

# The Good Shepherd

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Date: 30 April 2023

Preacher: Rev. Jeff Simpson

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning again, and welcome to Church of the Advent. My name is Jeff. I'm one of the pastors here. And as Tommy said earlier, this morning in the church calendar is the Sunday of the Good Shepherd, the week of the Good Shepherd.

And so that's what we're going to be talking about this morning. We're going to be talking about what it means that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And as I studied these passages this week, it became clear that it really boils down to one word, authority, authority.

And that's what we're going to be looking at this morning. We're going to be looking at how the authority of Jesus and how He exercises His authority as the Good Shepherd. So first of all, what does it mean for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd?

It means, first of all, that He has the authority to lead His sheep to flourishing. He has the authority to lead His sheep to flourishing.

Sheep are absolutely dependent upon their shepherds to flourish. They need to be led to graze in places where they can find grass to eat and water to drink. And they also need to be protected.

[ 1 : 14 ] Sheep are very vulnerable animals. They are easy targets for predators like wolves and bears. They have little in their natural ability to defend themselves.

They are frail and fragile creatures. They get injured easily. Their legs are broken easily. And they often wander away from the flock and get lost.

And that is why sheep need a shepherd. They need to be nourished. They need to be fed. They need to be led and guided. And sometimes they need to be rescued and healed.

Now, I think sometimes some people assume that because sheep are fragile and vulnerable, that somehow they are not intelligent animals. But that's actually not completely true.

I actually did some research on sheep this week. And I learned some things about sheep. And here's one of the things I learned about sheep. They are, intelligence-wise, they're about on par with cows in terms of intelligence level.

[ 2 : 18 ] And they have these neural systems in their brain that kind of set them apart from other animals. And these neural systems that allow them to actually recognize the individual faces and sounds of other sheep and to recognize the individual faces and voices of human beings.

And this is a scientific fact that finds great resonance in our passage. Because in verse 3, Jesus says, There's a YouTube video out there that you may have seen.

If not, you can go look it up later this afternoon. But it's a two-minute YouTube video. And it is set on a farm in Norway.

And there's a group of people standing in a sheep pasture at this farm in Norway. And they're standing at a fence in the middle of a sheep pasture overlooking this huge flock of sheep.

And several people in the group, several people in the crowd, try calling the sheep to themselves. So they are calling the sheep with loud voices.

[ 3 : 42 ] They are using different kinds of noises, different kinds of cries to call the sheep to themselves. And the people look a little ridiculous doing it. It's pretty comical. They're trying as hard as they can to call these sheep to themselves.

But the sheep don't respond at all. And finally, after several people have tried this, the shepherd of the flock comes out. And he comes to the center of the screen.

And he starts calling them. And at first, the ears of the sheep perk up. And then their heads start to turn. And finally, they start walking and finally running towards the shepherd, bleating and making sheep noises as they run and gather around their shepherd.

And what Jesus is saying here is that that is him and that that is us. Verse 10, he says, The thief comes only to steal and to kill and destroy.

But I have come that they may have life and to have it abundantly. The thief here is directly referring to Satan, the evil one. Satan comes to steal and to kill and to destroy God's good creation and the flock of God's people.

[ 5 : 02 ] But Jesus has come to bring us abundant life. He has come to lead us into flourishing, to lead us to the green pastures and quiet waters that Psalm 23 talks about. He has come to lead us into the fullness of life, the life that we all long for, a life of flourishing.

As the good shepherd, Jesus has the authority to lead his sheep into flourishing. But here's what we need to recognize, that the flourishing of the sheep depends on their closeness to the shepherd. The flourishing of the sheep depends on the closeness to their shepherd because they can wander away and get lost. But if they have the ability to hear and to recognize his voice and stay close to the shepherd, they will flourish.

Now, I understand that pray and read your Bible cannot possibly be the application of every sermon. And if it was, sermons would get really old really fast.

Listening to sermons would get pretty old pretty fast. And it also would not do justice to the fullness of God's word. So I'm thankful that that is not the application of every sermon that we preach here on Sunday mornings.

