

I Am the Good Shepherd

John 10:11-21

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“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11).

From early in the Bible, the shepherd symbolized the faithful man of God. Abel, Adam and Eve’s son whose offering was accepted by God, was “a keeper of sheep” (Gen. 4:2). Jacob, the father of the nation Israel, was a shepherd, as was his trusted son, Joseph. Moses was shepherding the flocks of Midian when God called to him from the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-2). David was the great shepherd-king of Israel, from whose house the Messiah was promised to come. Isaiah foretold, “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40:11). It is no surprise, therefore, that Jesus identified himself with words recalling this image of the divinely ordained leader: “I am the good shepherd” (Jn. 10:11).

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Jesus spoke these words to contrast himself with the false shepherds of Israel, especially the hard-hearted Pharisees. Accordingly, he contrasts the good shepherd with those who watch the sheep for hire: “He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them” (Jn. 10:12).

Philip Keller, a former shepherd who wrote a number of books recounting his experiences, recalls his own the first flock:

They belonged to me only by virtue of the fact that I paid hard cash for them. It was money earned by the blood and sweat and tears drawn from my own body during the desperate grinding years of the depression. And when I bought that first small flock I was buying them literally with my own body which had been laid down with this day in mind. Because of this I felt in a special way that they were in very truth a part of me and I a part of them. . . . [This] made those thirty ewes exceedingly precious to me.¹

But this is not at all how a hired hand feels about the flock. Keller remembers a ranch operated by a tenant sheepman. “He ought never to have been allowed to keep sheep,” Keller writes. “His stock were always thin, weak and riddled with disease or parasites.”² The reason was that the hired shepherd had no personal interest in the sheep and did not expend himself preparing green pastures.

As Jesus says, the hireling may serve fairly well when things are safe. It is when danger comes that the hireling flees. “He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep” (Jn. 10:13). J. C. Ryle says, “He feeds the flock for money and not for love – for what he can get by it, and not because he really cares for the sheep.”³ The same thing happens in the church when its ministers serve only for money or other gain, to the detriment of the flock.

This makes the point that each of us acts according to our character. We do according to what we are. The false shepherd flees because he is a hireling, whereas the true shepherd lays down his life because of the love in his heart. Moreover, our character is especially tested in times of crisis and trouble. Many a paid shepherd is revealed as a hireling only when the wolf appears, just as many a good shepherd is only recognized when he sacrifices for the good of the flock. Given this, character should always be a prime consideration whether you are selection someone for a job opening, deciding on someone to marry, or choosing a spiritual leader to follow. Character matters.

This is how Jesus revealed himself as the *good* shepherd: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11). William

¹ Philip Keller, *Inspirational Writings* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1993), 13-14.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:218.

Barclay writes, “Jesus was the good shepherd, who so loved His sheep that for their safety He would risk, and one day give, His life.”⁴

There are two Greek words for “good.” One is the word *agathos*, which speaks of moral goodness. But it is the second word, *kalos*, that Jesus uses here. *Kalos* denotes beauty or excellence. He is attractive and genuine. One old writer remarks that “It is possible to be morally upright repulsively.”⁵ But Jesus is the genuine, lovely, attractive, and true Shepherd to whom others can only dimly be compared.

Seeing Jesus as the good shepherd gives comfort to every Christian. To be saved is to enjoy a personal relationship as a sheep to the most wonderful, trustworthy shepherd of our souls. Whatever is happening in our lives, we can know that we are the sheep of God’s pasture, and God’s own Son is watching over, guiding, and protecting us.

Jesus highlights two features of his shepherding ministry that sum up his care for his own. First, he is the good shepherd because he lays down his life for the sheep. Second, the good shepherd gathers all his sheep into one flock for intimate fellowship with himself.

LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE

First, Jesus is the good shepherd because he “lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11). In a general sense, this may refer to the way a shepherd pours out his time and energy for the well-being of his flock. But it is clear that Jesus specifically refers to his sacrificial death on the cross. Indeed, Jesus’ description provides a valuable summary of the Christian doctrine of the atonement.

