

Marks of an Excellent Shepherd: Faithfulness

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:12

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Based on the enormous volume of available material, pastoral ministry would seem to be very complicated. Pastors face a bewildering number of choices as they seek to lead their people. They read books, attend seminars, follow programs promoted by church-growth gurus, and pattern their leadership style after successful pastors. But all too often, the programs, methods, and gimmicks fail to achieve spiritual results, cheating both pastors and congregations of the true blessings of God.

In actuality, however, pastoral work is confoundingly simple. The principles and directions for successful ministry that are laid out in Scripture are sufficient to fully equip the man of God (2 Corinthians 3:5-6, cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Instead of studying demographics and marketing techniques, or searching for cultural hot buttons to push, church leaders need to understand and obey biblical truth. Methods and trends come and go, and today's sensational new programs will be tomorrow's failed experiments. But the principles of godly truth and virtue that characterize an effective minister are timeless. Power and effectiveness in the ministry come from a heart that is right before God and passionately concerned about His plan and His people.

Nowhere is there a better model of a godly spiritual leader than the apostle Paul. His success in the ministry was the overflow of his godly life. He was a man who was focused on the right goals, driven by the right passions, and motivated by the right desires.

In the face of assaults on the Corinthian church by false apostles, Paul was forced to defend himself by presenting his apostolic credentials. And in the midst of his passionate and humble self-defense (2 Corinthians 12:12-19) we see the true marks of an excellent pastor—each one in contrast to the characteristics of false teachers.

The first mark is *faithfulness*. Unlike the false teachers in Corinth, who sought wealth, fame, and power, Paul's goal was to be faithful to the Lord. Because he was determined to be loyal to God's will no matter the cost, he performed the work of an apostle "with all perseverance" (2 Corinthians 12:12). Despite all the hostility, opposition, and persecution from the world he faced throughout his ministry, Paul remained faithful.

Paul ministered faithfully in the midst of constant duress and relentless persecution. As he wrote in his first inspired letter to the Corinthians, "I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily" (1 Corinthians 15:31). He lived every day knowing it could be his last; the mob in the next town he preached in might take his life, or one of the numerous Jewish plots against his life (Acts 20:19) might finally succeed.

God's spokesmen have always faced opposition and hostility. He warned Jeremiah, "Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them,

or I will dismay you before them. . . . They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you” (Jeremiah 1:17, 19).

The Lord charged Ezekiel, “And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions; neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house” (Ezekiel 2:6). John the Baptist was the greatest man who had lived up to his time (Matthew 11:11), yet he suffered imprisonment (Matthew 14:3) and martyrdom (Matthew 14:10).

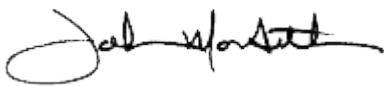
And while most pastors and church leaders today won’t ever face physical persecution or the threat of death, they still endure opposition. To begin with, they’re facing off against a sinful culture bent in defiance of God’s Word. The world hates those who bear the message of truth and light because they hate the Truth and Light (John 3:20).

On top of that, biblical shepherds are charged with leading and protecting flocks full of sinners—each one with his or her own sinful habits and patterns to break and spiritual growth to nurture and stimulate. It’s a joy and privilege to shepherd God’s people, but it’s also difficult, sometimes discouraging work. And from the world’s perspective, there’s little reward for faithful shepherds’ labor.

The truth is the world has nothing of lasting value to offer them. Instead, God’s true servants seek an eternal reward. Jesus told His followers, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great” (Matthew 5:11-12). At the end of his life, Paul triumphantly wrote to Timothy, “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

False teachers work for earthly rewards; true preachers work faithfully for a heavenly reward. Paul was determined to remain loyal to his calling despite the hostility from the world, knowing that “momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Excellent servants of the Lord aren’t hindered, swayed, or overwhelmed by difficult circumstances—they faithfully press on with their focus fixed on their heavenly reward.



(Adapted from [2 Corinthians: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#).)

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