

Softening Hardened Hearts

‘Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.’ (Heb. 3:13)

At a church service headed by a dynamic, on-the-go leader, a young father asked for prayer: ‘I am ashamed to admit but I am desperate for attention from my pastor who just hasn’t time for me.’ A young woman confessed to me soon after: ‘It’s like he [the elusive pastor] looks right through me but never sees me.’

Both are sensitive souls who suffer from sins of omission from their own fathers; they are insightful enough to know they transfer childhood needs onto pastors who usually fail to meet them. Insight here helps but does not heal. In fact, therapeutic connections can tempt them to a kind of hardness of heart—a defense not unlike the one they erected to the original man who got away.

Of course, real sins of commission occur—ways that pastors have hurt or betrayed us. No projections here: just real bruises from pastors who did some damage. Combine that with larger-than-life media exposure of abusive shepherds—amplified though the virtual universe—and our little wounds can widen. After a shocking round of clerical sexual abuse headlines, I worked hard to not project suspicion onto every priest I encountered for the next month.

Our hurt collects other hurts. Our hearts naturally harden through the deceitfulness of sin—omissions, commissions, and how we imprison many for the felonies of a few. That costs us. And the 97% of pastors who only want to father us well. When sin incites dullness and dread of them, we do more than demonize innocents--we lose necessary links to community and to Jesus Himself. We may become like an increasing number of Christians who fail to gather at all anymore, claiming a purely ‘individual’ relation with Jesus.

We need the lifeline of shepherds. That’s how God made us, and that’s why He commissions certain ones to help us take the next steps in our walk with Jesus. And guess what? Shepherds need us too. Yes, we are sheep and at the same time, we are Jesus’ members, shoulder-to-shoulder with our shepherds who need our witness, our encouragement and the unique gifts we bring to our churches.

What do we do? We use our insight wisely. We combine awareness of childhood wounds with adult actions. First, we own our ‘father wounds’ and ask Jesus’ forgiveness for imposing the burden of reparenting on a mere mortal. Second, we identify ‘pastor wounds’ and seek ongoing healing for them. We forgive our offenders. Third, we turn toward and live through the One Father revealed to us by Jesus who has nothing but time for us. He loves to love us.

We must cultivate this love but it’s easy. The Father loves us like no man ever could and gives us grace to give our fathers, to treat them mercifully as fellow humans, not as the next man who lets

us down. I love shepherds because the Good Shepherd loves me well.

‘Simply present your needs to Me with a trusting heart and I will show you that I am a lavish provider for those who let Me take care of their needs.’ In Sinu Jesu

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