The first thing we should observe is the *centrality* of the cross for the Christian faith. The one thing above all else that makes Jesus the good shepherd is that he lays down his life for the sheep. Some consider the cross to be an embarrassment and would like to emphasize something else about our faith. But the distinctive and central feature of Christianity is its teaching of the cross of Christ.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:71.

⁵ William Temple, cited in Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 377.

We can see this throughout the New Testament. The angel told Joseph what to name his expected son: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21). At the end of Jesus’ ministry we see the same emphasis. During his last meal with the disciples, Jesus established a sacrament by which he would be remembered, the Lord’s Supper, the elements to which specifically point to his coming death. Handing out the bread, Jesus said, “Take, eat, this is my body.” Then passing the cup, he told them, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:26-28).

Given this clear emphasis, a purported Christianity that down-plays the problem of sin and the remedy of Christ’s death is not the Christianity that Jesus taught. The same can be said of Paul’s teaching: “I decided to know nothing among you,” he said, “except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). He added, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:16).

Secondly, Jesus emphasizes the *voluntary* nature of his sacrificial death. The good shepherd does not merely suffer death, but the “lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11, 15). “No one takes it from me,” he says, “but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up” (Jn. 10:18). The resurrection, whereby Jesus rose from the grave, is the proof of his authority to lay down his own life.

It is true that Jesus died because the Jewish authorities arrested him and Pontius Pilate directed the Roman soldiers to nail him to the cross. But none of these things could have happened without Jesus’ consent. Barclay comments: “Jesus was not the victim of circumstance. He was not like some animal, dragged to the sacrifice, unwilling to go, struggling against the hands of the priest, unknowing what was happening. Jesus voluntarily laid down His life because He chose to do so.”⁶ Jesus came into the world for the primary purpose of laying down his life for the sheep and he did so by his own will.

This points to the third feature of Jesus’ teaching: his death was a *vicarious sacrifice*. Vicarious refers to something performed or

⁶ Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2:78.

suffered in the place of others. Jesus says that he died “for the sheep.” He offered himself as a substitute for sinners before the holy justice of God. He accepted the guilt our sins deserved and received God’s just wrath in our place.

The famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked what is the most important word in the Bible. He answered with the Greek word *hyper*. This is the word that is translated as “for”. The good shepherd lays down his life “for” the sheep. The word may also be translated as “on behalf of,” or “in the place of.” This shows us that Christian salvation comes not by what we do for ourselves or even what we might do for God. Rather, the heart of the gospel is what Jesus did for us and on our behalf. Paul wrote: “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6, 8). James Boice explains the vicarious nature of Jesus’ death: “We are sinners; as sinners we deserve to die (both physically and spiritually); but Christ willingly died in our place, taking our punishment, so that we might be set free from sin and its penalty to serve God.”⁷ Oh, the wonder that Jesus, God’s Son, should suffer and die for us. Let us exalt him in faith and with praise!

Jesus teaches a fourth thing about his cross, namely, that it was *planned* in advance according to God’s will. He explains that he laid down his life because “this charge I have received from my Father” (Jn. 10:18). Not only did God know that Jesus was going to die but he permitted it to happen. And not only did he permit it to happen but he planned it. Peter preached that Jesus died “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). And according to that same plan, Jesus rose from the dead to give eternal life to his sheep. So not only did Jesus die for us, but it was also for us that God gave his divine Son.

Fifth, Jesus’ atoning death was *personal* and *particular* in its design. That is, Jesus died for specific, particular people whom he was saving. Jesus does not say that he died for the whole world. Of course, it is true that his death offers salvation to everyone. But he died “for the sheep,” that is, for the elect people God had given him

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:755.

from all eternity. Later in this chapter, Jesus says, “I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish.... My Father... has given them to me” (Jn. 10:28-29). Later in John’s Gospel we read of Jesus’ prayer on the night of his arrest: “I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours” (Jn. 17:9). “I know my own,” he asserts (Jn. 10:14), and he died with each and every one of his own sheep upon his heart.

