

Episode 031

Caring Changes Everything

Introduction

Godly leaders care. It may be particularly relevant to pastoral leaders but nevertheless it should be in the heart of all God's leaders. Why? Because it reflects Jesus's heart. Because it reflects God's hearts. As we truly aspire to be more like Jesus, we ought to also aspire to be shepherds like Him. Shepherds who care about God's people.

Jesus set the tone in the parable of John 10:11-13(NIV) 11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

Hirelings flee in the face of danger because they do not truly care about the sheep. While true shepherds will fight for their sheep. Jesus expects shepherds to be willing to lay down our lives for the sheep. Not the other way around. Some leaders treat their sheep as assets or instruments to further their own ministries. That is not the heart of a shepherd, but that of hirelings. True shepherds feel a deep sense of responsibility for the sheep. The sheep feel like family to them.

Caring changes everything because it will infuse into our perspectives, our attitudes, our actions. Caring changes the flavour of our leadership. It takes the edge off goal-oriented leaders. It broadens our focus beyond achievements to account for feelings of people we deal with. It brings a tenderness and gentleness into the way we relate with people. True shepherds are motivated by their concern for the sheep, more than the accolades or rewards.



THE SHEPHERD'S HEART

Psalm 23 is a famous psalm about why we can trust in the Lord as our Great Shepherd. At the same time, it reveals key characteristics of true shepherds. Let's unpack this psalm to discover these characteristics.

Shepherds Nourish

Psalm 23:2–3a (NIV) 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he refreshes my soul.

The good shepherd brings the sheep to lie down in green pastures, where they can graze. To quiet waters where they can drink peacefully, without being harassed. This is what Jesus meant when He instructed Peter to feed His sheep. What does it mean when applied to God's people? It means the leader takes responsibility to refresh, to nourish their souls. It means that their soul is being uplifted, strengthened.

How do leaders do so?

One of the fundamental ways is through teaching God's Word. God's Word is food to our souls (Matt 4:4). However, the manner in which we serve God's Word can make a world of difference. Have you noticed the difference between the nutritional value or healthy benefits between food that is pre-packaged, highly processed and one that is freshly prepared? The difference between food thoughtfully made with concern for providing a balanced diet compared to food made for taste but little consideration for nutrition. Caring and wise parents give this careful consideration for the sake of their children and themselves.

In the same way, do we teach pre-packaged, highly processed messages grafted from other sources? Do we teach in an ad hoc manner? Without careful consideration whether it provides a balanced spiritual diet? There is a significant difference when God's Word is taught fresh out of the oven of heaven. Soaked in prayer, wrestled with the Holy Spirit, clarified in our convictions, adjusted for the palate of the hearers. Such messages bring revelation of God's Word and touches the soul. For that reason, I usually require at least 1.5 days work to prepare a sermon. Because I seek to faithfully nourish the flock. Such feeding leads to strong, healthy churches that are able to do exploits for the Kingdom.



Not all leaders are preachers, but the heart intent should be the same. Whether it be preparing for a Bible discussion in a small group, a mentoring session, a message to rally the team and so forth. Even if I am using a pre-prepared lesson, I make sure to digest the material into my soul, my convictions and seek the Lord for some fresh nourishment for my hearers. Seek to nourish.

Often, when I meet with Christ-followers, I try to bring in God's Word, not necessarily with Scripture and verse, but at least with the principle and the spiritual force behind it. In order that it may stimulate faith and bring life. Be creative, be intentional to do so.

Secondly, create an environment where there is space for prayer and meditation. Such times helps us refresh, realign, refill our inner energies. Being overly busy to the detriment of such spaces is not a badge of honour to wear. While I encourage diligence and effective use of time, I also encourage creating spaces for prayer and meditation amongst our people. It is important to emphasise carving out time, whether each day for devotions or each week for personal rest and reflection. I find it more effective to work hard and long for a day or two then slow down the next. I usually achieve much more when I am on the roll.

Thirdly, is to foster fellowship. Positive interactions with fellow believers are good for our soul. Hence, in our church we encourage involvement in small groups for Bible discussion, fellowship, prayer and support.

Fourthly, on the practical side is to encourage healthy habits such as exercise, spending time in nature, etc where people are able to relax, unwind and re-energise.

Shepherds Guide

Psalm 23:3b (NIV) He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

The Great Shepherd guides His sheep along the right paths. For sheep are prone to wander. Unfortunately, it can mean journeying into wrong, harmful paths. Hence the need for guidance. Many needs guidance to help navigate through life's many challenges, to avoid traps the Enemy devises and to plot a path forward towards God.



Too often believers make decisions whether it be marriage, partnerships, major financial choices, lifestyle choices with little input from spiritual leaders. I have seen many such decision made following patterns they learnt from their past unbelieving experiences. It is not surprising that these decisions tend to rob them of God's blessings and anointing which could have been theirs. Sadly, these decisions often create hindrances to further advancing in God's purposes.

God's leaders must have the heart to guide others. Out of a heart seeking the best for the people, not out of a desire to control or manipulate. Thus, we seek to help our people discover God's will, rather than what we would prefer God's will to be. This requires integrity on our part.

Giving guidance requires much wisdom and patience. Wisdom because every Christian is unique and their faith journey is unique. It is not possible to take a cookie-cutter approach. Even though the overall fundamental principles are the same, its application is unique for every person. For that reason, in our church I developed a subject called Knowing God's Will. To help lay out the framework for understanding God's will. So that at least when we discuss with our people, we have a good common understanding to work from. Thus, it is easier for leaders to focus on the unique guidance needed.

