

Who is Jesus?

Messages from the Gospel of John

Message 9

The Good Shepherd John 10:1-21

Introduction

It was a cold, damp winter day. The sunlight weakly penetrated the barnyard where my 4-H club had gathered to see a sheep farmer explain his vocation. We had known Mr. Shank and his family for several years, and I was interested in his presentation. He explained about feeding and shearing the sheep. Soon the sun sank below the barn and there was nothing to offset the chilling wind that swept between the buildings. Several years before I had tried to persuade my Dad to let me raise a sheep as a 4-H project, but he would hear nothing of it. “Sheep are a lot of trouble,” he said. “You need special fences, and you always have to worry about dogs.” So I raised a calf instead. Mr. Shank went on to tell us about lambing – when sheep give birth. This part made a big impression on me, which is why I remember this incident so clearly. By now we were shivering in the cold, as the damp night settled in around us. Mr. Shank was saying that he got up at 1:00 every night to check on the ewes and help them if they were giving birth – for they were unable to give birth on their own. For a whole month or more, the shepherd would roll out of bed, pull on warm clothes and boots, and head over to the barn to care for his sheep. What do you think? Would you choose a profession like this, one where you had to slog out into the cold every night to look after a bunch of flea-bag sheep? Why would anyone choose to live like this?

Sheep are dumb. If you remember nothing else tonight, don’t forget this. Cows will wander in an orderly group from pasture to stream. Pigs will figure out where you want them to go and run the opposite direction. But domestic sheep will wander aimlessly. They get lost, they get hurt, they get into trouble. Other farm animals have a sense of direction and danger. When attacked they will ruthlessly defend themselves. They bear their young without aid and fiercely protect them. But sheep cannot bear their young unaided, and are incapable of protecting them. In the face of danger sheep bleat and stagger here and there – until they are captured. This is why a shepherd is absolutely essential. A flock of sheep wouldn’t last more than a few days without a shepherd to guide and protect them. The one thing the sheep do do well, is follow the shepherd. They learn his voice and faithfully follow him when he calls.

The Shepherd and His Sheep

Aren’t you glad that Jesus uses this illustration of sheep and shepherd to show His relationship to us? Maybe you have seen the paintings of such a pastoral scene – the white, fluffy sheep nuzzling up against Jesus in His long, flowing robes, both sheep and shepherd freshly laundered for the painter. Some paintings show Jesus walking across the pasture, leading His sheep to the cool, clear stream for a drink – others show Him rescuing the wayward – and others show the sheep and shepherd all resting in the cool shade of a big tree. These are heart-warming scenes, and people like to think of Jesus as their shepherd.

But there are shadows which cast dark overtones on these delightful pictures. The most obvious is the scandalously insulting fact that, sheep being dumb, we have been monumentally insulted. If we are going to apply this passage to ourselves tonight, we are in the disturbing situation of admitting that we are dumb, too. To be fair to the analogy, Jesus must be saying that we cannot survive without guidance or protection. Is this true? Will you wander aimlessly through life, constantly getting mauled by your opponents, until you get knocked off? Are human beings so helpless and ignorant? How can Jesus say this about mankind, the race that built the pyramids and traveled to the moon? Why would Jesus say that His people are as stupid as sheep? No wonder He kept losing His audience!

Related to the stupidity of the sheep is the expectation that the sheep will ignorantly do whatever the shepherd orders them to do. Jesus seems to be blind to the fact that people like to have a say in their lives. No one likes to be ordered around, especially not Americans. We are born free and bred to liberty. New Hampshire's state motto sums up an American response to such tyranny: "Live free or die!" A life of mere obedience to another seems not worth living. Nowhere is this more true than for college students. Some of you may be rejoicing to have escaped the suffocating domination of your parents. Even if you love your parents and were happy at home, most college students enjoy the opportunity to be out on their own and breathe free. And no matter how much you love your parents, do you want them telling what to do now? No, of course not! No, this idea of constantly following a leader is ridiculous.

Then there is the matter of the thief. It is well-known that sheep will not follow a stranger, and it seems obvious that a thief is most likely to sneak in a back door at night. But why destroy the pastoral pleasure of Jesus and His flock by suggesting that there might be enemies out there who desire to steal the sheep? If this were true, life would be dangerous, if not frightening.

In light of all these considerations, would anyone really *want* to be a sheep? Are you really so dumb? Do you want to be ordered around by a shepherd? Do you want to be exposed to danger? If this is the life of a sheep, it is totally unappealing. So why would Jesus use it to illustrate His relationship to us? If you are wondering what Jesus hoped to accomplish by this little story, you are in good company. The original audience did not get it either. So Jesus went on to explain it to them.

