**April 14th 2024 Misericordias Domini Sunday**

**Text: Matthew 9:36-38** 0717

**Theme: The Work of the Shepherd.**

Grace, mercy, and peace be given unto you all from God our Father and the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear flock of God: In this day and age it has become the norm for men to neglect going to, or belonging to, a church. This reasoning is justified by many with the claim that they can still worship God, pray, and read the Bible on their own. They say things like: “I do not need some hypocritical man telling me what to think.” Or: “Why should I listen to the pastor, I am just as capable of understanding God’s Word as he is.” Thus many men neglect the Church of God, and membership in a church, because they do not see a need for it. In their mind there is no advantage to belonging to a church, and there is no disadvantage to avoiding church. Besides men like these, there has also arisen, in our day, the notion that the Pastoral ministry is unnecessary altogether, churches go years without filling the office at all, or filling it with someone not fit for the office. The divine call has also gone by the wayside, relegated to the trash heap of unnecessary “rules” of the church. The divine call has been replaced with the simple hiring of preachers, and this because it is much easier to rid ourselves of a pastor when he can simply be fired, but if he has a divine call from God, a congregation is bound to the man who has been called so long as he preaches according to Scripture and administers the sacraments according to Christ’s institution. Yet all of these things have gone by the wayside. Respect to the office of the Pastor is nearly extinct, and few church bodies still teach of a divine call to the office. In short, there has arisen nearly an entire generation believing that the ministry and church are unnecessary, and thus despise it altogether. What has led to this sort of thinking? What is the truth about the pastoral ministry? And what, if any, advantages are there in establishing it in our midst?

To help us answer these questions, it will be helpful to first examine the word pastor. This word means “a shepherd.” One who tends to the flock and cares for them. It has come to apply to the men called to lead the congregation because his work is that of a shepherd caring for his sheep. In Psalm twenty three, a very beloved Psalm to every Christian, the Psalmist speaks of the Lord as Shepherd. The Psalm writer, David, used this to describe the Lord because being a shepherd himself he understood very well what was entailed in shepherding sheep. For us who live today in great cities, apart from the life on the farm or in the raising of livestock we sometimes have a difficult time grasping just what a shepherd does. A shepherd is far more than simply someone who watches the sheep for one shift then goes home without thinking of them again until he returns. No, it is quite the opposite. A shepherd has purchased those sheep to be his own, and spends day and night in diligent watchfulness over them, guards and protects them from predators, and ensures that they are well fed and watered. Once we see this it is no wonder that David draws a direct parallel between shepherding sheep and the Lord’s leading of all true believers. It is as though God is our shepherd and we are the sheep of His pasture. He cares deeply for us all, in the same manner as a shepherd cares deeply for each and every one of his sheep. Those who have despised the office of the ministry and the church of God would then say that if the Lord is our Shepherd I will simply follow Him, I do not need a Pastor to shepherd me, for my Shepherd is God Himself. Based on these things then we will examine the work of Christ as the great Shepherd, and see whether it is His will that we establish and maintain pastors in our midst through the divine call. We will do this by looking to our text of Scripture for today which is found in the ninth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew beginning at verse thirty six:

**Quote text here.**

Let us pray, dearest Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, we thank and praise Thee evermore for laying down Thy life for us, Thy sheep. Thou hast purchased us with Thy blood, and through the faith worked in us we are brought into Thy flock. Teach us this day of Thy desire for shepherds sent by Thy hand to care for Thy flock. Thou hast ordained and established it for the good of Thy sheep and lambs. We pray Thee to instill in each of us the desire to be gathered together in Thy name, and to receive spiritual care from Thy hand through Thy servants. Thou hast sent them forth to be Thy instruments in proclaiming Thy truth unto the flock. Therefore we implore Thee to be with them as they tend to Thy flock and give them a discerning spirit and faithful heart that none of Thy sheep be lost at their hand. Keep them humble, knowing that Thou art the true Shepherd and they are but Thine instruments. Guide us then to green pastures and still waters by their hand and bring us safely through the valley of death unto the heavenly pastures. We ask all these things in Thy name alone. Amen.

According to our text we will see first that the work of the Shepherd is:

1. **To gather the sheep.** We read verse thirty six of our text: **read verse here.** It is indeed true that the Lord is the great Shepherd of Christians. The Pastor is not the one who guides and protects them, it is the Lord. However, He had ordained that He will accomplish this work of shepherding souls by the hand of men. Sinful men leading other sinful men. How can this ever work? Well our text holds the answer to this question. It is because the Pastor is leading not by his own authority or power, but through the power and authority of the true Shepherd Jesus Christ. As Jesus observed the multitude in our text he was moved with compassion because these people were as sheep without a shepherd. They had no one to guide them and protect them, no one to lead them to nourishment. It is for this reason that our Lord proclaims: *“He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him.” (Eph. 1:10)* God gathers together in one all true believers on this earth in Christ crucified. Because of the sacrifice which our Lord made on the cross and the faith worked in each believer, all are gathered together in the one true faith. This is the invisible Church. We are one with all other true believers; gathered together spiritually in Christ. It is for this reason that Jesus often said that He was sent unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel, because He was sent to gather men from all nations into the universal Church. Like unto a shepherd that gathers together his sheep in a pen, Christ does the same in the truth of the Gospel.

