

Jesus is the Best Shepherd

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John 10:1-21

Good Morning! We are continuing today in our study of John's Gospel called "More than just a nice guy." This is a study where we are looking at several of the metaphors or titles used to describe Jesus in the book of John. We've seen several titles so far. We've seen Jesus as the Word of God, as the Living Water, and as the True Temple. Last week we saw Jesus as the Light of the World, several titles. Today we are going to look at a very well-known title of Jesus, and that is the title "Good Shepherd." Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

As I thought about that title and as I read the news this week, a question came to my mind. The question is this: What is it that makes a Good Shepherd? I don't mean what makes someone a good keeper of actual, biological sheep. I mean what makes them a Good Shepherd, a good, qualified spiritual leader? What qualities enable a person to do a good job of the things shepherds do: feeding the flock, protecting the flock, leading the flock? Whether that flock is a church congregation or a small group or a family, what it is that makes someone a good shepherd?

As I just mentioned, the importance of that question about Good Shepherds jumped out at me this week as I read the news, because the news this week showed us beyond a shadow of a doubt that there are Bad Shepherds out there. There are shepherds who manipulate people use people even abuse people. I don't know if you followed the news last week, but first Pope Francis spoke out and said that in addition to the abuse of children that has been in the news so much, there are now many cases, by some estimates tens of thousands of cases, of Catholic Nuns being abused at the hands of priests in the Churchchapter . There are bad shepherds in the Catholic Churchchapter.

But that's not unique to the Catholics. There are Bad Shepherds in any denomination. Last Sunday, a report came out in the San Antonio News that chronicled 700 cases of sexual misconduct and abuse by Pastors, Church Leaders, and Volunteers in the Southern Baptist Convention. Many of the perpetrators are in jail or registered as sex offenders, but a large number went on to leadership or even the pastorate in other congregations. There are bad shepherds out there.

I've witnessed this firsthand not just with regard to sexual misconduct, although I have seen that and its aftermath, but I've seen bad shepherds who bullied the sheep, shepherds who shamed the sheep, shepherds who humiliated and abused the sheep. God help us. There are bad shepherds out there.

Let me say there were bad shepherds in Jesus' day too. As we've gone through Jesus' story in the book of John, we've seen some of them! We've seen really bad shepherding by the Pharisees and Religious Authorities of Israel. We've seen that they used ridiculous laws to

control people (crazy laws about what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath) and that because they were afraid, Jesus would take away their authority. They resisted him at every turn. When he healed a crippled man, they began to persecute him. When he offered people living water, they tried to stone him.

It was bad shepherding. This bad shepherding reached a new level last week, when Jesus healed a blind man in John 9. Because as we reach the end of John 9, not only were the Religious Authorities trying to kill Jesus, but they openly declared that anyone who backed Jesus would also be persecuted. They would be excommunicated from the synagogue!

They were bad shepherds! Because of that, Jesus gives some special teaching in John 10, teaching that tells us in no uncertain terms what makes a good shepherd and what makes a bad shepherd, and teaching that reveals Jesus for the Good Shepherd that he is. So let me invite you this morning to turn in your Bibles to John 10:1-21.

If you were here last week, today's passage is a continuation of that debate that started in John 9. There, Jesus had healed a man blind from birth. The Pharisees had accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath. When the blind man backed Jesus rather than the Pharisees, they excommunicated the man from the Synagogue. So in today's passage Jesus is going to continue the argument by talking about the kind of shepherds that the Religious Authorities are and the kind of shepherd he is. He's going to give us three descriptions that show us the difference between Good Shepherds and Bad Shepherds.

