me go to them. Listen and just see if you can catch what is being stressed. The Lord Jesus is speaking to Peter in John chapter twenty-one. "Peter, lovest thou me more than these? Peter, feed my sheep."

Acts chapter twenty, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking oversight thereof." We read in Isaiah chapter forty, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd." Ezekiel chapter thirty-four, "I will feed my flock." First Peter chapter

five, "The overseers among you I exhort, who also am an elder, feed the flock." Something repetitious? Something coming across?

Every place you read about the responsibility of those who would care for the assembly of God, the top of the list is not signing letters, designing halls, consigning to the back seat, and resigning someday. The chief thing given is, feed the flock of God. So that is the mandate that is given to all who would lead the people of God to to feed the church of God.

And so let me come then. In the last twenty-five minutes or so to the ministry of shepherds. Number one we've already mentioned: food to be provided. Food must be provided for the flock. Now there are other things that have to be done, we realize. But as I have mentioned already, in every list, in every instruction, in every example, feeding the flock of God is given priority. Making sure the people of God are fed. Now you'll forgive a hobby horse. That's always dangerous, but since it shows failure on my part, it's not a bad hobby horse. I sat back one year around this time of the year, the end of the end of a year, and I thought, what ministry has the assembly gotten over the past year?

You know, fifteen minutes after the breaking of bread, a little cheering up word, a little encouraging word, or a devotional thought is lovely, but we are responsible to teach the doctrines of the word of God. We are responsible to equip the people of God with the word of God. Are we doing it? Am I doing it in my own local assembly? And we have to confess failure. And Bible readings sometimes can get so bogged down, and drag on, sometimes just three or four verses a week, and people debating over tenses and over moods and over voices and all the rest, and people are leaving without food, without appreciating the great things of the word of God.

There is a need for vision for the assembly. It almost sounds like heresy to say you should have a goal for the next year. What we would like the assembly to cover in ministry? What teaching do we need to give? What should be our vision for the assembly for 2018? What goals do we have? Be nice to have a series of gospel meetings, yes. To have children's meetings, yes. But as far as feeding the people of God, do we have a vision? Vision is a vital thing in leadership. Back in 1948, just after the war years, Thomas Watson was head of IBM. And Thomas Watson's vision was this, that there might be room in the world for five computers, but he couldn't imagine any more would ever be needed. He didn't get his bonus that year. And he didn't get his bonus many years after that.

No vision. Now I know it's in a different context and a different meaning but you know so well the word in Proverbs, where no vision is, the people perish. But while that has a slightly different context the truth is still the same: the need for visionary leaders, people who are able to bring the people on board. And accomplish things and feed the people of God. Teach and strengthen the assembly for God. So the prime thing, the number one thing is, food must be provided.

But then footsteps need to be guided. Much of that is done as private counsel. And maybe here is a good time to mention this. I have little doubt that at the judgment seat of Christ, wives of overseers will likely get greater rewards than overseers.

Number one, they sacrifice time that legitimately could be devoted to them. Their husbands are either visiting, or their husbands are preparing or spending time in the scriptures. So wives of overseers know tremendous sacrifice for the sake of the work of God.

But secondly, a lot of teaching is done over a kitchen table or a dining room table, where an overseer's wife opens the house and people are invited in. And in that house setting. First of all, people get to be known better than just the casual handshake at the back of the hall. And people begin to open up and begin to express their concerns and their burdens. And counsel and guidance is given, and many times footsteps are guided in a home because a wife is willing to go to the expense, the trouble, the labor of providing all that's needed, and not worrying about whether there's a little bit of dirt on the carpet or there's a little bit of soiling on the sofa, or all the things that we worry about. Her home is open and used for the Lord.

