



The Heart of a Shepherd

We can too frequently neglect to consider the consequences of poor shepherding. The negative affect the state of a shepherd's heart has on the ability to influence as God desires is regularly underestimated.

Scripture provides numerous examples of leaders whose behavior adversely affected those they influenced, most often because their hearts were not in line with the heart of the Father. Moses' account of the happenings at the edge of the Promised Land is no exception. Although often overlooked, it is important to note the role the majority of the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel played in turning a 40-day journey into a 40-year wandering. And there is a lesson for us in the backstory...

Numbers 13:1-2

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them."

We are told Moses did as he was commanded, and the chief shepherds of each tribe performed a reconnaissance mission on behalf of their people, covertly investigating the land. These men had been given specific instructions regarding their probe which included everything from the land and soil to the people, towns, and produce. For 40 days they explored the land before returning to Moses, Aaron, and their fellow Israelites with a report.

Their findings were clear. The land was bountiful. In fact, the show-and-tell portion of their presentation proved it... pomegranates and figs and a single cluster of grapes so large it took two of the men to carry it on a pole between them. On the surface, it seemed like a wonderful place for the Israelites to settle. Then the men continued... but the people are powerful, but there are giants, but our enemies live there. Very quickly, fear consumed the crowd.

Caleb tried to reign it in. "Let's go at once to take the land. We can surely conquer it." Then, his fellow spies chimed in: "We can't go up against them. They're stronger than we are!"

Numbers 13:32-33

So they spread this bad report about the land among the Israelites: "The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that's what they thought, too!"

You can imagine the behavior that ensued among the thousands of Jews listening to this report: weeping, crying through the night, a great chorus of protest against Moses and Aaron, discussions of new leaders. They whined, they complained, and they plotted. If you have ever had disrupters in your work environment, your neighborhood, or your church, you know the scene.

In response, Moses and Aaron fell to their faces on the ground. Joshua and Caleb, two of the 12 spies, grieved at the lack of trust their fellow tribal chiefs and Israelites were displaying toward their God. And they begged the people....

Numbers 14:7-9

“The land we traveled through and explored is a wonderful land! And if the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey. Do not rebel against the Lord, and don't be afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the Lord is with us! Don't be afraid of them!

The reaction? The crowd turned against Joshua and Caleb and the fervor led to the desire to stone the two men! Yes, death for the two men who demonstrated faith in the God who, on behalf of His people, had already displayed His power and faithfulness on numerous occasions in miraculous ways.

And why? From where was this coming?

Ten men – the shepherds of 10 of the Jewish tribes of Israel – who lacked the faith necessary to follow Yahweh rather than their fears. They withered in the face of danger... and sacrifice. They chose to spread their unbelief like a cancer among the people, and they worked to undermine the will of Father. The heart of a shepherd matters.

As chiefs, these men were the heads of their tribes. Each obtained the role simply because he was the patriarch, the eldest male of the tribe. Sadly, their trust in God, their commitment to Him and the integrity He requires, could not be taken into account.

The same must not be true for today's shepherds. Their heart for the Father, His Word, His ways, His leading, must all be considered. It is from the heart the mouth speaks, our actions spring forth, and our decisions are birthed. It is the wellspring of life.

The heart of a shepherd matters... because it determines the type of shepherd we are.

How's your heart today, fellow shepherd?

Digging Deeper Questions

1. Do you recall a time when you wavered in your decision as a shepherd leader because of the voices around you? Were there any consequences, and were they negative or positive?
2. Has your behavior as shepherd leader ever adversely affected those entrusted to your care?
3. How's your heart today, fellow under-shepherd?