So that's what we're going to look at today. This passage will be useful for every one of us here today in some way. For those of you who are doing ministry, For those who are leaders and shepherds in some way, whether it's leading a Small Group or working with Youth or in our Children's ministry or if you are leading your family, this passage will speak very strongly, showing us the kind of shepherds we should strive to be. For others of us that are church members, this passage will show us what kind of Shepherds we should seek to follow, what godly Christian leaders really look like. This passage will minister to all of us on another level. Because this passage is not just about the kind of leaders we should be or the kind we should look for, this passage also describes Jesus. It's another one of John's beautiful portraits of Jesus that shows us his excellence his true nature. If we consider this passage honestly, it will minister to us by leading us to worship. Today we are going to think about what it means that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

So let's read this beautiful passage together. Jesus is talking to both the man born blind, and the Pharisees when he says this:

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a

stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

(but) "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

- John 10:1-21

What is a good shepherd like and how does he differ from a bad shepherd? Jesus gives us three answers to that question in this passage, and the first one is this:

Bad Shepherds drive the Sheep. Good Shepherds lead them

Bad shepherds drive the sheep from behind. Good Shepherds lead them from the front. Let's look at this passage, and I think you'll see what I mean. In verses 1-6, Jesus begins this passage by laying down a basic word picture or parable about sheep, and a good shepherd, and some bad shepherds or thieves. Some of the details of this parable will be discussed more fully in the following verses, and the parable will even be changed slightly. But for now, Jesus introduces the basic parable.

Let me just summarize for you: The picture Jesus draws in verses 1-6 is of a common sheep pen, the kind that would exist in almost any village in ancient Israel. Most families in an Israelite village would not have the means to have a giant flock of sheep or to have their own sheep pen. Rather, they would have a few sheep, just enough to meet their needs. At night, all the families of the village would pool their sheep together and keep them in one common sheep pen in the village.

The action Jesus describes is something that most Israelites would have clearly understood. Early in the morning, all the village sheep would be in that pen. The Family shepherd, who was often one of the children in the family, would go to that common sheep pen in the village. The watchman would know him and open the gate to him. Then that shepherd would, in his own unique voice, call to the sheep in the pen that belonged to his family. He would call them all by name. The flock would recognize that voice that they heard every day. The sheep that belonged to the shepherd's flock would leave the pen and follow that shepherd, as he led them out to graze and get a drink. If anybody tried to get into that pen any other way than through that gate, you knew that they were up to no good. They were thieves and robbers.

So that's the basic parable here. The main point of verses 1-6 is that Bad Shepherds drive the sheep, while Good Shepherds lead them. Let me show you what I mean. Jesus tells about Bad Shepherds. Look at what he says there:

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.

- John 10:1

Notice here he calls the Bad Shepherds "thieves," and he calls them "robbers" or bandits or even insurrectionists. The word was used to describe False Messiahs in Jesus' day. Later, he's going to call the bad shepherd a "hireling." But either way, the point is that they are up to no good. They're bad shepherds. Notice what they do: They gain access to the sheep by illegitimate means. They don't go through the gate, which Jesus later says is him! Because the sheep don't know these bad shepherds, look what happens:

But they (the sheep) will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

- John 10:5

So the true sheep don't follow these Bad Shepherds. They run! That means there's only one way for these shepherds to get the sheep to go where they want them to go. They can't call them, because they won't follow, so they have to drive them from the rear, through fear and through pain.

That's exactly what has happened in our story to this point. The Pharisees don't understand that this parable is about them, but this is a perfect description of what they are doing. The Pharisees have rejected the legitimate means of access to the sheep as the Messiah Jesus is the only means of legitimate access. He's going to say in a minute that he's the Gate. So the Pharisees' job as Shepherds was to work with him to go through him, so as soon as they rejected Jesus they lost their legitimacy. They rejected God's plan for shepherding.

So that only leaves them illegitimate means to control the sheep. That's what they did. They made a bunch of rules that no one could understand. They made God's Word confusing. They became the Authority. They became the only valid keepers of tradition, so that God's people couldn't just joyfully worship and serve God. They had to do it just the Pharisees' way. They had to jump through their hoops of fire.