And so she is an integral part of what we're looking at here. So there is food that needs to be provided. There are footsteps that need to be guided. There's fruitfulness that needs to be encouraged. Just those private brief words of encouragement to young men, to young women as they as they begin to develop, as they begin to grow, as they begin to express a desire for usefulness in the assembly. Just simple words of encouragement. I've told it before but the story is told about a young man by the name of Michael down in Baltimore number of years ago. He had ADHD, and he probably had a few other things, too. And he was floundering in the swimming pool, trying to take lessons. His two sisters put him to shame. And the teachers told his parents, nothing good is ever going to become of Michael. He's a write-off; forget it.

Well, there was a swimming coach there, Bob, and he watched Michael, and he said to his parents, "Do you mind if I just try to encourage him personally? I'll just take him under my wing and I'll try to help him. Because I think he has potential."

"Go ahead and try," they said. He not only tried, but when he was done, Michael Phelps won more gold medals than any other person who has ever been in the Olympics.

Just a word of encouragement. Someone who believed in him, who encouraged him, who coached him, who spurred him on to be the very best he could be. Words of encouragement. Someone said that we live and die by encouragement, and so often we come and go for meetings and we fail to realize how just a small word of encouragement could help a believer, and spur them to what people call your personal best. Well they use that in athletics but I think we should use it in Christianity as well. Quality Christianity—QC, if you will—to be the best we can be for the Lord. Words of encouragement rather than words of discouragement, rather than trying to find fault and flaws and inconsistency with each other. To try to be a help one to another in any way that we possibly can. Could I just encourage both brothers and sisters here brother and to appreciate sisters and to recognize this.

You realize, don't you, it's our sisters who bear most reproach as compared to brethren. Now you know what I mean. I could go to a business meeting, a medical conference, and I might just have, you know, a can of Diet Pepsi in my hand. And nobody

would say, why are you dressed like that? And why is your hair cut short? And why don't you have earrings? And where's your makeup?

But a sister, the moment she walks into an office, the moment she walks into another group of women, every eye is on her, and the absence of makeup, the modest dress—our sisters bear the reproach, and they should be encouraged. They should be encouraged in their testimony, because they bear the reproach publicly for the name of Christ far more than we brethren. So fruitfulness in the lives of believers to be encouraged.

Paul remind us in Acts chapter twenty there are foes. There are foes we need to guard against. There is a need for discernment, and for wisdom. When to let something go, and when you realize something has potential for tremendous damage. There are foes that have to be guarded against.

There's the flock that needs to be cared for. Now let me come back to Luke chapter ten for just a moment. That man was marked by compassion. When that certain Samaritan, as he journeyed came to where he was, he saw him, and he had compassion. So a shepherd needs a heart of compassion; not coldness, not callousness, but compassion. It doesn't mean softness. It doesn't mean that you're wishy-washy. It means a heart that feels, a heart that can enter into the grief and the needs and the hurts and the damage and the wounding of others. He had compassion.

Then, he cared for him. Now that meant a lot of different things. I would think it was not very convenient to get down to where he was wounded, bleeding, and left half dead, and begin tending to his wounds. I think it would be kind of messy. It was before the days of latex gloves and masks. You were there with it. And it would involve a certain amount of inconvenience. It wouldn't have been very convenient to get off your beast, put him on your beast, and you do the walking. And then it wouldn't necessarily be the safest place to stop by the side of the road, where you knew robbers and thieves had already been there, and just stop your own journey to care for someone else. And then to go out of your way and take him to the inn, and to spend time taking care of him, reach in your pocket and take out money.

So shepherding, caring for the flock, is going to mean time. There is no substitute for time. Christians cannot schedule their emergencies. Christians cannot schedule their crises to fit in with my busy schedule.

It happens when it happens, and you've got to be available and try to be a help to them when it happens. So it means time, inconvenience, digging into your pocket. Expense, maybe getting a little bit soiled in life. But caring for the flock is vital.

