

Chapter 6

Shepherding: A Father's Heart

*"Greater love has no one than this,
that he lay down his life for his friends"*

(John 15:13).

No greater purpose can there be for an elder than to accurately represent the Father's love as he serves fellow followers of Jesus.

The central issue of the Ten Commandments is God's love toward mankind and man's responsibility to love God and keep His commandments: *"I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments"* (Exodus 20:5,6).

The Hebrew word for love in the above passage is *ahav* (ah-hahv'), a passionate desire to cherish and to be in the beloved's presence. This kind of love has tremendous emotional connotation, a devotion which produces the fruit of obedience. The hallmark of a shepherd our Father chooses is his love for Him and for His flock.

The same emphasis on *ahav* is found in Deuteronomy 6:5-7: *"Love [ahav] the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."* Again the connection is made with loving God and keeping His commandments, and passing them on to succeeding generations.

The kind of love our Father is calling for can be obtained only through personal repentance and supplication. The issue of love is reinforced in the New Testament by *agape* (ah-gah'pay), the Greek equivalent of *ahav*. In 1 Corinthians 13 the whole issue of *agape* love is so important that Paul could state that *without it, "I am nothing."* Gifting, faith, wisdom—without love, these are worthless: *"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing"* (v. 2). Paul emphasized for the Galatians, besieged by agitators teaching them perversion of the Torah, that, *"In Christ Jesus the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through [agape] love"* (Galatians 5:6).

The issue of *ahav* and *agape* love is the critical character element for the shepherds our Father is choosing. This love is first nurtured in a man's home. In Ephesians 5:33 Paul stipulates, *"However, each one of you also must [agape] love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."* By growing in love toward his wife through God's grace, a man is then more prepared to fulfill the Lord's words, *"But I tell you who hear me: [agape] Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you"* (Luke 6:27,28).

Again, the type of love that really matters comes only through repentance and supplication for our Father's empowerment. *Agape* love is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 5:22), while humility of heart causes this love to grow. Armed with humble love, a man can truly lay down his life for others—a genuine mark of leadership. Humility mirrors a sacrificial heart that sets others before self.

Our Lord looks for a *correct heart* in his leaders, the heart of the Father. The Pharisees perverted the Torah by demanding blind obedience to man-made traditions. They evaluated everyone by *correct behavior*. A man who develops a correct heart toward God and his fel-

low-man will have a heart of *ahav* and *agape*. On the issue of *love* are the Law (Torah) and the Prophets based: “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

A true shepherd’s heart is really a *father’s* heart. Impregnating an ovum technically makes a man a father. But the heart of a father is developed over many years as a man learns self-sacrifice and acquires wisdom that is motivated by love. Paul displays his spiritual fatherhood as he emphasizes, “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:28,29). Fatherhood shoulders concern even when the loved ones are out of reach and all the shepherd can do is pray for them.

Our heavenly Father reveals Himself as He describes shepherding with a father’s heart:

As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice (Ezekiel 34:12,16).

A wealth of fatherly instruction for elders pours out of these two verses. It is easy to recognize the parallels between fathers and shepherds. Both keep a close eye on their charges, not confining them with a leash or rigid boundaries but allowing them a certain amount of freedom to make choices. Yet there are always consequences to wrong choices, and children as well as immature Christians need help in facing those situations with integrity. Learning to take responsibility is an important lesson. Otherwise the inexperienced will repeat their foolish errors or learn to blame others.

A godly shepherd *searches for* and *brings back* the strays. He *feels* a responsibility for every single sheep in the flock, not just the ones to whom he is partial or who are easy to care for. At our retreat center we had one sheep in particular that Mike just plain didn’t like. She was our most independent ewe and was frequently sidetracked from following us to the barn with the rest of the flock.