The Pharisees gained illegitimate access, and then they drove the sheep. They moved the sheep not by calling them to life, but by fear and shame and threats. In chapter 7, John said "No one would speak about Jesus for fear of the Pharisees." In chapter 9, John says "The blind man's parents were afraid of the Religious Authorities, who had made it clear that anyone who acknowledged Jesus would be put out of the synagogue." Later in the chapter, we see that that fear was well-founded. That's exactly what they did to the blind man. The Pharisees drove the sheep.

Let me ask you a question: Have you ever seen anyone that shepherded like that? I'm sorry to say I have I've seen Pastors say, insulting things about people and even call them down from the pulpit. There's a video on YouTube of one Pastor in Oklahoma who just goes to town on his congregation. At one point, he walks up to someone, calls them by name, and says "You're the sorriest church member I have." Bad Shepherds drive the sheep. They control them through rules and ego and fear.

Good shepherds, on the other hand, lead the sheep. They lead them from the front. This may be counter-intuitive to the way we think as Americans. I think as Americans, when we think of livestock, we tend to think of cattle. We think of cowboys on horses and pushing the herd from the rear. That's the way you work with cattle. You drive them from the rear.

But Scripture never calls us cattle. It calls us sheep (dozens of times!) Sheep work best when they follow. They were made to follow a shepherd, we were made to follow a shepherd. We weren't made to be driven. We weren't made to go it alone. We were made to follow and respond to someone greater than ourselves. We were meant to follow a Shepherd. That's why all those passages that compare us to sheep, and there are dozens of them, are so comforting

when we read them. When Scripture says “We are his people the sheep of his pasture,” it’s comforting. When Jesus tells the story about the shepherd leaving the 99 and going after the one lost sheep, it’s comforting. When people are in crisis, when they face the worst of times, they want to hear “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want,” because it’s comforting. It reminds us that we are not alone that someone is leading us. We’re sheep. We need a good shepherd, and good shepherds lead. Look what Jesus says:

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice

- John 10:2-4

In this image, the Shepherd doesn’t drive the sheep. Rather, he goes where the sheep need to be and then he calls them to come through where he’s already been to where he is. He leads by example. that’s a good word about leadership to those of us that are shepherds, whether we shepherd our family or a small group or our congregation. We need to lead from the front. We need to live a life that is devoted to God, a life of obedience to him and then call people to follow us, not drive them. Shepherds lead from the front. It’s a good word about leadership.

It’s an even better word about Jesus. He’s not a bad shepherd, he’s not just a good shepherd, he’s the Best Shepherd. He’s the Best, Because he leads! He’s already been everywhere that he calls his people to go! Did you know that? When Jesus says “The Shepherd goes on ahead of his sheep.” He means that, as the Shepherd, he will have been everywhere. He asks us to go even the scary places! Are you going through adversity right now? It’s OK. Jesus has been there! Are you going through injustice right now? It’s gonna be OK. Jesus has been there, like no one else has ever been through injustice. He’s been there. Are you unappreciated? Jesus has been there. “He came unto his own, and his own did not receive him.”

Everywhere Jesus asks his sheep to go he’s already been. Singles, Jesus knows what it is to be lonely. Moms, Jesus has been through exhaustion. Dads Jesus knows what it is to have the weight of the world on his shoulders. He’s been through betrayal and grief and pain. When it comes time to face death, it’s going to be OK, because you’ll find that Jesus has been there first. He’s already conquered it for his people.

Here’s what makes him the Best Shepherd. He didn’t have to do any of that. He could have just driven us through fear and punishment. He could have just given us instructions from heaven and left it at that. But he didn’t, because he knows we’re just sheep. So he came to lead us, to go ahead of his flock and call us to himself. through difficulty, through death to resurrection, he’s the Best Shepherd.

So the first thing Jesus tells us about Shepherds is that Bad Shepherds drive the sheep and Good Shepherds lead them. The second thing is this:

Bad Shepherds take away life. Good Shepherds give it.

