

Listening to God's Shepherds  
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My mother was probably my first shepherd. From my earliest of days, she was the one who spent the most time, the most energy taking care of me and guiding me. Nobody gave more to my direct and immediate well-being than my mother. If you're a mother, especially one of young children, that's what you're doing, too. What could be more important than that? That's why I call my mother a shepherd. That's what shepherd's do: Guide. Care. Keep. Protect.

If you'd ask my mother she'd probably tell you she has lots of regrets (I can relate: the list of my parenting regrets keeps growing). Sure, she made mistakes, but she did far, far more good than bad for me and my brother and sister. She was a faithful mother. She was faithful in two ways: 1) She sacrificed her good for my good. She gave up her sleep so I could sleep. She deprived herself of happiness so I could be a happy. Mother's die to themselves so their children can live. And 2), she told me the truth. She wasn't deceitful. She didn't mislead me. She didn't say, "Brian, touch this burner; I promise it's not hot" right after she got done making me mac n' cheese. She never said, "Nothing bad will happen if you want to skip school." There were a few times where she was sneaky (I'll keep those to myself), but even then she was working for my good.

The prophets and priests of Judah did not follow my mother's example. (PIC) Here's a picture of our sermon series in Jeremiah. The last two weeks we've talked about how at the root of the Judah's sins was their commitment to following their own heart. They trusted their wisdom, their understanding instead of God's; they followed their plans rather than God's. But did anybody try and put a stop to it? Did anybody tell them they were going the wrong way in life? Doesn't God have a *check engine* light for his people when something's wrong? He does: he gives his people shepherds; teachers of God's word. God gives his people teachers who show and instruct them in God's ways and especially to warn them when they are going the wrong way. But just like in our cars, the check engine light malfunctioned; God's shepherds were no help to God's people, which is mentioned in a striking way in Jeremiah 5:30-31, "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rules at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?"

Understanding God's words are essential for his people to know him, to love him and to walk in his ways. That's how it started for all of us, right? We heard the word, the message that Jesus Christ has come to save sinners. And when we heard that word, God's Spirit brought the truth and life of those words into our lives. But that's not just how we start the Christian life; it's how we live the Christian life, too. Col. 2:6 says, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." We received Jesus by faith in God's words of forgiveness found in Christ and now after we've received Jesus we are to keep walking with him the exact same way - by faith in his word. That's when and how his Spirit fills us and empowers us to be all that God is

calling us to be. And even still, just like in the OT, God gives us people to teach us what God's word is.

Let me just highlight what the NT says about the teachers of God's word that we need today.

- First of all, 1 Peter 5 says shepherds are to *set an example for the flock*. Why is that? Because we learn, not just by hearing words, but by seeing it lived out. A teacher confirms the truthfulness of what comes out of his mouth, by being an example of it. And when a teacher doesn't practice what he preaches, he denies the very things that come out of his mouth. An example.
- In Paul's instruction to Timothy throughout 1 & 2 Timothy, Paul repeatedly says, "Teach the people. Preach God's words to the people." We do this, as it says in Eph. 4:11-12 so that the people of God are equipped for every good work. So, secondly, the NT says *shepherds teach God's words to God's people*.
- Finally, there's a reward for a godly shepherd. Peter says to his fellow leaders in 1 Peter 5, *when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory*.

So, here's the recap: shepherds are to be an example; they are to teach the truth of God; and they will receive a reward.

There is remarkable symmetry between what we just reviewed from the NT and what we read in Jeremiah. Why don't you take your Bibles and turn to Jeremiah 23. We're going to read a good chunk of this chapter and I want you to look for things as I read. See if you can spot 1) what kind of example these shepherds were, 2) what they spoke, and 3) what's their reward. (READ Jer. 23:9-32)

Let's take this piece by piece. First, the example. God's shepherds did not set a good example. That's highlighted starting in vs. 13 (READ vs. 13-14). Again, God compares the rebellion found in Israel several centuries earlier with what he sees in Judah and his conclusion is "Judah, you are worse." The prophets of Samaria, meaning, those prophets from the conquered kingdom of Israel, they did unsavory things. I think of Chef Gordon Ramsay when I hear the word *unsavory*; they did something distasteful - and Gordon would tell them about it. They gave into false worship, which led the people astray. But notice the contrast starting in vs. 14, "But in the prophets of Jerusalem (Judah) I have seen a horrible thing." Oh, what did they do? Here's how I would sum it up: they practiced immorality. It's not just that they spread false teaching that contributed to immorality. No, they did the immoral living themselves. They committed adultery and walked in lies. It's the example they set. They actually strengthened the hands of the evildoers.

I don't think we pay close enough attention to how a lifestyle teaches. I know we talk about the need to set a good example; we're not unaware of this need in our personal life and in the church. But our lives teaches. A shepherd of Israel committing adultery *teaches* and *instructs* the people about marriage, about God's holiness, about sin. Heb. 13:7 says, "Remember your

leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” I find it interesting that the writer doesn’t say, “Consider the outcome of their way of life *and obey their teaching.*” He says *imitate their faith*, meaning, do what they did. You saw it; you watched them practice their faith. That’s your education.