This should make all the difference to a believer’s devotion to Jesus. We admire someone who dies for a principle, as the philosopher Socrates did when he refused to escape execution in ancient Athens. We extol a martyr who dies for a cause. When Nathan Hale was captured by the British during the American Revolution, he gained lasting fame by declaring, “I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country.” But the Christian can look to the cross and say something greater than that Jesus died for the principle or the cause of salvation. We can say, “He died for me.” Nothing warrants greater love or higher praise than knowing this.

This leads to one last, and sixth, point Jesus makes about his atoning death: it was *born of his great love*. There is no greater love than that which offers its own life. The good shepherd loves his sheep, and that is why he lays down his life for them.

In the First World War, a young French soldier was wounded and his arm had to be amputated. The surgeon struggled to tell the soldier as he awoke. “I am sorry to tell you that you have lost your arm,” he finally said. But the soldier replied, “Sir, I did not lose it; I gave it – for France.”⁸ Likewise, Jesus did not lose his life on the cross. He gave it out of love for his sheep. Arthur Pink writes, “It was not the nails, but the strength of His love to the Father and to His elect, which held Him to the Cross.”⁹

ONE SHEPHERD, ONE FLOCK

Besides the fact that he laid down his life, Jesus is the good shepherd because he gathers his sheep into the one flock of God:

⁸ Cited from Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2:78.

⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 539.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd (Jn. 10:14-16).

Just as Jesus' good shepherd teaching gives a primer on the atonement, it also sums up much of the Bible's teaching on his Church.

The first thing we notice is that the flock of Christ is where his sheep find belonging. This is one of mankind's greatest needs, and it is an especially great need for people today. We long to be known and really to know others. So many people have no place to belong, but Christians find belonging in the flock of Christ. "I know my own and my own know me," he says. This is the answer for what C. S. Lewis termed the "God-shaped hole" in every person's life. Every heart sometimes wonders, "Who am I? What does my life mean? What destiny is there for me?" Jesus answers with the intimate fellowship between man and his Maker, the sheep and his shepherd. As St. Augustine so memorably put it in prayer to God: "Thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."¹⁰ Those who are redeemed through faith in the blood of Christ, enter into this fellowship with God together with all the flock.

Jesus notes that this was not just an offer made to the ancient people of Israel or even to his hearers at that time. "I have other sheep that are not of this fold," he says (Jn. 10:16). This is where you and I enter into the Gospel: Jesus foretells that sheep will be gathered not just from Judaism as the first converts were, but from every fold in the world. The spread of Christianity across the globe validates this prophecy, as does the conversion of every person from different races and lands on the earth.

Notice, too, how definite this is. Jesus does not declare that he merely hopes for more sheep. He does not merely desire that his flock should extend into other racial and national folds. Nor does he merely predict that this will happen. He says, "I have" other sheep (Jn. 10:16). Every Christian, including those not yet saved, were known to Jesus and belonged to him from all eternity. Jesus calls

¹⁰ St. Augustine: *The Confessions*, I.

them all “my own” (Jn. 10:15). He says not that he plans to bring in his sheep, but “I must bring them also.” He promises not that some may listen and come, but “they will listen to my voice” (Jn. 10:16). It is hard to imagine stronger terms to declare the sovereignty of Christ’s saving plans and his certainty of success in gathering all of his own sheep.

Yet we also notice that Jesus’ flock is gathered in a particular way: “They will listen to my voice” (Jn. 10:16). This is why gospel proclamation is always at the heart of Christian ministry. It is always by hearing the good news that Christ’s sheep come to him. Paul therefore exhorts us to the ministry of preaching and witnessing the gospel of Christ, asking: “How are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” Christ gathers his sheep for salvation as his gospel is proclaimed and heard unto faith. “So faith comes from hearing,” Paul concludes, “and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:14-17).