I discovered that the key offering guidance is to ask good penetrating questions. Questions that surface their inadequate perspectives, attitudes, presumptions. Questions that draw them back to God, His Word, His purposes. It is crucial for the people to know that we care enough to listen and ask questions to help them. When done well, they usually will discover the answers for themselves. Some of our leaders undertook training to be coaches. The training equipped our leaders to be more skilful in asking penetrating, thought-provoking questions. Questions that become instrumental in helping people discover God's will.

Even so, the reality is believers tend to bring their worldviews, their insecurities, their fears and doubts into the whole process. We need patience and prayer to help them navigate through this to discover God's will and to walk in it.



Shepherds Presence

Psalm 23:4 (NIV) Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...

The very presence of the shepherd brings a sense of security and comfort to the sheep. Because they know that they are safe when their protector is with them. It is similar with young children who have this sense of security when they are within sight or hearing of their parents. Often, there is tremendous comfort in knowing that someone whom you trust, and that cares about you is nearby.

When a trusted and caring leader is present, it provides comfort to the members. By presence, it means they are visible or felt. The people need to feel that the person is walking with them. That the person is quickly available to lend a shoulder to cry on. There is security in hearing their familiar voice. Experiencing the comfort of a warm loving hug.

Our presence can lend courage to weak knees. Strength to flagging arms. Confidence to step out into bigger ventures. Because they know you are near enough to catch them should they waver. That they are not alone.

Hence it is crucial to be present. Even for a leader like me, who now travels significantly. I still try to project my presence through other means such as social media and messaging tools. When I am around, I try to walk around and touch base with members.

Shepherds Protect

Psalm 23:4 (NIV) Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Shepherds cast a watchful eye over their sheep to protect from danger. Their rods are employed to ward off danger. Rods are typically heavy, straight club-like tools which are used to defend against wild animals. While the shepherd's staff is well-known to be a long thinner stick with a curved end. Both are used together to protect the sheep. It provides security and comfort to the sheep.



Godly leaders watch over the flock that God has given to be responsible for. We ought to keep an alert against false, harmful doctrines. Some of these doctrines may seem attractive on the surface but lead the people away from God and His ways. Some doctrines create legalism or are unbalanced leading to unhealthy focusses. I have seen believers' lives lose its spark when they grasped hold of such doctrines. The antidote to this is to continually teach good sound doctrine and refute these dangerous false doctrines. It also helps when we consistently practice good Bible interpretation at the pulpit. This is why I normally do expositional preaching. It is also one reason why we developed a course in our church on interpreting the Bible.

We must be alert to wolves who may even come in sheep clothing. They prey against the undiscerning, inexperienced believers. Enticing them with smooth words only to fleece them financially, emotionally and spiritually. Some wolves seek to destroy by promoting unbiblical lifestyles couched in pious clothes or offer supposedly enlightening concepts which undermine their devotion to God. Wolves come in all shapes and forms. It takes a discerning shepherd to unmask them.

Another task of the shepherd is to protect the people from worldliness. People saved from the world will continue to bring the world into the church. The world system also seeks to mould the church by pressurising it from many angles. We must draw the people closer to God and further from the world in terms of their heart allegiance and perspectives. As shepherds, we must be watchful and discern the worldly cultures and values that can easily seep into the church.

Shepherds Empower

Psalm 23:5 (NIV) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

The imagery of Shepherd and sheep appears to shift to that of Shepherd and King. Where King David likely refers to a ceremonial feast where a ceremonial table is laid out in preparation for an anointing ceremony. Here the anointing is to commission a king into his role. David seems to allude to the fact that not all gathered around this table are friendly or trustworthy to him. Some are enemies who would seek his downfall, yet for the moment must agree to his appointment.

This imagery speaks of a shepherd who empowers others to rise up into greater roles, even in the face of greater challenges.



A key role of a caring leader is to empower others by helping them grow to be stronger, more mature, and more capable. In order that they may rise up to bigger things in God. For leaders who truly care do not wish for others to remain dependent on them. Rather their heart is to see them develop into all that they can be in God.

One of my great joys is to see those that I oversee, especially those I mentor, grow into God's calling and purposes for their lives. To see them able to function in their giftings with confidence. To see what they can accomplish with God's grace. To observe their godly character and convictions. It is a blessing to be able to release them, confident that they will do well in God.

Loves

Psalm 23:6 (NIV) Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

David the psalmist writes of his experiences and convictions of God's love and goodness which motivates him to dwell in God's house forever. Godly shepherds invoke such feelings amongst their people as well. Leaders who genuinely love their people and demonstrate goodness in their actions tend to gain deep loyalty. Many of our church members have expressed such sentiments to Lai Ling and myself. That deeply blesses our hearts because it means we have been good shepherds, as Jesus would want us to.

Paul spoke in tender terms to the church he established in Thessalonica. That is the heart of a loving leader. 1 Thessalonians 2:7–8 (NIV) 7 ... Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8 so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

That is how loving shepherds feel towards their flock.

CONCLUSION

When leaders truly care, it changes everything about the way we lead. Because our heart is to bless our people and help they grow up in God's purposes. In turn, the people mature, gain comfort and security, are empowered and reciprocate with loyalty.



Discussion Questions

These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. What are your thoughts about the statement “Caring changes everything because it will infuse into our perspectives, our attitudes, our actions. Caring changes the flavour of our leadership.” Discuss.
2. Several key thoughts were shared about how a Shepherd-leader can nourish their people. What are your thoughts on the importance of nourishing and what is important? Discuss
3. What key point has impacted you the most in this lesson? Discuss.

Actionable Steps

Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. What challenges do you face in seeking to better nourish your people? What are some key steps to improve in this?
2. Which aspect highlighted in this podcast is of greatest need for improvement in your leadership? What are some key steps that you can take to improve it?





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