[ 6 : 15 ] But it is the application of this one. How do you develop the kind of ears and hearts that can hear the voice of Jesus in the same way that sheep know how to respond to the voice of their shepherd and not to other people?

How do you develop that kind of sensitivity? You have to immerse yourself in God's word on a regular basis. You have to become familiar with God's voice.

You have to become familiar with the voice of Jesus. And you have to cultivate a life of prayer where you not only learn to speak to God, but where you learn to sit in silence and listen to his voice.

Are you close enough to Jesus that you can distinguish between his voice and the voice of strangers? And you might be here this morning and you say, that sounds great, but I don't know how to do that.

I don't know how to cultivate a life of prayer. I don't know how to read and study God's word. Quite frankly, no one has ever showed me how. I don't know how to study the Bible for myself or even learn how to talk to God or hear him talk back to me.

[ 7 : 37 ] And I just would want to say, like, we're so grateful that you're here and your pastors would love to meet with you. In fact, this is one of the greatest gifts that you could ever give us is to say, hey, we, I would love to learn how to cultivate a deeper prayer life.

I would love to learn how to study the Bible. You can ask Tommy or Dan or myself or Lisa, and we would love to meet with you and talk to you about that. That is literally our job.

Our job is literally to meet with you and to help you learn how to listen to the voice of a shepherd.

And so part of what it means that Jesus is the good shepherd is that he has the authority to lead us, his sheep, into flourishing.

But our flourishing depends on our ability to stay close to the shepherd and to develop a sensitivity to his voice where we recognize his voice.

Secondly, the other thing that part of what it means for Jesus to be the good shepherd is that he has the authority to hold all other shepherds accountable.

[ 8 : 45 ] He has the authority to hold all other shepherds accountable. Just because Jesus is our good shepherd doesn't mean that we don't need other shepherds.

In fact, it's just the opposite. God has ordained that there would be leaders who serve as shepherds in every area of life. This is how God has designed the world to work.

Children need parents. Employees need bosses and supervisors. Athletes need coaches. Students need teachers.

Citizens need public leaders. And all of us need God. And this is life in God's world. This is a good part about how God has designed the world to work. We all depend on others.

We all depend on other shepherds to lead us towards flourishing. But as you might know and as you may have experienced, not all shepherds shepherd well.

[ 9 : 44 ] Not all leaders lead faithfully. And this is the focus of our Old Testament reading, Ezekiel chapter 34. In Ezekiel 34, God is responding to the leaders of Israel who had become focused on feeding themselves rather than feeding the sheep.

In verse 2, in Ezekiel 34, the Lord says, Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves. Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat. You clothe yourselves with wool. You slaughter the fat ones. But you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened. The sick you have not healed. And the injured you have not bound up. The strayed you have not brought back. The lost you have not sought. And with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd. In John chapter 10 verse 12, Jesus refers to the hired hands. Who are the hired hands? Well, the hired hands are leaders whom God has put in place who are there to lead and shepherd God's people.

[10:51] But who nonetheless forsake their responsibility when trouble or conflict comes. They care more about themselves than the sheep that they are shepherding.

That's what a hired hand is. And Ezekiel 34 and John 10 show us that even though we are made for a world where we are meant to be shepherded, in a fallen world, broken and fractured by sin, good shepherds are in short supply.

Good shepherds are in short supply. Both of these passages refer primarily to the leaders that God has put in place to lead and shepherd his people.

So kings and priests and elders in the Old Testament. And so as such, they are primarily a sober word of warning to anyone who exercises leadership over God's people in the church, especially pastors.

Especially pastors. And as a pastor, this was a sobering passage for me to reflect on this week because it means that God will hold church leaders like me accountable if we use our position not to serve the sheep, but to serve ourselves.

[12:12] He's clear in Ezekiel 34. I am against you. I'm against you. And I will bring justice. To those who fail to neglect the flock that God has entrusted into their care, God will hold them accountable.

And we see this in the New Testament. In James chapter 3, we see that the shepherds of God's people, especially those who teach, are held to a higher standard and are judged with greater strictness.

