

There's a Sheep Born Every Second

by David Servant

We should not blindly follow others, but instead follow Jesus as our Shepherd and live a life of righteousness.

Scripture: Psalm 23:1, Psalm 23:3, Matthew 7:22, Matthew 23:8, John 10:11, 1 Corinthians 11:1, Ephesians 4:14

Topics: "Spiritual Leadership", "Following Jesus"

Description

David Servant delivers a powerful message drawing parallels between the behavior of sheep and humans, emphasizing the dangers of blindly following leaders and the importance of following Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to avoid being misled. He highlights the tendency of people to idolize spiritual leaders, giving them titles and praise that belong only to God, and warns against being deceived by those who seek approval and honor from men. David stresses the need for individuals to think for themselves, discern the fruits of spiritual leaders, and ensure that Christ has absolute preeminence in their lives to stay on the path of righteousness.

Transcript

It was reported by the Associated Press that, near the town of Gavas, eastern Turkey, one sheep among a large flock walked to the edge of cliff and jumped to its death. A second sheep quickly imitated the first, also leaping off the cliff to its death. Then a third sheep followed. Then a fourth. Then a fifth. The AP reported that "stunned Turkish shepherds, who had left the herd to graze while they had breakfast, watched as nearly 1,500 others followed, each leaping off the same cliff." When it was all over, 450 sheep had died and 1,050 survived, but only because those sheep that jumped later were saved as the pile of sheep got higher and the fall more cushioned.

Imagine the peer pressure that last sheep must have felt. Surely 1,499 sheep can't be wrong...can they?

There is no such thing as a sheep that possesses leadership qualities--all are born followers. Consequently, any sheep that does anything out of the ordinary, regardless of how foolish it is, becomes a leader by default. And all the other sheep, having no idea what it means to think for themselves, blindly follow. They simply assume the "lead sheep" must know something that they don't. I once watched scores of sheep jump over an obstacle that didn't exist, only because the first sheep in line had jumped over that same invisible obstacle. Perhaps not wanting to appear foolish, they all acted like fools. Slaughter houses take advantage of this weakness among sheep, commonly employing what they call a "Judas sheep" that every day leads the other sheep down the corridor to where their throats will be slit.

I'm sure you know where I'm going with this. It is no accident that God refers to people, and often His own people, as sheep--probably not the highest compliment. Sheep are dumb, and I mean d-u-m, dumb. They are easily misled, and so are we. As hard as it may be to admit, we generally tend to be followers who let others do our thinking for us. Sadly, we'll follow just about anyone who appears to know what he is talking about. The wool is easily pulled over our eyes if somebody draws big crowds, has initials after his name, shows some stage presence (what is often referred to as "anointing"), can read Greek, is on TV, or has written a book. "There's a sucker born every minute," quipped P.T. Barnum, but I'm afraid there's a sheep born every second. And there are a lot of sheep who are leaders by default only because the rest of us are too sheepish to question where they're leading us. Unfortunately, they're often leading us off the edge of cliffs, over non-existent obstacles, or down slaughter house corridors.

So what should not-so-smart sheep like us do to avoid being misled?

Foremost, we should make sure we're following the one whom Scripture refers to as "the good Shepherd," "the Great Shepherd," "the Chief Shepherd" and the "One Shepherd" (see John 10:11; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4; John 10:16). That would be Jesus, of course, and it is no accident that Scripture refers to Him using all those phrases. He is the only safe Shepherd to follow. When He has His rightful place in our lives as Supreme Shepherd, we will not be misled.

A person's propensity to be misled is directly proportional to the degree that he allows others to usurp Christ's lordship in his life. Those who "love the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:43) are most likely to follow other cliff-jumping sheep, craving their approval. But the sheep who can honestly say, "The Lord is my Shepherd" (Ps. 23:1), who refuses to give to any other sheep or shepherd what rightfully belongs to the Great Shepherd alone, and who doesn't care what the other sheep think, is safe. He won't be jumping off cliffs. Rather, he'll be lying down in green pastures (see Ps. 23:2).

Jesus plainly warned us against giving to any spiritual leader what rightfully belongs only to God:

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant (Matt. 23:8-11).

I'm afraid that the letter and the spirit of these instructions are often ignored. So many spiritual leaders these days are grasping for titles, and there have never been so many bishops, doctors, psalmists, prophets and apostles. Not only do they place titles in front of their names, but they line rows of initials after their names, and all for one purpose--to impress us. And impressed we are. Dumb sheep like us have made idols of these men, and the evidence is plain:

- 1.) We give them continual praise, frequently talking about them and their marvelous ministries.
- 2.) We're awe-struck in their presence (even addressing them with the title "Reverend").
- 3.) We bring them our offerings so they can continue to live at a standard far above us.
- 4.) We read their books more than we read our Bibles.
- 5.) We follow their teachings that blatantly contradict the words of the Great Shepherd.

That's at least semi-idolatry.

I recently looked through the full-color monthly ministry magazine of one of those very popular idols, and counted his photo no less than 47 times within its eight pages. When we give honor to those that are exalting themselves in these ways, we are laying out a welcome mat to the deceiver.