Is there anybody here who loves to dance? Weddings? I’m not a big dancer; I stink at it. Rocking back and forth with my wife is the extent of my dancing. But I imagine if I really wanted to try I’d need to have a partner I could just imitate. I would need one those Dancing with the Stars professionals who would say, “Watch me! Watch how I step here. Watch this little skip.” I could at least try and copy what they do. I’d probably get voted out the first week, but I think I could at least try and copy someone.

Which should make us think: how can I copy a teacher who I only listen to on the radio or watch on YouTube? Do you know what I mean? God means, God intends, for you to be instructed by watching others walk in the Lord. If your primary shepherds are all virtual, I think you’re missing out on a crucial part of God’s education for you. We all need to watch people follow God so we can imitate what they do. If that’s true, you and I need to be thoroughly embedded into a church family. You can watch your pastors live their lives. You can watch and imitate your Titus 2 mentors, your SS teachers, your volunteer leaders here at FBC. It’s actually an important teaching mechanism of the Lord; seeing an example of faith.

Secondly, what did the shepherds of Judah teach or speak? Look at vs. 16-17 (READ). Jeremiah doesn’t actually use the word *lies* in this passage, but it does in vs. 32, “Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams.” So, don’t listen to them. But what were those lies? Vs. 17 tells us: “They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord (so, sadly the people didn’t want God’s words), ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’” So look what they were lying about; they were dishonest about the consequences of their sins.

The most direction application for you and me (as pastor and congregation) is this: I need to tell you that things will not be OK if you live disobedient lives to God’s words and you need to hear it. I’m really happy to talk and teach about God’s amazing grace; I’m filled with joy when I get to teach you and remind you about the supremacy of Jesus Christ in all of life. How his death on the cross for our sins is the supreme act of God’s love; how Jesus lives inside of us when we are born again. I must tell you the good news often and you need to hear the good news often. But you also need to hear why the good news is so good; it’s because the bad news is so bad. Friends, I must tell you “disaster is coming” when you throw God’s words away and do your own thing. And Jeremiah got into the nitty gritty. He warned them about their dishonesty; when they took advantage of the poor, he told them the truth of God’s way. When they committed adultery, he didn’t pull punches. When they stole from their neighbors, he didn’t over look that sin either. I’d be lying to you and failing my calling if I said, “No disaster will come upon us!” when we are committed to our sin.

You know I don't like throwing stones, FBC, so please hear this not as a condemnation towards others, but a blood earnestness for God's glory and the good of God's people. This is why it's so important that this church and the denomination we are a part of does not follow the trend of others churches and other denominations of caving to cultural pressure to adjust the good counsel of God. We can't start saying bad things are good things; bitter things are sweet things. If we end up doing that, we're going to be just like Judah believing the lies of "*Peace, peace!*" *when there is no peace*. We need shepherds who will tell us the truth even about the hard stuff. That's how God instructs us and how he saves us from following our hearts.

Finally, there's a reward. The Bible is really clear: what we do in life echoes in eternity (that's a nod to Maximus in *Gladiator*). Romans 2 puts it this way: (vs 6-8) "He (God) will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life, but those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury." We get what we make out of life. What Paul goes on and says in the rest of Romans 2 and 3 is that we can never please God enough. Thankfully, that's why Jesus was sent to be our righteousness before God!

Then, throw on top of this James 3:1 "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." So, put 2 and 2 together, FBC. How do you think God will reward the teachers of Judah? Look at vs. 29-32 (READ).

Strong words. Several times God says, "I am against them." Think about having the God who made the heavens and the earth, the God who made the mountains, the oceans, against you. Wow! Do you want to hear the good news? God is for the humble. God is only against the proud, the ones who think they have it all figured out, the ones who think they are wiser than God's word, the ones who want to walk their own path. But for the humble (the ones who rely on God, who want his word, who will ask for help) God has grace... abundant grace. God is only harsh to those who refuse him; who live in pride. But to the humble, his mercies are new every morning.

I'm hoping hearing this message does a couple of things in you. I'm hoping it makes you eager to be taught God's word. We need to do our own reading; we should be memorizing and meditating on God's word, too. But we must be taught God's word. We all need the help of others (me too) in understanding the glory of the gospel of grace. In addition, I'm hoping this message will help you and I when we get a little offended when we hear teaching. Do you know what the people of Judah did when they got offended by God's word? They threw Jeremiah into a pit, they locked him up with chains in a dungeon. That's how much they hated God's messages when they disagreed with. I'm not thinking that's what you will do (I'm hoping not!), but it's all the same if you ignore it, you close your ears or just stop coming. Friends, God is looking to help us with his word through the teaching of God's shepherds. Let's rejoice and be glad for his provision of grace.

Key verse ~ Jeremiah 23:16-17

Questions for the week

- What are some of the most important qualities a teacher of God's word should have?
- What was most surprising (discouraging) to you about the shepherds of Judah from Jer. 23?
- What do you want to do differently after hearing the message today?