The Good Shepherd

The core problem in this illustration is freedom. Frankly, we don't want to be ordered around by anyone else. Subservience is repulsive to us, and we cringe at the very idea of obedience to another. Part of the reason we hate subservience because it implies an inferior status. In cases where we do put up with orders, it is because the situation is temporary, and obviously does not suggest inferiority on our part. But clearly, if the master *were* greatly superior to us, perhaps our attitude would be different.

We further hate obedience because it seems so unnecessary. We are perfectly capable of making our own decisions, and even if we make mistakes, they are relatively easily remedied. But what if we really *were* unable to make good decisions? Would we not be willing to follow someone else then? A few years ago some of us went to New York to help at The Father's Heart soup kitchen and then to sight-see. Most of us were incapable of getting to either place, so we willingly followed Leslie and Jim. In this case we could easily see that we needed shepherds to guide us, and we were grateful for their help. And when you are in danger, you are grateful for someone to guide and protect you. The military operates on a command structure because their reason for existence is to overcome enemies. Soldiers do not need, or want, a democratic process. They need good, experienced commanders who will lead them to victory and safety. So you see, even we, who hate oppression and love freedom, admit that we appreciate strong leadership in certain situations.

So, perhaps we would appreciate, or at least be willing to accept Jesus as our shepherd, if He truly were much greater than we – if He were God, for example. And perhaps if we were unable to keep God's laws and live a moral life we would welcome someone who would show us how. And maybe if we really were facing a real threat to our lives we would look for someone who would protect us.

But hasn't John given us reason upon reason to accept Jesus' claim to divinity? Hasn't he shown us over and over that Jesus created the world and gives life to everything? Isn't He the special Son of the divine Father? If Jesus is telling the truth, He is in fact so much superior to us, we ought not only to accept His

leadership – we would be crazy to reject it! Psalm 84 reminds us that it is a great joy and honor to serve someone greater. “For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.” (v. 10) Even if you are merely seeking fame and glory in this life, you will get farther by serving someone great than by going out on your own. This is much more true in the spiritual realm. You will get nowhere on your own compared to serving Jesus. Those poor souls who refuse to obey Jesus, but make up their own religion are so spiritually impoverished, a baby who can sing “Jesus Loves Me” is farther advanced than they.

And as far as our moral condition, is there anyone here tonight who will claim to have kept the Ten Commandments? Of course not! We daily break God’s laws. Those people who think they will get along without God’s help in life are severely deceived. They are following a shriveled moral code, and if they were honest, they would admit, like Benjamin Franklin, that they are unable to keep even their own pitiful moral code. Regarding our moral condition, Isaiah says, speaking to God...

You are indeed angry, for we have sinned –
In these ways we continue; And we need to be saved.
But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags;
We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.
And there is no one who calls on Your name, Who stirs himself up to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us, And have consumed us because of our iniquities.

Isaiah 64:5b-7

You see, when it comes to pleasing God, we really are helpless and inept. Worse, we are rebellious. Left to ourselves, not only will we fail to do good, we actively pursue evil. And in so doing we bring God’s fury upon ourselves. We are hopeless and doomed. Our only hope is that someone might come and rescue us. Earlier Isaiah said, “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way”. (Isa. 53:6) Yes, we really are sheep – in every way. We are spiritually stupid and morally rebellious. But God, in His love, gave us a Shepherd. Jesus came to guide us in the right path.

Since we are truly sheep in comparison to God and in light of our moral condition, Jesus not only has a right to command us as our Shepherd – it is our only hope that He do so. But Jesus addressed none of these aspects when He sought to explain His parable. Instead Jesus focused on one thing: goodness. And Jesus did not launch into a discourse on the nature and problems of goodness. He just gave a simple definition of a good shepherd – he will give up his life to save his sheep.

I don’t know about you, but I have had pets over the years, and I grew very fond of them. A few years ago Cinderella, our rabbit, got very sick, and we spent five times her worth in vet bills in a futile effort to save her. I also grew up on a farm where we had cows, pigs, chickens, and other animals. These animals were our livelihood. But I can assure you, neither love nor gain would cause me to die for an animal. Any shepherd who would die for his sheep would be incredibly devoted to them. And any god who would die for his people would be unspeakably full of love – especially if his people were wicked and rebellious. Folks, if nothing I have said so far moves you – if you are not quite convinced that it is an incredibly good deal that Jesus be your Shepherd – listen to this. Jesus died for you! Even though you were not worth dying for, even though you hated God, even while you were plotting against Him, Jesus died to rescue you from the sure disaster you were heading toward. Who else would do that for you? And if Jesus loves you enough to die for you, can’t you trust him to lead you into a wonderful life? And since Jesus died for you, don’t you agree that you owe it to Him to follow Him? Here you have the Lord of the universe offering to lead you successfully through life. Do you have the gall to refuse His offer? God help you if you do!