Take note that in the New Testament, no one in God's Kingdom had any titles except the Lord Jesus. You can't find, for example, the phrase "the apostle Paul," in the Bible. Yes, Paul did refer to himself using the words, "Paul, an apostle of Christ" (see 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). The word "apostle," however, (meaning, one who is sent) was his calling, not his title. Paul also sometimes began his letters with, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle" (see Rom. 1:1; Tit. 1:1). He once asked the Corinthian believers, "What is Paul?", and then answered his own question: "A servant through whom you have believed" (1 Cor. 3:5). To the same group he later called himself "the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9).

Compare that to the spiritual leaders today who try to impress us with their titles and bios that list the many reasons they should be admired. Some time ago, for example, I saw an advertisement for a church in my area that consists of about 25 people. The pastor had bestowed upon himself the title of "senior pastor." I was recently reading the bio of an unknown minister on his website (where he had plagiarized an entire article I had written), and it said that he was one of America's most sought-after speakers. (Perhaps he meant he was being sought by the police.) A few days ago, I was shocked to discover that a humble Indian pastor who once spoke in my church when his ministry was much smaller now goes in India by the title, "His Grace, Most Reverend Metropolitan." (I also found it interesting that his Indian title is kept hidden from the tens of thousands of American Christians who support his well-known ministry.)

In the book of Acts, Paul's name is listed 126 times. Only once did Luke even mention that Paul was an apostle (see Acts 14:14). The other 125 times Luke simply called him "Paul." Similarly, Peter once mentioned Paul in one of his letters, and he called him "our beloved brother Paul" (2 Pet. 3:15).

Along these same lines, there is no mention in the New Testament of "Bishop so-and-so," "Apostle so-and-so" or "Prophet so-and-so. In fact, there is no mention of anyone with the honorable title of "Pastor" either. Was Jesus' forbidden list of titles limited exclusively to "teacher," "father" and "leader"? Or should we read beyond the letter of what He was saying and into the spirit of it?

As one who has pretty well proven his love and esteem for pastors all over the world, I'm certainly not advocating that we not honor those to whom honor is due. But I've noticed that some saints go beyond honoring their pastors to the point of idolizing them, and the title that always accompanies their pastor's name is one among many manifestations of the very thing Jesus forbade. Could we be arousing the jealousy of the Great, Good, Chief and Only Shepherd when we gush over earthly shepherds? If someone asked you, "Who is your shepherd?," would you quote Psalm 23:1, or would you name the person whose name is painted on the church sign? Of greater concern, would your pastor correct you if you started addressing him without his title? If so, run. Run for your life. "Beware of the scribes, who...love respectful greetings...and chief seats...and places of honor" (Luke 20:46).

All of this is just to say that, when we are enamored by spiritual leaders, we are susceptible to be deceived because we are giving to man what rightfully belongs only to God. Again, a person's propensity to be misled is directly proportional to the degree that he allows others to usurp Christ's lordship in his life. And when spiritual leaders crave to be admired, it reveals that something is very wrong in their hearts.

Please note that I am not saying that God's sheep only need Jesus and don't need pastors. On the contrary, God has placed shepherds in the Church, and sheep desperately need shepherds. But the shepherds they need are under-Shepherds who are setting an example of obedience to the Great Shepherd (see 1 Tim. 4:12). That kind of shepherd is the only safe under-Shepherd to follow. Paul wrote, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). True, God-sent leaders are like Christ. But you can't discern who is like Christ unless you know something about what Christ is like. So again, it is unsafe to follow any human shepherd unless the Great Shepherd has absolute preeminence in your life.

Pastors and other spiritual leaders are, of course, also sheep in God's flock, who have just as much propensity as the rest of us to follow other sheep over cliffs. They, too, have their favorite teachers, many of whom are default leaders only because they're straying in a new direction. That is why the Church is always besieged with new "movements." Pastors, following other sheep who are the latest default leaders, promote the latest movement to their flocks.

Some pastors jump from one movement to the next, thinking that "winds of doctrine" (see Eph. 4:14) are actually "waves of the Spirit." They're always looking for the next wave to catch. Others get locked into movements that have long ago subsided, and visiting their churches is like going back in time anywhere from ten to four-hundred years. On the other hand, some wise pastors who have the good sense not to go with the latest flow, have unfortunately been washed right out of their churches by movements that gained enough influence to send most of their flocks surfing a wave that ultimately crashed on the shore of reality. How much better is it to just stay anchored to Jesus and His timeless Word. Then those waves roll right on by.

Although Scripture compares us to sheep, the analogy is of course imperfect, as are all analogies. Unlike real sheep, we don't have to be so stupid, following other sheep over cliffs. We can all actually think for ourselves, and Jesus, the Great Shepherd, has even also told us how we can recognize those who are wolves in sheep's clothing. Although they may appear to be sheep, they can be recognized, He said, by their fruits. He was not speaking of fruits of miracles, because He warned within the same context against spiritual leaders who work miracles but who were not holy (see Matt. 7:22-23). Thus, when He said that we'd know them by their fruits, he must have been speaking of their fruits of holiness. Simply put, are spiritual leaders like Jesus? Do they live as He lived? Do they teach what He taught? Are they humble servants?

If we'll only follow the simple instructions of our Great Shepherd it is quite easy, even for dumb sheep like us, to know who to follow and who not to follow. Our Good Shepherd is guiding us, not to follow foolish fads, but down "paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (see Ps. 23:3). He leads us on paths of righteousness because He is holy, and He requires that we be holy. Thus, any under-shepherd who is not leading his flock down paths of righteousness--by means of his teaching and example--is not a shepherd that anyone should be following. 1,499 sheep can be wrong.

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