He speaks as well of the fallen that need to be recovered. Ezekiel chapter thirty-four; First Thessalonians chapter five. Now let me let me show you an important distinction. There are two parables that are somewhat similar. Luke chapter fourteen, and Matthew chapter twelve. On both occasions the Lord Jesus is doing a miracle on the sabbath, and he comes in for the criticism of the people around him. Luke chapter fourteen, you recall, talks about a man who invited the Lord to a dinner in a pharisee's house, and whether it was a plant just to see what would happen, or it

just happened to be there was a man there with what they called dropsy (likely kidney failure) and the Lord healed him on the sabbath day and the chorus of criticism began.

And Lord Jesus Christ says, now wait just a minute. Which of you having an ox or a donkey, if he falls into a pit on the sabbath day, won't you pull him out? I mean logically, won't you pull him out and help him? Well of course. There is the analogy. But in chapter twelve of Matthew, again he heals on the Sabbath day and once again there's a criticism. And the Lord Jesus Christ is which of you having a sheep that falls into a pit on the sabbath day, won't he pull it out?

But that's not what he says. He says you don't pull sheep. He says, which of you, having a sheep fall in a pit on a Sabbath day, will not lift him out. Lift him out. The ox or the donkey you could pull. You could be at a distance just get a rope around his neck and be twenty yards away and pull as hard as you can and you may strangle him a bit but you get him out.

But he says, that's not how you treat sheep. You don't treat sheep the way you treat oxen and donkeys.

He says, when it comes to sheep, you have to get close to them. You've got to feel the weight and the burden and you've got to lift.

So it means inconvenience, it means work. It's going to mean expense, it's going to mean time, it's going to be schedules that are just not quite as perfect as you'd like them to be. He says, you have a responsibility for those who are fallen to try to lift them. But then he says, what about those who are feeble? Those who are weak? Now Paul uses similar words in First Thessalonians chapter five. He speaks about knowing them that labor among you over you in the Lord and so on, and he speaks to those who are in leadership.

Let's just read quickly in First Thessalonians chapter five, where he speaks to the elders, "warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all." Supporting the weak, those who are feeble, those who need to be helped and strengthened and carried. Now tragically, there are believers that need to be carried, sometimes all their lives. There is a weakness of feebleness but still that is the responsibility of those who would lead the people of God. What about those who have gone astray, those who have backslidden. The Lord Jesus again, in two similar but totally different parables. We all know them. Chapter fifteen of Luke, "This man receives sinners," and he speaks of the shepherd going after the sheep until he finds it. What about Matthew chapter eighteen, it's not now sinners involved, but saints, believers who have strayed and he says of the shepherd, *if* he find it. So when it comes to the shepherd and the unsaved, *he will* find it; but when it comes to the shepherd and a believer who has strayed, it is *if* he find it.

Now I don't know if you find this the case, but I think it's harder to see someone restored, than to see someone saved. Once a person leaves and gets away and gets involved in other things, whether it's embarrassment, whether it's the fear that they'll do it all over again, I don't know. But you labor and you work and you visit

and you meet with them and you have coffee with them and you discuss things with them. And yes they agree and yes they agree and they want to come back. And it just seems like it never happens. It's so hard to see people brought back. But that's part of the responsibility of shepherds. And I firmly believe—and I know of no issues here so I'm not in any way speaking of anyone here—I firmly believe that shepherds seek sheep. Sheep do not seek shepherds. Our responsibility is to go and get them. They're not going to come to us. They're lost. They're wandering. They're away. Shepherds seek sheep.

So there is food to be provided, footsteps to be guided, fruitfulness to be encouraged, foes to be guarded against, furtherance of usefulness and gifts, flocks to be tended, fallen to be recovered, feeble to be supported. One final thing.

