

I Am the Good Shepherd

John 10:11-30

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 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. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 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. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

19 There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. 20 Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” 21 Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

22 At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” 25 Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. 30 I and the Father are one.”

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for His sheep and who holds us fast to secure our salvation.

Last week, we talked about Jesus as the door, and this week we’re focusing on Jesus as the good shepherd. Last week, after worship, someone asked me if Jesus is just using mixed metaphors here in John 10, referring to Himself as both the good shepherd and the door. The English teacher in me feels compelled to rise up and defend Jesus from such scurrilous accusations: A mixed metaphor occurs when someone mixes together two different metaphor in a single expression, like this –

- We could stand here and talk until the cows turn blue.
- He was watching me like I was a hawk.
- I’ll get it by hook or ladder.
- I wouldn’t eat that with a ten-foot pole.
- I shot the wind out of his saddle.

Far from a mixed metaphor, Jesus is simply using two different metaphors at different times during his teaching. But it’s possible that they could all be the same metaphor, if we understand the shepherd in the field to be laying across the entrance of the sheep pen and thus serving as the door for the sheep. But even if this isn’t what Jesus had in mind (and I think it is), door and shepherd are used distinctly in this passage to convey distinct meanings.

The truth is that no single metaphor is sufficient to fully capture all that Jesus is and all that He does for us. So Jesus uses a variety of different metaphors, each designed to convey some aspect of His person and work to us:

“I am the Bread of Life” speaks of Jesus as the nourishment and sustenance of our souls. “I am the Light of the World” highlights the illumination of brilliant truth and righteousness that Jesus both is in Himself and that He brings into the world. “I am the Door” speaks of the access Jesus gives us to security and to sustenance, to safety and to provision. Of all of Jesus’ metaphors, “I am the good shepherd” is a favorite of many, because it carries with it multiple meanings, an abundance of rich reassurance for believers, who can often feel as stupid, helpless, scared, vulnerable and harassed as sheep. With good reason, Psalm 23 is the most quoted and beloved of all psalms. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

Last year, I had the privilege of teaching Psalm 23 to the preschoolers at New Covenant Christian School. As we walked through the psalm together, we learned how the Good Shepherd feeds the sheep, leads the sheep, protects the sheep and corrects the sheep. To this familiar Old Testament picture of the Lord as our Shepherd, Jesus here adds some further depth – The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him. He keeps His sheep secure and no one can snatch His sheep away from Him. Wonderful pictures of the depth of love, sacrifice, intimacy and security come from the lips of Jesus in these precious verses.

I. Jesus is the Good Shepherd

A. He lays down His life for the sheep.

Jesus begins in verses 11-15 by saying, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 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.”*

The most striking aspect of this image is the fact that Jesus identifies being the good shepherd with laying down His life for the sheep. At first, it seems like Jesus might just be talking about a willingness to defend the sheep from the wolves at all cost, unlike the hired hand, which we’ll discuss later.

Yet it soon becomes clear that Jesus is talking much more specifically and intentionally. It’s one thing to say, in abstract, “I’d die for you,” as long as that reality is not directly in front of you. It’s a very different matter to realize that the promised death is now required: The wolf has entered the sheepfold and is ravaging the flock, and only the death of the shepherd can secure the flock from this danger. The shepherd must battle and defeat the wolf, but the battle will, in fact, cost the shepherd His life.

The wolf was let into the sheepfold by Adam in the Garden, who failed to exercise his dominion over the serpent by banishing him from the Garden and rejecting his lies. Instead of protecting his wife and the creation he was charged with ruling, Adam submitted himself to the serpent, ate the fruit, and gave the wolf devastating access to the sheep. Soon, sin would lead one of Adam’s sons to kill the other, as the wolf continued to ravage the flock of God.

The Old Testament unfolds the story in chapter after chapter of the devastation of the wolf on the people of God through idolatry, worldliness, corruption, injustice, unfaithfulness, etc. Sometimes a wise shepherd-king like David or Hezekiah or Josiah would arise and restore order, but such restoration and reform would never last that long.

From the beginning, God knew exactly what the rescue of His sheep would cost. As He cursed the serpent in the Garden in Genesis 3:15, He said:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.*

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, alongside the story of the ravages of the wolf, God also continued to give His promises of deliverance and to give pictures of what that deliverance would cost, in the Passover lamb, in the Day of Atonement and the other bloody sacrifices of the ceremonial law, and in the words of the prophets and psalmists.

Now the long-awaited deliverer had come into the world, and He knew what the deliverance of God's people would cost Him. As Isaiah 53 had said over 700 years prior, "*All we, like sheep, have gone astray, and the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*"

B. He lays down His life in love for His Father & His sheep.

Jesus makes it clear that he lays down His life willingly, as an act of loving obedience to His heavenly Father and of sacrificial love for His sheep: "*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may 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 I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.*"

The Father has made the promise of deliverance and given the charge to His Son to deliver, and the Son is here expressing His free willingness to fulfill the promise and to carry out the charge to deliver His people, even at the cost of His life. – "*I lay down my life . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*"

That Jesus does so in willing obedience to His Father is clear: "*This charge I have received from my father.*" That He does so in love for His sheep is seen in the contrast he draws between Himself as the Good Shepherd and the hired hand.

II. Jesus is Not a Hired Hand

"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. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."

The hired hand seems to be a very different character from the thieves and robbers that Jesus discusses earlier in John 10. Thieves and robbers actually steal from and abuse the flock. The hired hand is not so openly wicked; he is just not committed to the sheep with sacrificial love. He is willing to do his job well enough, as long as he is being paid and the dangers are not too bad.