Look what Jesus says:

Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

- John 10:7-10

Notice here that Jesus changes the metaphor slightly. In verses 1-6, Jesus plays the role of Shepherd, but here he's saying that he's the gate. What does that mean? Well, it may not be as much of a change as it seems at first. Jesus is still probably the Shepherd in this word-picture, but the scene may have changed. Many scholars think that Jesus is referring here not to the community sheep pen in the village, which would have been nicer and made of stone, rather here he's referring to a more rustic sort of corral that's out in the wilderness. Sometimes shepherds couldn't make it all the way back to the village, so they would have to spend the night in the hill country. There in the hills, they would use what in Africa would be called a boma. It's a makeshift corral constructed of lots of thorn branches woven together into a big circle. It keeps the sheep in and the predators and thieves out.

When they're using these bomas, the Shepherd would actually become the gate, because he would stretch out and lay down across the opening of the corral. So when Jesus says "I am the gate," he's is saying "I'm the watchman. I'm the passageway. Nothing inside the corral gets out without going through me and nothing that's outside gets in unless I let it in." So that's the metaphor. Now notice that the point is "Bad Shepherds take away life. Good Shepherds give life." Let's think about the Bad Shepherds first. Jesus says:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;

- John 10:10

Bad Shepherds see the flock only as something to be exploited and used and even damaged for their own sake. They steal, kill, and destroy. The Pharisees did this. They fleeced the flock! They had all kinds of demands about how much other people should give to God, and they had all kinds of loopholes for themselves. They literally taught that, if you swore to pay your debt by the Temple, you didn't have to pay it but if you swore by the gold in the Temple you did. They had a practice called Corban, which meant that if you declared that your possessions were devoted to God you didn't have to take care of your aging parents. By the way that's not a thing, Elisabeth! They abused the flock. In fact, Jesus called the Pharisees "Those who devour widow's houses." In other words "Those who eat up what widows need to live."

Scripture teaches that it's legitimate for a Shepherd to make his living from the flock. Paul states that directly in 1 Corinthians, but these guys were exploiting the flock. They were mis-

using it for their benefit. There are bad shepherds out there who do that today, pastors who live way above the standard of their flock and have yachts, and multi-million dollar homes and private planes and even big red trucks (just kidding it's a 2012). There are Pastors who use the flock as their personal servants. I remember one time in Zimbabwe. I was teaching on Deacons and one of my students literally said to me "I know the Bible teaches that the Deacons are supposed to polish the Pastor's shoes, and carry his Bible but what else do they do?" I thought "Man, how did your Pastor pull that off?" So bad shepherds take away life.

But good shepherds give life. Jesus says here "I am the gate through me you'll go in and out and you'll be saved." What he's saying is this: Good Shepherds recognize that Jesus is the source of all good things. Good Shepherds know that it's through Jesus that we come into the safety of the fold. It's through Jesus that we find rest and peace and tranquility, protection from the storms of life. Good Shepherds know that it's only through Jesus that we find pasture and nourishment, the things we need to make us truly thrive. Paul says "Through him, we live and move and have our being." In other words, it's through Jesus and his kindness that find God's provision, both material and spiritual. It's through him that we find pasture.

Good Shepherds know this, so they don't take away from the life of the flock by making the ministry all about them, as if people are there to provide for them and their pocketbook and their ego. Rather, they add to the life of the flock by pointing people to Jesus. The one who can provide everything they need. Bad shepherds take life away. Good Shepherds give it.

Jesus isn't a Bad Shepherd, and he's more than just a Good Shepherd. He's the Best Shepherd. Because Jesus doesn't just point us to these things, He himself is the source of all these things. The reason we can rest in the fold is that Jesus has purchased our security. Because of what he did, we don't have to strive to measure up, we don't have to worry about whether God is out to get us. Through Christ, our God's goodwill and our future is secure. The reason we can go out and find pasture, the reason that we can go out and find the material and the spiritual things that we need to thrive, is that Jesus is walking beside us working in our lives to produce things that are truly good for us.

