

Follow Your Shepherd(s)

Hebrews 13:7-8, 17-21 (EHV)

⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will give an account. Obey them, so that they may do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no benefit to you. ¹⁸ Pray for us, because we are sure that we have a good conscience, and because in everything we want to conduct ourselves in an honorable way. ¹⁹ I urge you to do this even more, so that I may be restored to you quickly. ²⁰ Now may the God of peace—who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, in connection with his blood, which established the eternal testament—²¹ may he equip you with every good thing to do his will, as he works in us what is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.” (verse 7a) Leaders who spoke the Word of God to you are your pastors. Yes, there’s overlap with people who serve in positions of leadership at church – our councilmen, our elders, our Sunday School teachers, and more - but, by and large, God’s Word for you today is talking about God’s expectations concerning your relationship with your pastors – past and present, and that includes me.

Pastor is a title meaning “shepherd.” Pastors lead you, shepherd you, to Christ by speaking to you the Word of God. For some, I may be your first pastor. For others, I am one in a long list of pastors that you’ve had. God directs us to remember our pastors of the past, the leaders who spoke the Word of God to you. As you think back on pastors, you probably fondly remember some of them. Maybe they were dynamic preachers, patient and engaging Bible teachers, straight-forward no-nonsense sort of guys, available and compassionate men who walked with you through hardships and grief. Then there are the other pastors that you remember as being very dry and boring, who didn’t seem to exude joy over the Word of God, who were too busy for you and didn’t give you the care and attention that you felt that you needed, pastors who were closed off, impersonal, who seemed as if they didn’t care. Your experiences with your pastors of the past have shaped your expectations of how a pastor is to shepherd.

What then do you do when your pastor does not meet your expectations? Do you leave, stop coming to church? Do you tell others about your grievances? Do you talk to others to see if you are way off base with your thoughts or do go and talk to people who you know will agree with you, who will jump on the bandwagon of complaining?

The first thing to do when your pastor (me) fails to meet your expectations is to step back and ask yourself if my expectations of my pastor are *my* expectations or *God’s* expectations. Because if your pastor is not meeting God’s expectations, if I am scattering and destroying God’s flock by what I am doing, then I must be corrected and know that I will be judged by God. But if I am doing what God tells me to do, if I am shepherding people to that great Shepherd of the sheep, to Jesus, and his life lived for you to clothe you with his perfection, his death died for you so that his blood removes and cleanses you of all your sins, his resurrection guaranteeing that he will raise you to on the Last Day so that you live and reign forever with him, then I have a good conscience before God and am conducting myself in an honorable way as your pastor.

How then are you, the hearers of God’s Word, God’s flock, to respond to your pastor? Have you ever asked yourself what God expects of you when it comes to your pastor, to me as your pastor? The answer probably won’t make you comfortable. God says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will give an account.” (verse 17a)

Did you cringe just a little bit with those words “obey” and “submit”? To clarify: to submit is not insisting on your way and instead following and supporting the one God has called to lead. Submission does not imply inferiority but gives a relationship dynamic. If you are in to sports analogies, this is like the relationship between a pitcher and a catcher in baseball. The catcher gives signals to the pitcher for what pitch to throw, but the pitcher ultimately makes the decisions and throws the pitch and the catcher has to go with it. Both are needed to play the game and to win, but the catcher is not in control of the pitcher; he has to follow his lead. We struggle with this relationship dynamic because we like to be in control and have things our way. We don’t want to give up control for the sake of following the lead of someone else. This is our selfish sinful nature rearing its ugly head insisting that we will only follow our way and will instead of those who have been called by God to serve us by leading us, as our pastors are so called to do.

And we will come up with reasons to justify not following the shepherds that God has called to lead us. But are those reasons from God or are they reasons we have created? Is the problem with the pastor or is it with me, the member of God’s flock? Is my pastor not fulfilling his duties to God and me or am I not fulfilling my duties to God and my pastor?

