

Esteeming Shepherds

Call to Worship: Psalm 91:1-2

1st Scripture: Hebrews 13:7-17

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a

Hymn #634- *We Praise Thee, O God*

Hymn #4- *All Praise to God*

Hymn Insert- *In Christ Alone*

Introduction:

Last time, we had concluded what we might call the main purpose of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. In other words, Chapter 1 through Chapter 5:11 contains the content, which addresses the primary purpose of Paul's writing this letter. And, if I were to label this purpose with one phrase, I might label it, "Keep on Keeping on!" "You're doing well (in these ways). Keep persevering and keep pressing ahead and keep doing what you are doing, remembering the whole way, the big picture...etc." That is the purpose and body of this letter.

Chapter 5:23-28, to which we will eventually come, brings us to the conclusion of that purpose, which contains a Benedictory encouragement, meant to offer a final encouragement that suits the main purpose.

This morning, we come to an inserted section (an addendum, as it were, or maybe a P.S.), which Paul adds to the letter, as sort of a laundry list of added exhortations, that he wants to get into the hands of the Thessalonians, as well (vs. 12-22). To this end, what you will find here, is a shotgun variety of several additional exhortations that are not necessarily *directly* related to the main purpose. Because of this, we may have to break this section up a bit, to get through it in a way that will profit us. We remind ourselves that all of Scripture is God-breathed, and so, even when theological bullets are flying all over the place, we want to absorb each one, unto our own edification, and unto the glory of God!

I. Esteeming Shepherds

For this morning, then, we will begin by limiting our focus to verses 12&13, which address one particular, singular matter.

Now, let me preface our consideration of this text by saying this: For me, next to tithing, this is probably one of the most difficult topics that I will ever have to address from the pulpit. And the reason for this is probably obvious. Because it speaks of the great honor that is to be

placed upon the shepherds (pastors) of the congregation, by the congregants. And so, inevitably, this is not a comfortable topic for me to address, without feeling like I am seeking to exalt myself in some way or using such a text as a means of manipulating you to do whatever I say (or to throw this into your faces in some way). Let me assure you that none of this is the case. That being said, I can also assure you that my reason for working through the Book of 1 Thessalonians had nothing whatsoever to do with getting to this text (in fact, I had no remembrance that it was even here). However, that also being said, out of respect for God's Word and for the providential working of the Holy Spirit, I, of course, must faithfully expound what I believe this text to be saying. I have to preach this text, as I would any other text (rightly seeking to divide the Word of God), casting aside my personal identity in this matter, while allowing God's objective truth to speak whatever it means to say. [Maybe, we should exchange pulpits when we come to these texts?]

And so, without any further or due, and with the risk of coming across in any self-serving way, let us consider Paul's exhortation here:

Right away, we ought to take note of the significance of this matter, before even getting into the specific exhortation, by the words, "And we urge you, brethren..." For Paul, this is significant, and realizing that human nature (in the context of a fall) will not easily comply with the following exhortation, he prefaces it with these strong words of compulsion, "We urge you, brethren. We implore you. We plead with you. Against every contrary thought of the mind and/or movement of the fleshly desires, do this."

"Recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish (instruct or warn) you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (vs. 12-13). Now, in our consideration of this exhortation, brethren, let's divide it into three parts, before bringing the whole package back together.

- 1) Consider *who* it is that is to be "recognized" here. (Labor, over, admonish)
- 2) Consider *how* they are to be recognized. (Esteem very highly in love)
- 3) Consider *why* they are to be recognized in this way. (For their work's sake)

1) Who it is that is to be recognized

"Recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish (instruct or warn) you..." Paul describes the pastor/shepherd/elder in three ways here:

a- Those who labor among you. In this sense, Paul here describes the ministry of the Word, as if he were to say, "Those who labor in the Word; to study it, to understand it, to break it down and to teach it, in a Christ centered way with relevant application." To rightly divide the Word of truth, is the task of the shepherd, and that, in the context of so, so many, false teachers who twist the scriptures unto the destruction of themselves and their hearers.

And so, to labor here, then, would be to grapple with scriptural texts, and to present them, as they are, without bias, unto the consciences of God's people; to make Christ and His will known. This idea is clearly expressed by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:17, when he instructs Timothy, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those *who labor* in the word and doctrine."

b- Those who are over you in the Lord. Here, Paul addresses that role of the shepherd as overseer. The pastor/shepherd does not micromanage the lives of God's people, telling them where to work, what to eat, where to live, what hobbies to have, where to go to school...etc. The shepherd is "over" the sheep *in the Lord*. He watches out for your soul, and seeks to faithfully guide you toward heaven. His authority is of a spiritual nature, as one called by God, solely by the grace of God, unto the spiritual welfare of God's people. He is the arms and feet of Christ, utilizing the means of grace (in administering the sacraments, in preaching, in teaching, in the overseeing of ministries, in the affirmation and encouragement of the use of spiritual gifts, in leading corporate prayer...etc) unto the edification and growth of the body.

In Hebrews 13:7, The author states, "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct." And again, in verse 17, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

And so, Paul refers to the pastor/shepherd as an overseer or "ruler," not in a tyrannical sense (not "lording it over the flock"), but rather as a gracious leader among equals, who uses his authority as a means of maintaining order and leading the people of God heavenward.

1 Peter 5:1-4, "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."

c- Those who admonish (instruct or warn). Dealing with the welfare of the soul is no small matter. Dealing with the welfare of many precious souls, and that, with having to give an account to God for His flock, can be terrifying. And so, the shepherd must instruct and warn the people of God. He cannot sugar coat the Word of God. He must present the whole counsel of God, in its Law and grace clothing.