One harsh winter morning she was missing. It was lambing season and Mike suspected she must have wandered off to have her lambs. Frantically he prayed that God would forgive him for his hardness of heart toward that sheep and allow him to find her. Suddenly, down in the woods he spotted faint wisps of steam: newborns! With streaming eyes he rushed down the hill and there she was, a new mother once again. Gently scooping up the wet lambs and holding them close enough to her so that she would follow, he led that stray sheep up the hill and back to the warmth and protection of the barn.

Referring again to the Ezekiel verses, see how diverse is the pattern of care that is poured out by a shepherd who has the Father’s heart:

- persevering enough to keep on searching.
- loving enough to sacrifice comfort and energy to rescue his sheep.
- merciful enough to bind up their wounds and nurture them to recovery.
- discerning enough to know which ones to cull for the good of the rest.
- just enough to impartially care for them all.

You can see why Paul was so detailed in his listing of leadership qualifications in his letters to Timothy and Titus. These characteristics represent essences of a mature, caring, responsible person. Biblical elders are very special men of God!

Indispensable Suffering

People who have gained wisdom over many years of life experience are not surprised by suffering. Pain comes from the refining fires that help to conform us to the image of Christ. The apostle John recognized the truth of this when he identified himself as “*your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus*” (Revelation 1:9).

Those who have tasted God’s compassion over the course of many trials know the limitless extent of His mercy. Such men (and women) are neither speechless nor helpless when confronting tragedy in people’s lives. They understand that God alone is the Comforter. They are just His vessels to pour out comfort to the grieving. Peter, whom the Lord forewarned that Satan desired to sift, realized the developmental value of suffering:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name (1 Peter 4:12-16).

While many younger people have faced severe trials and overcome them with victory, it is over the stretch of many years that they learn the *pattern* of our Father’s faithfulness. As a youth you are tempted to feel that your own fortitude has carried you through some tough times. Unfortunately for those around you, you might expect that they, too, should just pull up their bootstraps and get on with life. After all, that is what you did! However, people who have received and extended God’s mercy over a long period of time can see past the mystery of a tragedy. They can offer hope and comfort to the weary, even while identifying any actions that need to be taken. This is the picture we get of our Lord: “*He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young*” (1 Samuel 40:11).

What a picture of compassionate intimacy! The Shepherd can recognize the special need of those who just can’t go on without personal help—the lambs—yet he doesn’t separate them from the flock or push them beyond their capability or rebuke their weakness. He comes alongside them, bearing their load and helping them to remain connected with the others. Only a man who has suffered and understood our Father’s purpose in it can have such a heart.

Let’s translate this into the service of an elder. Like a father he knows the condition of each of the people in his care—which ones are strong and healthy, which need some “one-anothering” from the rest of the flock, and which are temporarily disabled by a catastrophe and need his immediate attention. Just as a father trains his children to be mature and responsible citizens, the elders should be training up the flock to be *aware of each other* through exercising their spiritual gifts and growing as extended family toward one another. As part of their flock training, fatherly elders encourage more mature sheep to come alongside those who need special attention. *Sheep* nurse lambs; shepherds help the sheep

do their job well.

Lambs don't stay little for very long. A shepherd or mature sheep is not meant to "carry" a distressed person on a long-term basis—just long enough for trust in God's faithfulness to strengthen that needy individual. By tactfully mentoring and guiding others in the flock to assume *relational responsibility* for each other, elders are not overwhelmed by a myriad of difficult life problems confronting their faith communities. They are gently leading those who have "younger" believers in their care so that *both* discipler and disciple will grow in spiritual maturity.

God looks at the trusting heart of an elder to be a vessel through whom He can display His loving care. That is why elders are called to minister to the sick through prayer and anointing (see James 5:14). Through discerning prayer these men can perhaps also discover if this is an illness for chastisement, or for the glory of God, or unto death. By this act of mercy they are following the example set by Jesus and His disciples in anointing the sick with oil and healing their infirmities. Through faithful ministry to the afflicted, elders can compassionately point the weary and sick toward a greater trust in God.

A Father's Larger View

As a shepherd to Israel, David understood that the Father's purposes for His people extended far beyond the problems and joys of day-to-day living.

