Feed My Lambs
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When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

(John 21:15-17 NIV)

What is the first mandate of a pastor? What would be the core and primary responsibility in the priority of a pastor? What is it to sum up a pastoral ministry? What is the alpha and omega of the pastoral responsibility? What is it that a pastor should do first and to make sure even at the last?

I believe that this passage in John 21:15-17 by Jesus Christ to Peter addresses and answers all of these questions, "to take care of my sheep, first to feed my lambs and finally make sure to feed my sheep".

First (1), I like you to take a careful consideration and biblical concept of "shepherd" in the Bible. The word, "shepherd" in the Bible is usually meant to be a leader or someone in charge of and responsible for taking care of the others following. If this person does a good job as a leader, this person is then called a good shepherd. In this view, a shepherd could be a parent or a guardian, a manager or an employer, a governor or a lawmaker, a governor or even a president (or a king or a queen) for today's context. The Bible teaches and points out the ultimate "Good Shepherd" to come and lead the people of God (John 10, Ezekiel 34, Psalm 23).

Second (2), you may have heard a categorical frame of various "love" (such as agape, phileo or eros) for divine love, mundane friendship love, or sexual
desire or lust. But this is a modern invention and categorization, not biblical especially to distinguish the love of agape and of phileo for it has nothing to do with the language of the Bible in the time of Jesus. These two words were used interchangeably at the time of Jesus for both New and Old Testament writings in Greek. The word, “agape”, in verb form was used also for the love of material greed, sexual desire and many other ungodly loves, even in rape. Further it is almost certain that both Jesus and Peter spoke in Hebrew tongue (or Aramaic, as you may have seen the movie, Passion, by Mel Gibson in 2004). So please discard this nonsense word-study of love (as you may have heard of it in the past and stuck with it).

Third (3), the process of the “feeding” here means the process of teaching and learning the Word of God, the Bible as Peter himself later emphasizes in 1 Peter 2:2 (and also in Hebrews 5:12-14). Our Lord has given this commandment to Peter the head of the Apostles, with the confession of Peter’s love (in contrast to the confession of Peter’s faith in Matthew 16:13-20). For this, Jesus has asked Peter “three times”. Even Peter finally sensed that this is something very serious. (In contrast, Jesus entrusted John for his mother “once” on the cross in John 19:27.)

Here Jesus is not asking Peter to do something very difficult. This task may seem to be a very easy and trivial daily task that Peter and others apostles have done for new convert, including baptism, in the past. Essentially this task is simply to tell and instruct new disciples of what Jesus has done, spoken, and commanded.

Surely if Jesus has asked Peter to do a “mission impossible” three times, Peter may not feel so “trivialized” or even “worried”, but be “challenged”.

Strangely enough, our Lord never asked Peter to build a denominational-size mega-church, or stadium-size worship-center, or a shopping-mall-like user-friendly church, or to feed millions in starvation, or to fast forty days as Jesus has done in the wilderness, or to found a global Christian network or broadcasting company, or to evangelize a barbaric nation, or to be a martyr and to be stoned to death, or to be a wonder-healer of all kinds of terminal
illness or disabilities, or to raise the dead, or even to perform miracles of wonder, or to be able to speak in fluent tongues with a few dozen foreign languages.

Truly Peter has lived a colorful and glorious life as the pillar of the apostles. He has accomplished many wonderful things and even more, and died on the cross as a martyr. When he preached in one occasion, a few thousand repented, baptized, and added to the church (Acts 2:41), healed the lame man (Acts 3), demonstrated the solemn judgment of God (Acts 5), set free by an angel from the prison cell tightly guarded by the armed guards (Acts 12), in his evangelism and mission journeys to Judea, Samaria, Babylon (1 Peter 5:13), all over the Roman empire including Rome where he was martyred on the cross.

For a pastor, there are many pastoral tasks and in priority, including worship and fellowship, evangelism and mission, education and discipleship, managing and leading, helping, healing and counseling. But why does Jesus command first of all and last of all to “feed my lambs” and to “feed my sheep”, in order to “take care of my sheep”?

The first mandate and first in priority of "taking care of my sheep" according to Jesus Christ is to "feed my lambs".

We may ask why this should be first in priority and most critical among the pastoral tasks and functions. It is because a lamb is like a new-born baby who cannot take care of itself but absolutely depends upon someone (one’s mother) to feed (whereas the sheep can take care of themselves grazing outside for most of the time). Thus it is the shepherd’s most critical task to make sure a lamb to be fed first and well fed with a plenty of the spiritual milk (the word of God, pure and rich) against the starvation. Lamb’s very immediate survival and future growth totally depends on the feeding and nutrition of its early age. Yes, there are so many other things that demand a pastor’s attention. But what would it be the one and only one task that a shepherd should do first of all and do his best throughout his ministry? What makes a person a good and serious shepherd in the approval and delight of
our Great Shepherd? I believe that it is this ministry of "feeding" given by our Lord, first his lambs and all of his sheep.

Have you seen some of the terrifying pictures of starving children in Africa in 1970’s and 1980’s? One picture that I remember so vividly is a picture of a hopeless little child, about four to five years old, left alone and dying in severe starvation. Several feet away from this child there was a hungry eagle, patiently waiting for the decisive moment of preying. This is a human tragedy. And I knew that, just like this eagle, Satan is waiting silently and patiently to feed his hungry stomach, sitting a few feet next to a little lamb (like you and me) dying in starvation. Can you imagine the agony and the sorrow of our Lord Jesus when his little lamb starves? A few years ago, I saw a television documentary series by ABC (Night Line) about the refugees of North Korea, taking their refuge in Manchuria (north of North Korea). They have escaped from the severe starvation, hard-labor and execution by the most evil regime in the history of mankind. One evening a reporter interviewed several children in refuge. They were also under constant chase and pursuit by Chinese officials to be taken back to North Korea. If so, their fate was almost certain to the worst tortures and death in North Korean prison camp. It was so painful to watch these children suffer. Further I was stunned when the reporter asked them their ages. They all looked in their 8 to 12 years old, tiny and fragile, childlike. Their answers were ranging from 15 to 19 years old. The reporter added his comment that these children were under extreme malnutrition in their childhood. As a result, their growth had stopped due to the extreme malnutrition when they should have grown in their childhood into their teenage.

Have you (a pastor) ever thought about how to get "A+" for your grade report by our Great Shepherd? How does our Lord Jesus evaluate His shepherd in care of His sheep? I believe that this ministry of "feeding" is the key to any successful pastor, to do first of all and do well and thoroughly to take care of His lambs and His sheep. I believe that this ministry of "feeding" the word of God to His sheep is the “Alpha and Omega” of our pastoral ministry. Amen.