However, our Lord also desires that Christians be gathered together in a physical manner with one another. Christ our Lord gave the power unto His church, the office of the keys. The power to remit or retain sins, remitting them to the penitent and retaining them to the impenitent. This power is give unto the invisible Church to dispense unto Christians the Gospel of God. This is done in the assembly of the congregation, where like minded believers gather together to hear the Word of God and receive the sacraments instituted by God. If God so desires that we hear the Word and receive the Sacraments we must be at the place where they are administered. Neglect of these things is paramount to despising God’s grace, and is unbelief. It is true that a man can be converted and saved apart from the visible church, for the Word of God still holds the power of God. But if he refuses the offer to receive at the Lord’s hand the grace found in the Sacraments and the preaching of the Gospel, he has shown that there is no faith in his heart, for what sinner that loves God’s grace would turn down such an offer? Thus we are exhorted in Hebrews: *“Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” (Heb. 10:27)* God knows our weaknesses and the things that we need to keep us in the one true faith, and these are the Word and sacraments which serve to strengthen and preserve faith in the heart of a Christian. Thus we are to be gathered together in the name of Christ with one another. The power given unto the Church is then entrusted to one man to dispense unto the entire congregation. God instituted the office of the ministry for the express purpose of dispensing the keys unto the souls of Christians. In short to shepherd the flock of God as he says: *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28)* God so wills that we assemble together in the local congregation and have His grace given to us through the Pastor. Thus the Pastor’s work is to gather together the sheep into the fold. He is to seek out the lost sheep and bring them into the fold; to find those sheep who have wandered and bring them back into God’s flock. Just as a shepherd does with his sheep. Yet the work of the shepherd is also:

1. **To care for the sheep.** We read verse thirty six of our text: **read verse here.** As Christ walked about on this earth He was always about the work of caring for the sheep as our text plainly shows. He healed their diseases, preached the sweet comforting Gospel unto them, and protected them from harm. This is the purest example of shepherding. Christ shepherded His flock with great care and love, doing the work which only He can properly do, for He is the true Shepherd. This care for the souls of the world is seen throughout the Gospels. But one instance in particular stands out in my mind, that of the woman with an issue of blood. As our Lord was on His way to heal the daughter of Jairus, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years reached out and touched His garment so that she might be healed. When Jesus sees this woman He says to her: *“daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.” (Mark 5:34)* The care of Christ for this poor woman is incredible. He is concerned with her physical ailment, but He is much more concerned with her eternal soul. This is the reason why Christ says that her faith had made her whole. He was not at that moment speaking of her plague, but through her faith her soul had been made whole. Her sin had been forgiven and she had been saved by grace through faith. He first assures her of this, then he states that she is also made whole of her plague. What tender care shown by our Savior as the great Shepherd!

This same care He desires to give unto men through the Pastor of a congregation. Every soul under the care of the shepherd has the privilege of receiving this same care. Now a man will never have the power to heal diseases, but he can comfort with the Word of God those who are suffering and sick; those who are troubled in mind or soul can receive the comforting assurance of the Gospel at his hand. And this not because he has some special power or ability to do this, but God has chosen him as His instrument for the care of souls. The Pastor is the instrument of God’s hand to give assurance of forgiveness unto penitent sinners, and to rebuke impenitent sinners, that is, to dispense the office of the keys publicly unto the church. This is of great benefit to those who belong to a local congregation, for they receive of the Lord’s hand the promised green pastures and still waters of the Gospel of Christ in the preaching of His Word and the administration of His sacraments. However, this work of Christ, as our great shepherd, is carried out:

1. **By sending faithful men.** We read verses thirty seven and thirty eight of our text: **read verses here.** God very well could do the work of shepherding the congregations without men being called as Pastors, but He chooses to work through Pastors. Who are we to say that this is unnecessary? He has said this is how it will be done and we should then establish the ministry in our midst and maintain it. Christ says that the harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few. How true this is, especially in our day. Christ tells us to pray that He send forth laborers into His harvest to labor in the Word. There is an ever growing need for faithful men to shepherd and lead the congregations of God. It is not an unnecessary thing, but it is God’s command to establish and maintain the ministry in our midst. Paul summarized the state of things when he said to the congregation at Philippi: *“For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your souls. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s.” (Phil. 2:20)* Paul could find no one to care for the souls of the Philippians, except men who simply looked to serve their own bellies rather than serving Christ. They are not true shepherds but hirelings. They serve for recompense, and not because they love the flock of God.

The things I say here today are not said to elevate and glorify the pastor, for he is nothing. The faith of the flock depends not on the shepherds who are sent, but on Him who sends them. It often happens that a congregation will become quite close to a Pastor, and do not want to ever have another Pastor. So when their beloved Pastor moves to a different call or enters his eternal rest, they are reluctant to call another. Yet this should never be. We follow not the Pastor, but we follow Christ Jesus who sent that Pastor. Thus it does not matter who the Pastor is, but it only matters if he preaches in accord with Scripture and administers the sacraments according to Christ’s institution. Our hope should never be tied to a man, for it will then fail us. On the contrary let us tie our hope to the Gospel which proceeds from the faithful Pastor’s lips, for then we will be upheld in the one true faith. I implore everyone this day to cling to the church of God and use the sacraments which He has given us, and take heed to those who have been charged with our care, for they must give an account thereof at the last day. Let us give thanks unto the Chief Shepherd of our souls that He has provided all these things for us, His flock, and that He leads us day by day down the path of righteousness unto our eternal home in heaven. Let us pray that He continue to send faithful Pastors who care for the flock as their own, and that He keep from us wolves in sheep’s clothing who desire to consume the flock. Truly he is our Shepherd, and through His instruments, He leads us to the green pastures and quiet waters of heaven. Amen.