God had defined the borders of Israel for Abraham—from the River of Egypt in the South to the Euphrates River in the North. Given the vast number of enemies arrayed against them before they could take that land, the troops needed training—not just military preparation but *spiritual* training so that they could be victorious through righteous obedience. "*In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns. And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler'"* (2 Samuel 5:2). The mission God entrusted to David involved both the knowledge and compassion of a shepherd as well as the skill and courage of a general.

Like a father with his children, spiritual shepherds see beyond the immediate needs to the larger purpose God has for their faith communities. Training up the flock in one-anothering is vital for growth in maturity, for reaching the lost for the Kingdom, and for developing new gatherings. This is one reason why the epistles address *all* the faith community family, not just the leadership. Busyness can create a short-sightedness that robs both the elders and the flock of the opportunities God has prepared in advance to further His Kingdom. *Availability* is a key need for all followers of Jesus. Your neighbors and co-workers need to see Him "with skin on" to know that He indeed lives!

When a faith community that is intent on Jesus reigning in their lives comes together, it is a time for mutual encouragement and edification as well as worship and intercession. When they are apart their concern for one another continues, as well as their burden for the unsaved in their neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and community.

The Body of Christ is far wider than a single congregation. The multiplicity of small faith communities in biblical times were called "the church at Ephesus" or "the church at Jerusalem." In the same way, each flock must begin to see itself in unity with other flocks so that Jesus' will might be fulfilled: one flock and one Shepherd.

David understood the importance of unity in his big, sweeping kingdom. He established over forty fortified cities in Israel, each autonomous under the leadership of elders. But the residents of each city understood their connectedness with the rest of Israel and their responsibility to their fellow Jews nationwide. Therefore they could respond to the king's call when they were needed for battle against Israel's enemies.

The leadership of our faith communities must have a larger view of their flocks. They must see their congregations as part of the Father's family at large. Relational connectedness by the shepherds is an important feature for faith communities today if we are to obey our King's commands and take the land for Him.

Picture each time you meet a new person as if your index finger was extending to touch his index finger. If your relationships remain surface, each meeting will continue to be like one finger tip touching another. But as relationships deepen among believers in a faith community, the fingers begin to slide down alongside each other until they are meshed together. Continued one-anothering strengthens those relationships to form a sturdy bond of relational responsibility for each other.

As a counselor to church leaders, Mike would ask the elders of a congregation, "If you weren't in positions of leadership in this Body, would you be friends with each other?" All too often the answer was a resounding "No!" These leaders had never been connected *relationally*, only positionally. They had assumed positions of control and direction in their faith communities but had failed to exemplify the relational leadership that true shepherding calls for.

A certain group of clergy met at our retreat center each month for years. During that time several were driven from their congregations because of their own failures. Mike knew that others in the group could have shared the wise counsel and personal support that might have forestalled the dismissals. At one of the meetings Mike asked those present, "If you were shepherds in the Old Testament and one of you were ill, what would you do?" They responded that they would have helped him care for his flock until he returned to full health.

Then Mike rebuked them: "We've lost five men from this group in the past few years because their churches have removed them for cause. Some of you, if you'd had the heart to, could have come alongside to keep them from destroying their own ministries. How many of you here feel better about yourself when you hear that some other shepherd has failed in his ministry?" Every man, some with tears in their eyes, raised their hand to acknowledge their competitive attitude, their jealousy of those who had been successful, and their lack of relational love for those who needed help.

Jesus rebuked his apostles for their sectarian perspective: "*Teacher,*' said John, *'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.'* *'Do not stop him,'* Jesus said. *'No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us'*" (Mark 9:38-40).

The apostle John warned his friend Gaius about men who use their position for their own gain: "*I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church*" (3 John 9,10).

The nature of the shepherd our Father is recruiting and using sees himself as "his brother's keeper." A caring shepherd who sacrifices for his flock can easily relate to other shepherds. Together these leaders can more clearly discern the larger interests of the Father and can cooperate with Him with yielded hearts.