

Pastoring With Less Pain, Part 1 of 2

by David Servant

David Servant discusses the challenges of pastoral ministry and emphasizes the need for a goat-free church to reduce pain and conflict.

Scripture: Matthew 18:15

Topics: "Pastoral Ministry", "Church Discipline"

Description

David Servant addresses the pain experienced by pastors due to conflicts and broken relationships within their congregations, often referred to as 'the Judas syndrome.' He emphasizes the importance of pastoring a flock of genuine sheep who love God and each other, as opposed to selfish goats who cause strife and conflicts. Servant highlights the biblical distinction between sheep and goats, urging pastors to identify and address goats within their churches to create a 'goat-free zone' for a more peaceful pastoral experience.

Transcript

I've been thinking about a conversation I had not long ago with a friend who is a pastor. He shared his pain regarding some people who had recently left his church. At one time they had been loyal, enthusiastic supporters of his ministry. But their departure was anything but that. Now they were speaking ill of him to others, and it had become ugly.

It wasn't the first time he had experienced what pastors sometimes refer to as "the Judas syndrome." And if past experience teaches anything, it wouldn't be the last time.

Naturally, I understand that pastor-parishioner splits are not always the fault of the parishioner. Many people leave churches for justifiable reasons. When I think about some churches and the pastors who lead them, I wonder why anyone stays.

But in this case, I had to side with my pastor friend because I know him pretty well. He understands the gospel, preaches the truth, and doesn't fall for the latest fads. He's not perfect, but he's doing a good job. (He supports the ministry of Heaven's Family and likes my e-teachings as well, which certainly makes him a cut above the average!) So as he poured out some of the pain in his heart, I couldn't help but sympathize with him.

His story is the story of a million other pastors. I know this, not only from hundreds of conversations over the years with hurting pastors, but also from my own experience. I was a pastor for about twenty years off

and on, and I've got the scars to prove it. Near the end of my last pastorate, I sometimes privately described myself as a man who had been through three-hundred divorces. It effects you deeply. In your darker moments you begin to wonder if there is any reality to Christianity, this "wonderful family of God" that has left a legacy of strife and splits wherever it exists, a never-ending episode of Family Feud.

Ah, to live above with the saints we love, that will be all glory!

But to live down here, with the saints so dear, that is another story.

Underneath this lighthearted poem lies a bittersweet truth that slowly makes many pastors more bitter than sweet. Years of conflicts and broken relationships take their toll.

Pastors who survive this syndrome (and tens of thousands don't, ultimately exiting the ministry for good), find ways to cope. Some just play a game, becoming professional people-pleasers, slick and shallow. They try very hard to keep everyone happy, which generally requires a compromise of principles. Every pastor knows the temptation. I can't resist interjecting a story I heard about a pastor who succumbed:

A successful pastor was visited in his office one day by a stoic deacon. The deacon expressed his opinion about a certain issue in the church, to which the pastor repeatedly replied, "You know, you are right. You are absolutely right."

No sooner had that deacon departed when another deacon showed up, and expressed the exact opposite of the first deacon's position on the same issue. As he listened, the pastor repeatedly replied, "You know, you are right. You are absolutely right."

After that deacon departed, the pastor's wife came into his office. She said, "Dear, I just overheard in an adjacent office your conversations with both those deacons. They both expressed opposite opinions, and you told both of them that they were right! Dear, you shouldn't do that!

He pondered what she said for a few seconds. Then he replied, "You know, you are right. You are absolutely right."

Another way of coping is to do your best to distance yourself emotionally from your parishioners. You try to look at them as customers to be served rather than as friends or family members. You become a doctor in an ER, and they become casualties whom you patch up, never expecting them to stay very long at your hospital. You guard yourself from forming any real friendships with anyone in your church. This method of coping is taught in many Bible schools, I might add, by ex-pastors who didn't survive.

There is also the "this is my cross to bear" method of coping. You tell yourself that you are suffering for the sake of God's kingdom, and keep reminding yourself of the reward that awaits you in heaven. You resign yourself to the fact that having people who once loved you now hate you is just part of the pastoral package.