And so this is a sober word of warning to anyone who exercises leadership in a church. But it is also a sober word for anybody who exercises leadership in any area of life.

In any area of life. If you have leadership or influence over others, you're a shepherd. You're a shepherd. Maybe it's in the home as a parent, as a mom or dad.

Or maybe it's in the workplace as a boss or a supervisor or a team leader. Anyone, anyone who misuses their authority to harm others, to injure others, to neglect others, make no mistake, Jesus, the chief shepherd, will hold them accountable.

[13:25] And this is what Ezekiel 34 and John 10 both show us. If our image of Jesus as the good shepherd only includes him holding lambs in his arms and cuddling them, then it is an incomplete picture.

Because it should also include him wielding his staff and his rod that he sometimes uses to rescue wayward sheep, but also to discipline those who misuse their authority as under shepherds of his flock.

And whether in this life or the next, Jesus holds all leaders accountable for how they treat the sheep entrusted to their care. Because he is the one who has all authority in heaven on earth.

He is the one who has the authority as the good shepherd. But even though this is a sober warning, it shouldn't remain a sober warning.

It should also be an invitation. It should also be an invitation because it means that it is possible to be a faithful shepherd leader.

[14:40] Not just in the church, but in the home, in the workplace as well. It's possible to be a leader like Jesus, whose leadership causes others to flourish.

And this is a beautiful possibility. We can't not talk about the workplace in this passage because the image of Jesus as a good shepherd comes directly from the ancient workplace.

The work of a shepherd was central to the economic life in the ancient world. And so the image of the shepherd gets at the heart of what it means to be a leader in the workplace.

It means that a true leader is not primarily concerned with their own flourishing, with their own success, with their own career, with their own achievements and accomplishments and resume.

But they are primarily concerned with the flourishing of those around them, with the flourishing of those that they lead, their employees, their co-workers, their clients.

[15:41] True leaders put the flourishing of others before their own. Now, let's just acknowledge that this is way easier said than done. Some of you work in workplace environments where it is more natural to be a shepherd.

Some of you may serve as teachers or nurses, doctors, counselors, social workers, where being a shepherd, caring for people, is literally written into your job description.

The word shepherd is probably not on there, but the idea that you are there to serve people and to lead them towards flourishing is literally your job, and therefore you have a workplace culture that helps you do that, hopefully.

But others of you may work in companies or in organizations where you actually get rewarded for being cutthroat. Perhaps it's business or sales or law or politics.

Not that those places obviously can't have healthy workplace cultures because they can, but there are often entire workplaces where you are incentivized, rewarded for succeeding at the expense of others.

[16:58] You get rewarded for being cutthroat. But no matter how difficult or complex this may be, as people who follow the good shepherd, we are called to live differently.

Even if we are, even if we're working in a place where we get rewarded for being cutthroat, we are still called to help others flourish. Sometimes, sometimes, even at our own expense.

Sometimes, even at our own expense. Because that is what Jesus Christ has done for us as the good shepherd. He has allowed us to flourish at his own expense.

And so if you're in a workplace environment where you get rewarded for being cutthroat, where you succeed when others fail, this might be more challenging for you, no doubt.

But what if we actually believed that because Jesus is the good shepherd, that he is the expert on how to help our workplaces flourish? What if we believed that Jesus knows more about the flourishing of the financial industry than the CEO of Goldman Sachs or J.P. Morgan or Wells Fargo?

[18:12] What if we believed that Jesus knows more about the flourishing of the retail industry than the CEOs of Target or Apple or Amazon?

What if we believed that Jesus knows how to help schools and small businesses and restaurants and hospitals and nonprofits flourish? What if we went to work as if that were true?

What would that mean for our relationship with Jesus? Well, I think it would mean a lot of things, but I think part of what it would mean is that our prayer life would involve speaking to Jesus and listening to Jesus to help us be competent managers and bosses and supervisors and leaders knowing that he is the expert on how to help our workplace and those around us flourish.

So the second thing we see is that as the good shepherd that Jesus holds all shepherds accountable and this isn't just a sober warning, this is also an invitation.

