

***“I Will Set Shepherds over Them”***

In the name of him who directed his disciples to feed the hungry people, dear friends in Christ: The appointed Scripture readings for the past several weeks have been hammering away on a steady theme; namely that of sinful people’s natural opposition to the Word of God and their propensity to try to silence anyone who proclaims it. Just to review, a few weeks back we had the prophet Ezekiel whom God called to proclaim his Word to his people Israel whom the Lord referred to as “a stubborn, hard-hearted, and rebellious lot”. The Lord told Ezekiel, “They’re not likely to listen to you, but I want you to go speak my Word to them anyway.” Then we had the account of the prophet Amos. The Lord told him to deliver a sharp word of warning to the people and king of Northern Kingdom of Israel at Bethel, which was the site of one of the rival temples they’d built and at which they worshipped an image of a golden calf – a golden calf that they said was the Lord God of Israel. For his trouble Amos was mocked, viciously threatened, and run out of town.

And then in New Testament times we had the Apostle Paul contending with the cantankerous members of the church at Corinth who were bad mouthing him and dismissing his teachings; we had Jesus teaching God’s Word in ways that amazed his hearers at his hometown of Nazareth, but still they took offense at him personally and they rejected him; and then last week we had John the Baptizer who was imprisoned and then executed for the high crime of calling King Herod and his unlawful wife to repent. So, as I said, the theme has been pretty consistent. God’s truth is not well received by the people of this world, and those who proclaim the Word faithfully to them will be subject to their animosity, their hostility, and perhaps even their violence.

And let me make this clear: this is the Lord’s assessment of all the people of this world. No one happily hears his truth. Everyone resists having their sins exposed and being called to repent and to receive God’s gracious forgiveness for the sake of Christ. That includes you. Hopefully I’ve made that clear. And hopefully too you’ve seen your need to repent of the sin of resisting God’s truth and neglecting his grace in Christ.

But if you came here this morning a bit on the defensive because you’re expecting more of the same – me standing here telling you how rebellious and sinful you are – I’ve got good news for you. This week, with the reading from Jeremiah, the shoe’s on the other foot. This passage is not directed against God’s people in general, rather it specifically targets those whom the Lord has called to shepherd his people. In Jeremiah’s day, that would have included not just the priests, prophets, and religious teachers; but also the king and other civil authorities. But in our day, recognizing that Old Testament Israel finds its New Testament fulfillment in the Church, it’s speaking to those who are called into the office of holy ministry. In other words, this text speaks the Lord’s sharp word of rebuke to me and to everyone else who serves as a pastor or teacher in the Church of Jesus Christ.

In that sense, it’s sort of a double whammy. That’s because everything the Lord says about his people opposing his Word of truth applies to pastors as well. We’re just as guilty as anyone else of that sin. But those called to the ministry have additional obligations placed upon them. They are not only to submit themselves to God’s Word, but they are faithfully to proclaim it and apply it to the lives of God’s people. They are to shepherd the flock of God entrusted to their care. And they are to do so knowing that they will be called to account for the way they

serve. And even though this passage speaks primarily to me and to other pastors, it's important that you know what it says too. That's because in the Church of Christ the sheep have the right, the duty, the obligation to judge their shepherds. They have to: because if your pastor isn't doing what he's supposed to, yes, he'll have to answer for it to the Lord; but you too will suffer consequences if you have allowed yourself to be led astray by his failure to properly discharge his ministry. The whole church suffers from bad shepherding. Therefore you need to know what the shepherd's ministry is.

With that in mind we turn to the Word of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah where he says, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture ... You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds."

Those are harsh words. And they would have come as a surprise to the leaders Jeremiah was addressing. They would have replied, "What do you mean we've scattered the flock? The Temple is always full of people. We've got all kinds of activities going on there. We've never been busier. And the offerings? Why, the money's pouring in. The collection plates are always full. Things are going great. How can you accuse us of scattering and destroying the people? They've never been happier to come here for worship."

And that much was true. The Temple was a busy and profitable place. The people were happy. Why? It's because those in charge were telling them what they wanted to hear. Preaching about sin and repentance is unpopular, so don't preach it. Tell people the Lord is happy with them just the way they are. Tell them that the sacrifices they bring aren't about God graciously taking away your sin through substitutionary death; no, no – it's all about bringing a gift to God to make him happy, just like the other nations do with their gods. They offer sacrifices to earn the favor of their gods so they'll look kindly on them and do things for them in return. Oh, and while we're at it, let's bring some of those gods into the Temple and worship them too. Didn't the Lord say this was to be a house of prayer for all people? Well then, why not for their gods too? We're inclusive. We're loving. We're tolerant. And we especially like the racy "worship" that goes on in those fertility cults.