In response to all of this, I cannot help but ask, Isn't the hatred we experience supposed to be coming from the world? Should pastors expect nothing better than enduring a never-ending stream of broken relationships with brothers and sisters? Isn't there some obscure scripture in the New Testament that says something like, "By this shall all men know you are My disciples, if you love one another"?

I suppose I'm just so altruistic that I believe Scripture has some answers for us, and that there is a better way that is biblical, if we'll just follow it. So let me propose in this e-teaching a first step to pastoring with less pain.

Let me first make it very clear, however, that I'm not addressing those pastors who are the modern equivalent of the Pharisees, who love money, exalt their traditions above God's Word, love the respectful greetings and special places of honor, are goats by Jesus' definition (see Matt. 25:31-46), and wolves in sheep's clothing, even if they are "evangelical" or "born again." I'm speaking to sincere, pure-hearted pastors who have hope of something closer to New Testament Christianity.

May I also add that I have not joined the crowd who, having been burned so many times by the many wolves in sheep's clothing, have altogether rejected the God-ordained ministry of the pastor/elder/overseer (all the same office in the New Testament). Trust me. There are genuine, God-called pastors in the body of Christ, but they are not the slick super-stars that so often claim the title of pastor. Real pastors, in fact, don't like titles at all, because they love to serve.

Step #1

The first step in pastoring with less pain is to make sure that your flock consists of sheep rather than goats. Sheep are a joy to pastor. Goats are hell. It's just that simple.

Goats are selfish, because they aren't really born again. They may be religious, but they aren't righteous.

Sheep, however, love God and each other. They are the true disciples of Jesus (see John 13:35). On the rare occasion that they do have conflict with you or other genuine sheep in the church, they will work hard to resolve that conflict, obeying the instructions of Jesus in this regard (see Matt. 18:15-17). They consider their relationships with other sheep to be sacred.

Most churches these days are a mixture of sheep and goats, and those are two very different species. Sheep are spiritual offspring of God, whereas goats are spiritual offspring of Satan (see 1 John 3:10). Worse, all the goats think they're sheep, and many of the sheep, lacking biblical understanding, even think the goats are sheep. It is no wonder that there are so many conflicts and problems. But the church of Jesus Christ is supposed to be a goat-free zone!

Goats cause strife because they are selfish by nature. They must have their way. They care only for themselves. They want to find fault with you. Pastor, don't be fooled into thinking these people are heaven-bound sheep. Paul clearly declared that those whose lives are characterized by "enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions and factions...will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:20-21). These folks are not born again. They're goats.

Pastor, I'm sure you will agree with me that it would be much less painful to pastor people who are hungry for God, whose chief aspiration is to please Jesus, and whose lives are characterized by humble self-sacrifice and devotion to care for "the least of these" in Christ's family, that is, those who are sheep by Jesus' definition (see Matt. 25:31-46). Imagine if everyone in your church was passionate about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing shelter for the destitute, and visiting the sick and incarcerated among our spiritual family. Don't you think there would be less strife in your church? Wouldn't there be fewer of those kinds of people leaving your church in search of something better? So you see, all your problems are with the goats. When they leave your church, you should rejoice. (Of course, you may want

to weep for them.) They are, in the words of an old pastor friend of mine, "blessed subtractions." You don't need them.

I'm afraid that we've accepted a very low standard for what is supposed to be normal Christianity and normal church experience. Again, the church of Jesus Christ is supposed to be a goat-free zone.

Scripture tells us that there were some goats who crept into the early church, but the apostle Paul certainly didn't consider it to be acceptable. He told the Corinthian church, for example, to excommunicate an obvious goat, a man living in open immorality (see 1 Cor. 5:1-13). He then reminded the Corinthians that there are certain people who, by their lifestyles, make it obvious that they are goats. Paul went on to say that such people, if they are in the church, should be judged by the church, and those within the church should not associate with or even eat with them. This is not just the responsibility of pastors, but of all Christians!

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother [a goat] if he is an immoral person, or covetous [greedy], or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler---not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges (1 Cor. 5:9-13; emphasis added).

A few verses later, Paul re-emphasized the same concept:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous [greedy], nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11, emphasis added).