Our intimate relationship with God shapes our relationships with one another. Jesus speaks of the unity of the flock he has gathered: “There will be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn. 10:16). This teaches that all true Christians are joined by the good shepherd into one flock. This unity is based on the loving union within the Godhead. Jesus said, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again” (Jn. 10:17). The Father has loved the Son from all eternity, but the faithful obedience of Jesus on the cross only stirs up the Father’s love all the more. So it is among believers. We love each other because of the love of God in us and because of what Jesus has done for each of us. And as we serve one another in his name that loving unity grows more and more.

Many people believe that Christian unity is something that we have to achieve. But Jesus says the unity of his flock is something that he has achieved. The unity of all Christians is a fact, not a mere hope. It is true that Christians today are not gathered in a single visible hierarchy. Some people are troubled by the presence of denominations, but Jesus does not say that there will be only one sheepfold; he says there will be only one flock. In fact, the worst times for the

Church – the times when the gospel has been most corrupted and muted – were times when Christians were organized in a single religious and political, institution. Instead, ours is a spiritual unity.

It is natural for like-minded Christians and churches to band together in denominations and other associations. Much of our work is likely to take place within such unions. Moreover, Christian leaders have a duty to oppose false teaching and expose wolves among the sheep. But we should always avoid a spirit of disunity and party factionalism. We must be happy to work alongside other believers who profess the gospel of the cross of Christ. Christians need one another and have an obligation to manifest the love-union we have together in Christ.

A good example of this took place in the ministry of Egerton Young, the first missionary to the Native American Indians in Saskatchewan. On one occasion, Young explained to an old Indian chief the love of God as the Father of all who believe in Jesus. This idea amazed the chief. “That is very new and sweet to me,” he said. “We have never thought of the great Spirit as Father. We heard Him in the thunder; we saw Him in the lightning, the tempest and the blizzard, and we were afraid. So when you tell us that the great Spirit is *our Father*, that is very beautiful to us.” He then paused as another thought came to him. “Missionary, did you say that the great Spirit is *your Father*?” “Yes,” Young answered. “And did you say that He is the *Indians’* Father?” “I did,” said the missionary. “Then,” cried the old chief, with a look of great joy, “you and I are brothers!”¹¹

This is Jesus’ point exactly. Here is the only hope for unity among mankind. No other power can remove the hatred between nations and men than the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Only in Christ can we overcome the divisions of race, class, and nationality, and our union of love is one of the greatest blessings believers presently enjoy. All Christians have the same Lord and Savior in Jesus, and the same God as our Father. We have been redeemed from the same condemnation of sin and have all gained forgiveness at the same cross. All believers are joined in one flock with one good shepherd, we all partake of similar trials and hardships in this life, and all Christians are destined

¹¹ Cited from Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2:74-75.

for the same eternal glory. What a privilege it is for us to experience this unity now together in the church.

A DIVIDED WORLD

There remains, however, a great division within mankind as a whole. It is the division between those who are members of Christ's flock and those who are not. We see this in the conclusion of this episode: "There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, 'He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?' Others said, 'These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'" (Jn. 10:19-21).

To the unbelieving world, Jesus' teaching about sacrificial love – a good shepherd who lays down his life – is sheer madness. This is what some of Jesus' listeners were saying: "He has a demon, and is insane." But others were drawn by Jesus' teaching and understood the meaning of his miracles. The true division is over Jesus and his gospel; Paul explained that it is "to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Cor. 2:16).

So the world is divided into those who reject Christ's gospel as madness and those who receive it as the aroma of life. This division that will continue for all eternity, those who believe entering everlasting life and those who reject Jesus receiving everlasting condemnation. But thank God that time remains for many still to pass from life to death. There are still "other sheep" of whom Jesus spoke. Is he calling you? If you are already one who has come, Jesus calls you to spread the good news. We must spread it with our lips, telling all who will hear about the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. And we must spread it with our lives, through the love of God that binds us as precious, purchased sheep in one flock destined together for everlasting glory.