It's an invitation to be the kind of leader that Jesus is, to be the kind of leader in no matter what domain or field we are in, to be the kind of leader that looks primarily to the flourishing of others.

[19:40] So he has the authority to lead us to flourishing. He has the authority to hold all shepherds accountable. And finally, as the good shepherd, Jesus has the authority to lay down his life.

He has the authority to lay down his life. Verse 11 says, I am the good shepherd. And the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. In verse 17, he says, 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.

I think one of the most moving stories in the whole Bible comes from John chapter 21. After Jesus' resurrection, several days after, he meets the disciples for breakfast on the shore of Tiberias.

And he has this conversation with Peter where he shepherds Peter's heart in a really beautiful way. On the night of his betrayal, Peter had disowned Jesus publicly three times, telling three different people, I do not know that man.

[21:00] And this was perhaps one of Peter's greatest moments of failure and shame. Denying the good shepherd who had loved him for the past three years, refusing to be identified with Jesus, and at breakfast on the shore of Tiberias, Jesus asked Peter three times, Simon, son of John, do you love me?

And Peter responds three times, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. And Jesus then responds again three times, well then feed my sheep.

Feed my sheep. In the place where Peter had experienced colossal failure, Jesus assures him of his love.

And in the place where Peter experienced perhaps his greatest shame, in the place of Peter's deepest shame, Jesus gives him a ministry.

He gives him work to do. He gives him a vocation. He gives him a calling. And he says, feed my sheep. Why? How is Jesus able to do this? Because as the good shepherd, Jesus had already dealt with Peter's sin and failure and shame at the cross by laying his life down on his own authority.

[ 22 : 28 ] In the ancient world, the life of a sheep had great economic value. No doubt. But none of them were more valuable than the life of a shepherd. A shepherd in the first century or in our century would never willingly lay down their life for one of the sheep.

But that is exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus is the good shepherd who has also become for us the Lamb of God, the atoning sacrifice for all of our sin.

And because Jesus had the authority to lay down his life for you and also the authority to raise it up again in his resurrection, he also has the authority to bring healing and restoration in the deepest places in your life of sin and shame and failure.

To heal you in the deepest places of your woundedness. He can take the largest of all your large failures and turn it into a vocation.

Turn it into a ministry. And he also has the authority to bring healing and restoration in your life where you have been sinned against.

[ 23 : 50 ] Where you have been wounded by somebody in your life who was supposed to be a shepherd but who ended up being more like a hired hand. Maybe it was a parent.

Maybe it was a family member. Maybe it was a boss. Maybe it was even a pastor. Chances are you have been wounded by someone who was supposed to be a shepherd to you.

Perhaps they were intentionally malicious but maybe they were faithful in many areas but nonetheless did things to hurt you and wound you. And what I want you to see is that in that place Jesus is the good shepherd.

He has the authority and the power to heal you and to restore you in that place because he is the one who has the authority to do so. Maybe it may take some time to heal but the person who has sinned against you the person who has wounded you does not have authority in that place in your heart.

Neither does your own voice of shame and criticism. Jesus does. Jesus has authority in that place because he is the good shepherd and he is able to bring healing and restoration where false shepherds, those who have failed to be shepherds, have brought hurt.

[ 25 : 21 ] and so that is what it means. That is what it means for Jesus to be the good shepherd in our lives. It's about his authority. It's about his authority to lead us to flourishing and so we must attune our hearts and our minds to hear his voice by cultivating a deep life of prayer and study of God's word.

It means that he has the authority to hold all shepherds accountable and this is a sober warning to anyone who exercises authority and especially in the church but on the other side of this is an opportunity to become a shepherd like Jesus to lead and guide others towards flourishing in our homes and our workplaces and he has the authority to lay down his life and to raise it up again for our salvation and our healing and for the salvation and the healing of the world.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus Christ thank you that you are the good shepherd that you have all authority in heaven and on earth.

May our hearts and minds today be attuned to your voice. May we be the kind of shepherds that you are and Lord in the places that we have been wounded Jesus come and heal us and restore us by the power of your cross and resurrection.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.