The Bad Shepherd

Now since Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd, we are prompted to wonder if there is a bad shepherd, and who he might be. The Old Testament can help us out here. Ezekiel has an amazing chapter where he spells out in gruesome detail the characteristics and behavior of bad shepherds. Chapter 34 opens:

And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel,
prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds:
“Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves!
Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?
You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool;
you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock.
The weak you have not strengthened,
nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken,
nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost;
but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.
So they were scattered because there was no shepherd;
and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered.
My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill;
yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth
and no one was seeking or searching for them.” Ezekiel 34:1-6

Notice the chief characteristics of these shepherds. Instead of feeding the sheep, they eat the sheep. Instead of clothing the sheep, they fleece the sheep to clothe themselves. Instead of caring for the sick and rescuing the lost, they kill the sick and abandon the lost. But you can understand this, can't you? Sheep are a lot of work. Sheep are dumb. Everyday you lead them out to the pasture, but they never learn the way. Every day you take them to the watering hole, but they still get lost. It is enough to drive you mad! You never have a vacation from these stupid sheep! Eventually you would get so sick of them you would wish some wolf would come and drag them off so you wouldn't be bothered with them anymore.

But however hard the job, the shepherd is responsible for his sheep, and he will have to give an account to his master. Let's continue reading in Ezekiel...

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:
“Behold, I am against the shepherds,
and I will require My flock at their hand;
I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep,
and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more;
for I will deliver My flock from their mouths,
that they may no longer be food for them.”” Ezekiel 34:7a, 10

God is saying here that any shepherd who mistreats His sheep will pay for it. God will become his enemy. God will pursue him and attack him and rescue the sheep from him. But God will do more than just attack the bad shepherds. He also will become the shepherd of His sheep.

For thus says the Lord God:
“Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.
As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep,

so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them
from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day.
“I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away,
bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick;
but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment.”

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 16

This chapter opens identifying the bad shepherds – they are “the shepherds of Israel”. Ezekiel was preaching against the wicked priests of his day, and Jesus would apply this passage to the Pharisees and other corrupt leaders of His day. And Jesus Himself is the Lord who comes to seek His sheep and rescue them from the evil shepherds.

But on a deeper level we can see the work of Satan here. Satan is the destroyer and deceiver. The devil never had a new thought. He gets all his ideas from God, and twists them to suit his purposes. So it makes perfect sense that he should set up false shepherds, bad shepherds, who would destroy the sheep. It was Satan at the beginning in the garden, who sought to provide guidance to Adam and Eve. He was the thief who sneaked in the side gate when the master was not present and stole the sheep from the sheepfold. And ever since he has been the spirit behind those who covertly invade God’s people and attempt to destroy them from within. Satan is still active. Therefore Peter says, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Peter 5:8) You are a prey for Satan, and if you think you are safe, you are among the most vulnerable. In such a situation you need a shepherd.

Finding a Good Shepherd

The greatest threat you face from Satan is in being deceived. He will try to convince you that you do not need a shepherd. Just as he convinced Eve that she did not need God to tell her which fruit to eat in the Garden of Eden, He will try to convince you that you are wise enough to make your own way in the world. He will flatter you with compliments and deceive you with lies until you are confident that you are doing just fine. You will think this until your life explodes in the destruction of your health or family or career – or until you come to your senses in hell. Satan does not usually try to kill you outright. He would rather amusing himself by letting you kill yourself.

Here is the truth. Here is reality. When you pull back the curtain of deception and banish lies from your mind, you will see that you need a shepherd. You cannot succeed in life, in fact you cannot even find life without someone to lead you. Everyone is a sheep on the path to destruction, and needs a shepherd to pull him back from the precipice and lead him into safety. Jesus is that Shepherd. Jesus is a good Shepherd. Although we are dumb, frustrating sheep, Jesus is good to us because He loves us. Jesus loves us so much, He died for us so that we might not perish, but have life, abundant life, eternal life.

You need Jesus. Your friends need Jesus. Everyone needs Jesus. Without Him you will perish. With Him you will live. And what a life it is! Led daily by a Shepherd who takes you into rich abundance now, and then into an eternity in paradise. A Shepherd so good He died for you. Do not reject Jesus. Do not attempt to find your own way in life. Do not choose death. Follow Jesus, like a good sheep. You and your friends and everyone you meet, call everyone to follow the Shepherd who died to save you.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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