These shepherds of Israel thought they were doing a great job. The numbers seemed to confirm it. And they were dearly loved by the people they served; after all, they were getting from them exactly what they wanted. But these shepherds *were* scattering the flock of God. By failing to preach God's wrath against sin and his forgiving grace through sacrificial death they were driving the people away from the Lord and his truth. They were destroying the sheep by leading them to damnation.

I wish I could tell you that things are different in our day; but they're not. We were disappointed but not surprised a few weeks ago when the Supreme Court decided to redefine marriage – as if they had the power to change it from the institution God that designed. But the truth is that many church bodies that call themselves Christian were already there. Their shepherds are gladly following the trends of changing culture – what they perceive the people to want – rather than the unchanging Word of God. And that's only on one issue. They'd already caved in on many others. And they're only too willing to surrender God's Word whenever it suits them in the future. You don't like what the Lord has to say about that? Okay. We'll get rid of it. As long as it makes *you* happy.

And it usually happens that the most outwardly successful ministries are theologically the worst. I could give you countless examples of this; but I'll give you two of the most

prominent. Take Joel Osteen. Yes, please, take him. I pick on him a lot, but that's only because he's by far the most popular preacher in America. What does he preach? Nothing about sin and grace, that's for sure. No, he preaches what's called "word of faith" and the gospel of prosperity and positive thinking. Forget about your eternal destiny. God wants you to be rich, happy, and successful in this life. And the only thing holding you back are your negative thoughts. So, stand before the mirror each day and tell yourself, "I'm the person God wants me to be. I'm good looking. I'm talented. I'm going to achieve my goals." You keep doing that because your words will create your reality. Whatever you say – if you sincerely believe it – will become true. And if you don't achieve your dreams, it's because you don't believe enough in yourself. People love this message. They can't hear enough of it. Why? Because it ascribes to them the God-like power to speak things into reality. And who doesn't want to be like God and the master of their own future? Oh, wait; that's how our first parent fell into sin: wanting to be like God. Huh.

Then there's Rick Warren, the senior pastor at Saddleback; a sprawling mega-church with satellite campuses in a dozen different countries. You may know him as the author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, a book that's been a best seller in Christian bookstores for the past ten years, with sales second only to the Bible. What's his message? Purpose, of course. The worst thing you can do in life is fail to discover God's purpose for you. And what is your purpose? It's to ensure that you get the best possible place for yourself in heaven. You see, you're going to be rewarded in the next life according to the number and quality of your godly works done in this life. So get in and do everything you can. Otherwise instead of inheriting a mansion you may find yourself spending eternity in heaven's ghetto. Yes, Jesus gets you through the gate, but it's up to you to earn your place. This is pretty much how the Pharisees thought. And notice that if you think along these lines, your motive for doing good works is entirely selfish. You're working for your own good, not for the good of your neighbor. That's not the love Christ demands of us. It's the exact opposite.

And if that's not bad enough, even worse is what Pastor Warren writes in his book *The Purpose Driven Church*. It's directed more to pastors and church leaders. But in it he says most forcefully that when the people of a church meet for worship, they should not be expecting to get anything out of it. You're not here for your benefit, not here to receive the gifts of grace and forgiveness that God has to give you in Jesus his Son. Heavens, no! You're here for God's pleasure. You're here to give to him. In other words, he's exactly like one of the pagan gods who wants to be served rather than to serve the needs of his people. There's no other way to say it: this is not the Christian faith. But it's amazingly popular with people who call themselves Christian.

And that's the temptation for the shepherd: to be popular. To be well-liked. To be successful in terms of ever growing numbers of members and the all important increased cash flow. And all a shepherd has to do is to cut out those parts of God's Word that people don't like to hear and say the things that will please them. But by so doing such shepherds scatter and destroy the flock of God. And the Lord will deal with them accordingly for the damage they have done. He's made that a promise.

And he's made another promise. He's promised to gather his sheep from where they have been scattered and to set faithful shepherds over them who will care for them – care for them properly not with their own self-serving words but with his divine Word of truth; all of it: the Law they don't like to hear, the Law that threatens and condemns them and tells them they're not worthy – that strips them of any kind of merit or internal righteousness; and the Gospel that

tells them of God's love in Christ Jesus who gave himself on the cross to pay redemption's price – Jesus who is the Lord our righteousness.

That is my calling: to aspire to be such a shepherd for you. For my failures, for the times I've succumbed to the temptation to be more concerned with my image and what you think of me than with God's truth, I humbly beg God's forgiveness and yours. And I ask you to pray for me and for all the shepherds the Lord has set over his flock, that we may serve him faithfully and well by doing and saying what is right in God's eyes rather than man's. Yes, pray for this, so that together as we grow in his truth the Lord will work in us his holy will and gather for himself a fold that is fruitful and multiplies, and that dwells securely in time and eternity in Christ who alone is our righteousness. In Jesus' name.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***