There is the future to be considered. When you get to my age, even before you get to my age, you begin thinking, who is there for the future? Who is there that God is raising? It's not a matter of who I like. It's not a matter of who is popular. But who do I see that God is raising up in the assembly. Who do I see that the spirit of God is preparing for leadership. Because I'd like to pass the baton on while I'm still here and able to be of some help in molding and helping the next generation of leaders. So looking to the future, and realizing that it is God's assembly, not mine. Feed the flock of God which he has purchased. Feed the flock, the little flock over the which—it is God's assembly, God's flock. It doesn't belong to the oversight. In fact, it's interesting, when you come to Philippians chapter one and Paul is writing to the assembly to thank them for a gift, among other things, he picks up his pen and he says 'to the Saints with the overseers and deacons.' He puts the saints first. Because the overseers and deacons serve the saints. The saints are the big thing. The assembly is the big thing in the eye of God. Leadership serves. Deacons serve. But the assembly is the big thing in the eye of God. So we have a care, a responsibility for the assembly. And we read hurriedly in Hebrews chapter thirteen, verse fourteen, "obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls as those that must give an account."

That's a solemn verse. That means that those in leadership will give an account of how they have led the assembly. I recall, to this day I recall, a promising young man, and because of a marital problem, he turned on his heel and walked out the door. And I remember just asking myself, is there anything else I could have done to have preserved and kept him within the assembly. Because I have to give an account.

I'll have to answer at the judgment seat of Christ for my stewardship. Titus chapter one reminds us that we are stewards of God. Those who are in leadership are stewards of God. He has committed his church to our care. The most precious thing upon earth to him (Acts chapter twenty), the flock which he purchased with the blood of his own son, he has committed that to our care. We have to give an account of how we have done. And so we're reminded here of the tremendous ministry of those who would lead the flock of God and of their responsibility.

What about the means? How do you do it? Paul is leaving them in Acts chapter twenty. He says, I've got two things. Two things that I can give you that will be your resource for all the days to come: I commit you to God and to the word of his grace.

Hebrews chapter thirteen. Remember those who have had the rule over you. Whose faith follow. Those who have had the rule over you, who have taught, who have spoken unto you the word of God, whose faith follow. The first resource we have is this book. Now I have nothing, and I have to confess to you I have I have tried my best through the years to learn something in other fields, something about counseling and something about psychology, and trying to apply it from the word of God to the needs of the people of God, so I'm not against educating myself in other areas; but, the book we have to help the people of God with is this book. The word of his grace. It's grace from first to last.

So he says I commend you to God and to the word of his grace. There are the two great resources that leaders have. This book and the throne of God. Not just the idea of prayer, commending you to God, but to all the resources God has made available to us through his word to meet the needs of the people of God. He says, that is your resource for the day in which you live. Able to build up and to give an inheritance among all of them that are sanctified. We have all the resources in this book needed to feed, to strengthen, to guide, to teach the people of God. All come from the book that we hold in our hand. So there are distressed saints. There are difficult saints. There are detoured saints. There are discouraged saints. There are doubting saints.

Thank God there are developing saints, and those in leadership have to have a sensitivity to the varied needs and be able to come to this book and apply what is needed from this book to each and every individual case.

It is a tremendous responsibility, and has a tremendous accountability. I don't think I'm stretching it, but every place in First Peter where you read about glory, it is always preceded by suffering. By paying a price. Now when it comes to shepherds in chapter five, he speaks to shepherds about their responsibility and he says when the chief shepherd shall appear you'll receive a crown of glory.

Is he implying that there is going to be sacrifice and suffering, that is linked with the glory. I think he is. I think everyone who leads the people of God, everyone who assumes a place of responsibility knows something of sacrifice, of sorrows, of grief. Watching with tears at times, that the needs of the assembly be met; but always remember, there is a chief shepherd. We are just under shepherds and our responsibility is to reflect something of the care, something of the compassion, something of the concern, something of the capability of that chief shepherd, as we minister to and care for the flock of God which he has committed. So elders, overseers, bishops, leaders, shepherds always working together in the plural balancing each other harmonizing with each other in the care of the assembly, and attending to this ministry which is so varied but so valuable. And so vital for an assembly's welfare.