

While there are many references to shepherds and the responsibilities of leaders in the Old Testament, we usually look at the passages that put the shepherds or leaders in a good light. One of the dominant passages dealing with the imagery of a shepherd as a leader is really looking at shepherds from a negative perspective. Ezekiel 34 points out that the leaders of Yahweh's people, remember Yahweh is the term God used to introduce himself to Moses with, Yahweh is what God told Moses and the people to call Him, anyway people were not leading with the correct shepherdly attitude.

The Shepherds of Israel were its rulers and leaders, both spiritual and political. This chapter of Ezekiel demonstrates God's or Yahweh's reaction to the appointed shepherds, in this case the priests and kings, when they fail to care responsibly for God's people. "This denunciation of the shepherds is sobering in that it evokes from all who have pastoral responsibilities an act of self-examination." (Craigie, 1983, 243) If we are all to be involved in caring for people, which I believe is the true biblical concept then this evaluation needs to be done within the biblical perspective and evaluate both the actual pastoral care and motives for pastoral care. Craigie goes on to say "The pastoral role involves caring for others, not striving for oneself." (Craigie, 1983, 243)

1. Pp1 God's evaluation – He see's the lot. Motives and actions.

Pp2 *EZE 34:1 The word of the LORD came to me: ² "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?' ³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.*

Really what God is pointing out is that these shepherds or carer's are in it for their own personal gain.

Eat the curds, clothed with wool, slaughter (and eat) the best animals. Sounds to me like they have the good life. Eating the best in the Old Testament is seen to a blessing and sometimes a status symbol. You eat the best the closer you get to the Kings table at a feast. The good bits are up the Kings end. So these people are in exalted status because of the position as shepherds.

How do we place this in a contemporary context. Basically people using leadership status to their own ends. This kind of thinking borders on corruption. Using people to get what you want. Being on a committee to further your own personal desires or agenda, being in a job because it has an element of respect to it.

Look at the results.

.pp3 ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵ So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

Verse 4 gives us a basic outline of our christian duty to others.

Pp4. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.

This is what they should have done:

Pp5 Strengthened the weak

Pp6 Healed the sick

Pp7 Bound up the injured

Pp8 Brought back the strays

Pp9 Searched for the lost.

Look at that list. Those are our responsibilities – each person who claims to be a christian.

Strengthen the people who are in a state of weakness, both physically and Spiritually. Heal the sick – be with them when they are sick, pray for them, aid their recovery. Bind up the injured. Physical pain needs assistance and so does emotional pain. To bind means to wrap up. Wrap them up with love. No not just a hello cuddle, but provide for their emotional needs. Build them up, encourage them. At this point in their spiritual development it might be a good idea to stay away from mentioning their bad points, they need love and encouragement.

Bring back the strays. – I think it takes more love to allow someone to return to the fold or to the church than to find new sheep. Why? If people have left, they have a reason, sometimes an issue. Here is where the rubber hits the road. Forgive as Christ forgives, you cant expect them to do that if you don't first show love to them. If we are to truly love each other, you be the one to start loving. Bring back people by forgiving and loving.

The searching for the lost is often the glamour job in church circles, the perceived evangelist. I think I need to mention here, no ministry is any harder or easy than any other. Sure different gifts, different situations but no harder. Someone said to me the other week, I couldn't get up and preach each week it would be too stressful. I said, I couldn't work with pre- schoolers every day it would be too stressful. I have been an evangelist, a youth workers, a region ministry coordinator, a pastor. They are all different, different stresses. Don't think your job is any harder than anyone else's. God gives the gifts to

those who He chooses to do that job. Searching for the lost is about us using our God given gifts, talents abilities and situations to help people get found by God. But this job is only one job and it is linked with all the other pastoral care jobs.

If we don't do it right – what happens???

Pp10 ⁵ *So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.* ⁶ *My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.*

Basically – the church gets scattered. The church is weakened and the individual is endangered. Abdication of one's responsibility to the care of others has an effect on the church, and on the spiritual well being of each individual. Scattered and even greater tragedy – no one is looking for them. No one cares. Thankfully, this is not a common practice in this church. But the warnings are there. Look at God's response to this.

Pp11 *EZE 34:7 " Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸ As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, ⁹ therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰ This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.*

Look at verse 10 again - ^{pp12} *This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock.*

We are to be held accountable for the people we are responsible for. So who are we accountable for? Jesus put it differently, Who is my neighbor? Jesus told the God Samaritan story in answer to this question. Who was the neighbor – the one who had mercy. Who are we to be neighborly to – those in need. IN the church and out of the church, all who have the need.

We are accountable for the people sitting around us today AND those sitting or sleeping at home today that we have contact with. A neighbor in this context is someone who we have contact with, actually anyone we have contact with.

We are to care for them. Lead them to Jesus.

We don't have time to look at the rest of the chapter but one passage that caught my eye was this

Pp13 **EZE 34:17** " *As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?*

God is addressing us. His flock. And telling us to look after the resources we have. Don't trample the food, don't trample the talents that people have that are useful for the persons or the churches development. Don't waste the refreshing water, don't waste the things that give people refreshment.

I need to be honest here. Don't waste the gifts that God has given you. Don't use them half heartedly and make them all muddy. Certainly don't stop someone else using their gift to encourage others. Don't let others in this congregation have second best because one of us is selfish. If people want to grow, let them, if people want to encourage let them, if people want to have a go at ministry let them. Don't stuff it up for other people.

Ezekiel goes on

Pp14 **EZE 34:20** " *Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, ²² I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. ²³ I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.*

The warning is not to get pushy, not to get selfish not to get picky. Why? Because it mentions one shepherd, my servant David. This is referring to Jesus – the one shepherd. Jesus came from the line of David. Jesus is the good shepherd, remember that while Jesus is the head shepherd, He has us do the shepherding working for Him. We are responsible to Jesus. God is saying don't push and shove my people, Jesus see what you do. Deal with Jesus sheep with integrity.