As a pastor, I am convicted by this passage when I reflect on my fellow shepherds in Sudan. Absalah Kori was a student in our seminar in Uganda and he has been planting churches in Sudan. To get Bibles and books to certain areas of his flock, he has to cross enemy lines at night, risking capture or death.

A. He does not run from danger.

The Good Shepherd does not run from danger like the hired hand. He does not flee when the wolf comes. This reminds me of David, who did not flee when the giant wolf Goliath came. The reigning king of Israel, Saul, who was head-and-shoulders taller than the rest of the Israelites and should have been Israel's champion, hid in his tent when Goliath threatened and challenged God's people and mocked the Lord. Saul was playing the part of the hired hand. David came playing the part of the Good Shepherd. His words to Saul are compelling:

“Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God. . . The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” – 1 Sam. 17:34-37, ESV

David was no hired hand. He would not flee from danger, but he would trust in the Lord to deliver. Jesus does even better than David, for He allows Himself to be swallowed by an even greater giant, Death himself, that He might destroy death from the inside.

B. He has all authority.

Jesus is also different from the hired hand in that He has been given all authority. This is part of the meaning of the word “charge” in verse 18, where Jesus says, *“I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

The word translated “charge” means a commandment or precept, which is why it reflects Jesus' obedience to His Father, but it also means “that which is prescribed to one by reason of his office,” so even as it reflects the Son's obedience to the Father, it also reflects the Son's authority as the Son of God.

So Jesus exceeds the hired hand in sacrificial love for the sheep, but He also exceeds the hired hand in rightful God-given authority to sacrifice Himself to save the sheep. As the Good Shepherd, He will willingly lay down His life for the sheep, but He has also been given authority to lay down His life in a way that will deliver the sheep from danger, in a way that the hired hand could never accomplish, even if he did not flee and was willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

III. Jesus Knows & Keeps His Sheep

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus lays down His life for the sheep because he knows His sheep. This means more than the fact that Jesus recognizes or can identify those who are His sheep and those who are not. He loves His sheep intimately, deeply, personally and savingly. Simple words carry such profound depth when Jesus says, *“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”*

A. He knows all His sheep.

Jesus makes it clear that he knows all of His sheep. He says, *“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.”*

Jesus is talking here about the Gentiles who would come to believe in Him. Even though they have not yet come to faith or even heard about Him, Jesus still identifies them as His sheep. *“Not of this fold”* means not of the Jewish nation and Jesus says of these Gentiles – which includes us, sitting here 2,000 years later on the other side of the world – *“I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”*

If you have responded to the call of Jesus to follow Him, it is because he is your Good Shepherd and you are His sheep. He knows you. He laid down His life for you, personally and powerfully. He is now bringing you into the fold, that He may have one flock under one shepherd.

B. His sheep know Him & follow Him.

Again, as we asked last week, how do we know who the sheep of Jesus are? Do we have some secret tattoo on the inside of our left arm? Is there a sheep birthmark? No. The sheep of Jesus are those who know Him and follow Him. In verse 27, when Jesus comes back to the Good Shepherd metaphor, He says, *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”*

C. Those who do not know Him are not His sheep.

By contrast, those who do not follow Jesus are not His sheep. Listen carefully to what Jesus says to the unbelieving Jews in verses 25-26: *“Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.’”*

Jesus does not tell them, *“You are not among my sheep because you do not believe,”* but the opposite, *“You do not believe because you are not among my sheep.”* They may be Jewish. They may even be respected leaders among the Jewish people, but they are not Jesus’ sheep. They are not His, and so they do not believe but remain blind and cold, even in the face of compelling evidence in the miraculous works of Jesus.

People who say *“If only I could have seen Jesus do some miracles, then I would believe”* are missing the reality here: These people saw and did not believe, because Jesus did not count them among His sheep. It doesn’t excuse their unbelief, which comes from their sinful and rebellious hearts, but it does explain why they are so deaf to His call.

D. Jesus keeps His sheep secure forever.

More importantly, it explains why some of us have had our sinful, rebellious hearts changed and our ears opened to hear the voice of Jesus. We are not better than unbelievers. We have been called because Jesus has called us His own. We have been made to hear His voice because he has been pleased to number us among His sheep. And once he has claimed us and called us, we can never be lost!

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

“My sheep hear my voice” – This is not a literal physical hearing of a voice, but rather recognizing the authoritative voice of Jesus speaking in His Word, the Bible.

“I know them” – This is the second time Jesus has affirmed His personal love for His own.

“They follow Me” – True sheep don't just listen to the shepherd while standing still, they follow, they obey.

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish” – Eternal life is a gift given by Jesus. Jesus' language is definite and not merely possible or hypothetical.

“No one will snatch them out of my hand” – Those who belong to Jesus cannot be lost, and to re-emphasize this security, Jesus lingers to repeat and strengthen His statement – *“My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”*

“I and the Father are one” is one of the strongest and clearest claims to divinity Jesus makes in the Gospels. It will provoke an angry response and deep division, which we will examine next week. For now, consider why Jesus says this: He is extending assurance of absolutely security to His own. He and His Father are one in their absolute commitment to keep the sheep of Jesus, to preserve us from ever being lost.

If you belong to Jesus, having heard His voice and responding by faith to follow Him, you are His forever. You cannot and will not be lost. The Father and the Son are absolutely united in this. This should give us real confidence, assurance, peace and joy!