Sadly, out of a fear of man, it can be too easy to simply watch sheep dangle themselves over the edges of steep cliffs, but the true shepherd must fervently warn. He must teach what is true about every facet of the diamond of God's Word. He must strive to encourage the weary and yet persevering Christian with regular doses of Christ's grace. He must bring the hypocrite and the unbeliever to the gates of hell, to bring the very smoke of its burnings right into their nostrils, so that they might dread going to that place; so that they might not carelessly dangle their souls over the burning ridge, by treating their sins as a light matter. He must teach the whole will and counsel of God, and he must warn, as unfavorable as warnings have become in these last days.

2 Timothy 3:16-4:5, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for

themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."

Such is Paul's description of the shepherd/pastor in this context, whom he urges the church of Thessalonica to recognize among them (Those who labor in the Word, those who oversee their spiritual well being, and those who instruct and warn them).

2) How they are to be recognized.

What does Paul mean, when he calls the Thessalonians to recognize the shepherds among them? How are they to do this? Well, he defines that recognition in the text: "Esteem them very highly in love..." (Read vs. 12-13a again). The Ethiopic translation renders it, "Honor them abundantly."

And so, clearly there is a great level of honor and respect, which the Lord desires to be granted to His under-shepherds, who are entrusted with the responsibility of leading His sheep. They will have to give an account to Him one day, for how they have led the flock (where there is God given authority, there is always also a weighty responsibility that goes with that), but nonetheless, the responsibility of the sheep is to honor and obey the shepherds, whom God has placed over them.

Paul charges the Ephesians elders in Acts 20:28, "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, *among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Pastors are ultimately put in their position by the Holy Spirit, which is a great motivation, in itself, for heeding Paul's charge to the Thessalonians. Notice again, the weighty nature of Paul's charge. It would seem sufficient if he simply said, "Esteem those who are over you." "Respect and regard them highly." And again, the *emphasis* would be further noted, if he said, "Esteem them *highly*." But Paul digs even deeper, when he says, "Esteem them *very* highly." Clearly, there is a great level of respect and honor in view here.

And then, Paul adds those two short, but critical words, "in love." Pastors can wipe the sweat off of their brows when they read that, because we know that, in and of ourselves, we are not worthy of such honor...at all. Many of us (and I'll speak for myself here in particular) have been plucked deeper out of the dumpster of sin than the average congregant. Our position and any level of giftedness granted us by God, is entirely undeserved and God given, for purposes beyond our comprehension. Maybe that's part of what enhances the "humility factor," which is necessary for ministry. We know (or at least ought to know) that we don't naturally belong here. All honor is Christ endowed, and Christ given. It is on lend, as it were.

And so, love is a necessity; indeed, it is a critical necessity for the sheep to have, if they are to hold in high esteem those who don't naturally deserve to be held in high esteem. Such a command must be obeyed in Christ, with eyes on Christ the whole way forward. Love for Christ and therefore love for His people, compels the flock to joyfully regard and honor the positions into which Christ places His people. And so, pastors are to be very highly esteemed *in love*. And this then brings us to address our third and final question:

3) Why they are to be recognized in this way.

Well, as I said, "Certainly, it is not because pastors deserve such honor, in and of themselves." But notice what Paul adds to this exhortation, which brings forth the motive for this type of pastoral recognition, "Esteem them very highly in love *for their works sake*" (vs. 13a).

Not because of who they were before, as if they are naturally better than anyone else. Again, many pastors were lower in the dumpster when they were first saved and fished out. Not because they have attained to perfection. Pastors, while required to be blameless, still struggle with the same battles against sin and temptation that all Christians struggle with. They have unlikeable qualities and idiosyncrasies and quirks like everyone else. Not because they are impeccable or perfect decision makers. You may, at times, disagree with them and they can be wrong. Rather, they are to be highly esteemed *for their work's sake*. That is to say that, their calling and office, both of which are from God, necessitate this kind of high honor and respect. It is God's stamp on them, for His glorious purposes, which sets them apart in any honorable

sense, and that is where the high esteem comes in. If you simply look at the man, too closely and for a long period of time, you will find little motivation to esteem him. But, if you consider the sovereign hand of God, who put them in the office, to conduct a calling that deals with the welfare of never dying souls, than the high esteem should come easier.

The work of a shepherd, not to their own credit whatsoever, is set upon that most essential work in all the world. This is not to make other work less necessary or less spiritual, but the shepherd is called to shepherd the flock of God, and to lead them safely home to glory. To fail to honor the pastor is to potentially hinder or jeopardize, or at least increase the hardship related to that work. It is to spurn the gospel and the work of the gospel because of the imperfections or humanness of the vehicle that God has ordained to use in the exercise of this great work. Certainly, God could have used perfect angels or even dumb animals to do His work, but God is in the business of using broken things to accomplish great feats, all the more to His glory! Any pastor worth his weight in salt knows that apart from the present grace of Christ and the continual empowerment of the Holy Spirit, nothing good will come of his labors...at all.

And so, the high honor given to pastors, is driven and motivated by the high honor, which belongs to the office and the work of ministry, which centers upon the unraveling of the will of God, secured by the cross of Christ.

II. Closing Thoughts and Applications

1) Esteeming is not worship or putting any man on a pedestal. There is only one Christ. It is equally as dangerous (if not more so) to worship a pastor, as it is to dishonor or despise him.

2) We are beyond blessed with the treatment that we have been receiving here.

3) However, the temptation to allow the weaknesses or shortcomings of the pastor, to eclipse this command can be great. I would definitely find myself struggling with this, and I have in the past. That is why we must remember the office, the work and the glory of Christ.

4) Pastor Doug's labor in the Word for the PM service. Even out of love for him.

Amen!!!

Benediction: Ephesians 3:14-21