Your pastor is a jar of clay, just like you. I have to admit that I will not be able to serve you in all the ways I want to because I am a sinner with limited time and resources. As much as I want to be there for you through any and every crisis, spending unlimited time with you, I know that I won't be because I am limited. I want to fix every problem that you are going through, but I won't be able to because I'm not God. I will disappoint you. I will let you down. God forbid, but I will probably sin against you.

If I have sinned against you, been inconsiderate, not fulfilled my God-given calling to you, then please forgive me as Christ has forgiven me. Lead me back to Christ, your Shepherd and my Shepherd, in order to be renewed in the worthiness and perfection and forgiveness that he has won for both of us.

Even though your pastor is a jar of clay who will not meet all your expectations, God has still given expectations to his flock regarding their pastor. It's similar to how God designed the marriage relationship. The husband is called to love his wife as Christ loved the Church, to serve her, to put her first, to lead her to Christ. The wife is called to submit to her husband as the Church submits to Christ. She doesn't insist on her own way but follows the lead of her husband. The marriage dynamic and vows are not conditional. If the wife will not follow her husband's lead, he sins if he stops loving her as Christ loved the Church. He doesn't get a pass to stop serving her in response. In the same way, the wife does not have an out to stop submitting to her husband when she disagrees with the decisions he makes. She's still called to follow him. God's expectations are not conditional, and both will be called to account for their actions before God.

The life of a Christian is a life of service, reflecting the love with which God has served you. The pastor serves you by leading to Christ so that you have the forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of your faith in him, eternal life with God in heaven. You serve the pastor by following his lead. Just like in a marriage, when both parties are striving to fulfill God's callings to them and his expectations of them, it goes really well. One benefit is listed here: "Obey [your shepherds], so that they may do this [shepherding] with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no benefit to you." (verse 17b) When you follow your pastor who is proclaiming to you God's Word, it brings him joy in his calling and builds him up. Do you know that just by coming to church in person you bring me joy as your pastor? I sign it at the end of all the worship previews in the weekly newsletter because it's true. When you come to church and worship with me, I feel like David who said, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" (Psalm 122:1)

Why does God expect us as his flock to obey and submit to our pastors, our shepherds? It's not just to make his (my) life easier and more joy-filled, but because your pastors have a responsibility to lead you to that great Shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ. When your shepherds spoke the Word of God to you, they led you to Christ. They led you to the same Good Shepherd that David wrote about, the one who led him to green pastures and quiet waters, who protected him as he traveled through the valley of the shadow of death. They led you to the same Shepherd that God promised through the prophet Jeremiah that he would raise up for his people, the one called "the LORD Our Righteousness." They led you to the same Jesus who had compassion on the crowds and shepherded them with his teachings. This is our Shepherd through the shepherds, pastors, that God has given us because they have all preached the same Jesus who lived perfectly for us, who shed his blood to establish that eternal one-sided covenant where God forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (verse 8) That's the Jesus that your pastors have preached to you and the one I continue to preach to you for you.

So, how do we follow the lead of our shepherds, our pastors? Our God-given expectations were reiterated earlier in our worship service. "Take to heart [your pastor's] scriptural words of warning and encouragement, humbly accepting the Word planted in you. Work together with him for our Lord's kingdom so that by your works of service the Body of Christ might be built up. Help him by your word and example in teaching the young, remembering how the Scriptures urge you to bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Honor and love him...Pray for him continually, that his ministry among you may be greatly blessed and that, with all his responsibilities, he may continue to have a cheerful spirit. Provide also for his physical needs..."

God equips us as his flock to follow the pastor he has given you in these ways. Your pastor prays that "the God of peace ... equip you with every good thing to do his will, as he works in us what is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen." (verses 20, 21) We trust God to answer this prayer for us all because we have our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, who has promised to give us whatever we ask according to his will. This is his will for us: to follow the shepherds he has given us. Lead us and me as the pastor to fulfill our callings from God as we all follow the one great Shepherd. Amen.