But Jesus does more than that. He says here "I have come that they might have life and that they might have it to the full." Jesus gives us abundant life. True life. True meaning. True love. True joy. Jesus is the Best Shepherd, because he gives that to his sheep! Can I tell you something? You can have abundant life. It doesn't matter how much education you have, how much social status you, have how much money you have, what matters is how much Jesus you have.

I have a situation that occurs almost every time I take a fellow American out of our country on a missions trip, whether it is to Mexico, or Honduras, or Zimbabwe or wherever. Not all of the people in those countries are poor, but we are often working with poor Christians there. At some point in the trip, someone almost always says something like this "The people are so happy! How can they be so happy when they have so little?" Listen, it's because they have

abundant life! Life is not found in the abundance of possessions. It's found in Christ, our Shepherd.

Bad shepherds take life. Good Shepherds give it. Now Jesus give us one more thought:

Bad Shepherds run when times get tough. Good Shepherds are willing to lay down their life for the Sheep.

Look at what Jesus says in verses 11-18 in this third section of our passage. He finally calls himself THE Good Shepherd:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also (and he means there the Gentiles). They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

- John 10:11-21

What Jesus is saying here is that Bad Shepherds run when times are tough, but Good Shepherds are willing to lay down their life for the sheep. So, he talks about the Bad Shepherd first, and here he calls him a "hired hand." Some other translations call him a "hireling." The hireling doesn't really seem to represent the Pharisees in this part of the parable rather, I think, he represents the Disciples. Because the hireling's problem isn't that he is evil or fleecing, the flock, like the Pharisees, were. His problem is that he's fearful. He's not as invested as the Shepherd is because the Sheep don't properly belong to him. So when he sees danger or hardship coming, he runs away.

The disciples are going to experience this when Jesus is arrested. For the most part, they are going to flee and leave Jesus and the rest of the flock. It's understandable, but it's not good shepherding. I'll just be completely candid with you today and say this is a passage I've wrestled with a lot. Because when Kelley and I returned from Zimbabwe, we left a hurting, persecuted flock behind. It was hard. After several years and after a lot of prayer, we felt like God was calling us back to the States. Then we lost our permission to be in Zimbabwe. We left behind a beloved, hurting flock of people, who couldn't just hop on a plane and fly away like we could. I remember not too long after we had returned, I went to a Leadership Conference in Seattle. In a moment of ministry with a few other leaders, they asked "What name did you bring with you this week? What name would you give yourself to describe what's going on inside of you?" And I said "My name is 'hireling' because I left a hurting flock behind."

God has been redeeming that name and those thoughts over the years. But I've thought about it a lot. There was a reason that at John Maiden's ordination I said "God doesn't just call you to stay in a place until it gets hard or until you face opposition or until you get a better offer. He calls you to stay right there until he releases you and calls you elsewhere. Bad Shepherds run when times get tough. But Good Shepherds stay. They stay with the flock until the threat is gone or until God calls them elsewhere. That's what makes Jesus not a Bad Shepherd and not just a Good Shepherd. That's why Jesus alone can claim to be THE Good Shepherd, the Best Shepherd. It's not just that he came to the flock when he didn't have to, It's not just that he stayed and stuck with the flock to the point of death, as much as that makes him a Good Shepherd that's not what he did, rather he chose to come for the express purpose of dying for the flock. He knew when he came. He knew when he started his ministry that it would climax in his horrible, sacrificial, willing death for the Sheep. He knew that was the only way he could provide everlasting life for the sheep. He came to die so that we could have life and have it more abundantly. Nobody took his life. He laid it down for the sheep.

Isn't he wonderful? He didn't come to drive us from the rear. He came to lead us from the front, experiencing everything he calls us to go through. He didn't come to take life, to steal, and kill, and destroy. He came to give us abundant life. He didn't come to run when times get tough he came to lay down his life for the sheep.

Isn't he wonderful? He's the Best Shepherd. Don't you want to follow him?