Thus the reason that such people should not be permitted to remain in the church (unless they repent) is because such people will not be permitted to enter heaven. And Paul's list that I just quoted from 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 is not exhaustive. He adds others into the goat category later on in that same letter. He was fearful that there were quite a few goats hiding in the Corinthian church:

For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish...that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances (2 Cor. 12:20).

As I have already pointed out, Paul listed those identical sins in Galatians 5:20-21, declaring that if such sins are practiced, they mark one as not being destined to inherit God's kingdom.

Obviously, Paul was working to clean up the church in Corinth, in order that it might be what God intended, a body of holy people, a goat-free zone. His method was first to describe how spiritual goats act, revealing that they can be identified by their actions. Then, in light of that, Paul admonished all in the Corinthian church to examine themselves:

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test? But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test (2 Cor. 13:5-6).

How to Have a "Goatectomy"

Every pastor who has goats in his church should follow Paul's example in this regard. Teach just what Paul taught. Teach your congregation how to identify church goats, so that goats can identify themselves (and hopefully repent) and so that they can be identified by others. Admonish the people to examine themselves, just as Paul did. Tell them that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom, and tell them specifically who the unrighteous are, just as Paul did.

If you have a mixture of sheep and goats, and you desire to pastor a church of sheep, you must either convert the goats into sheep or drive them out. The only hope of converting them is to convince them that they are goats. God's Word is certainly capable of doing that, and there are plenty of scriptures you can use that identify goats by their actions. (For help, see *The Great Gospel Deception*.)

If, however, you only parrot the typical American gospel of salvation by grace through a faith that is void of works (a faith that Scripture says is dead, useless, and cannot save---see Jas. 2:14-26), you are doomed to pastor goats forever. Goats absolutely love that "gospel." Only God knows how many millions of dirty goats have found sanctuary in churches where they can shout "Amen" when the pastor preaches that Evangelical mantra, "We are saved by faith alone!" Those goats sure don't want to know that there is only one verse in the entire Bible where the words faith and alone are found together: "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (Jas. 2:24; emphasis added). That's it.

If you've been proclaiming a typical American gospel but start proclaiming a biblical gospel, you shouldn't be surprised when persecution arises from within your own church, naturally, from the goats. When that happens, you won't be pastoring with less pain, but probably with significantly more pain than you've ever experienced before. You can cope by remembering that they are not rejecting you so much as they are rejecting Jesus (see 1 Sam. 8:7). If you can remain steadfast, your church will ultimately be goat-free, and probably a lot smaller in size. (In the event that goats hold the church's political power, however, you may be in for a "pastorectomy" rather than a "goatectomy." That could be the best thing that ever happens to you, a wonderful deliverance.)

If you can't convert the goats into sheep, and if they won't be driven out through the preaching of the truth, then they must be driven out by excommunication. That is precisely what Paul prescribed to the Corinthians concerning the man who was living in immorality with his stepmother. And that is precisely what he warned the other unrepentant Corinthian goats of near the close of his letter:

For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish...that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.

This is the third time I am coming to you. "Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone (1 Cor. 12:20-13:2).

Can you see that Paul was promising a full and fair investigation when he returned to Corinth? Clearly, those who were characterized by "strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances...impurity, immorality and sensuality" were the goats targeted by Paul. He promised that he

would not spare them. They would be excommunicated from Jesus' holy church, because it is supposed to be goat-free.

Tragically, most pastors would not even consider what I'm saying, as they can't imagine preaching a gospel that calls people to holiness, or offending any goats, and certainly not excommunicating them. They are trapped in an institution that bears little resemblance to the true church of Jesus Christ. They are likely goats themselves. No true sheep could be satisfied sitting under the "ministry" of such a pastor.

Of course, I am aware of the fact that false pastors have used some of the very scriptures I've mentioned in this teaching to justify their iron-fisted control over their flocks, excommunicating those who are not submissive and instructing the remaining body to shun them. As I said at the beginning, however, I'm writing to true pastors, not wolves in sheep's clothing. And sheep who actually expect their pastors to follow Jesus, and who question why they are not, are not sheep who are "causing dissension." They're just sheep following the Great Shepherd.

I've got more to share, but I'll leave it until next month. In summary, if you want to pastor with less pain, you first need a goat-free church. It's just that simple!

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