

John 10:11-18

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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."

"I am the greatest!" That's what Mohammed Ali said in 1964, a soundbite that's frequently replayed. "I am the greatest!" I remember a few years back when Apple used parts of his speech for a commercial about taking selfies on their new iPhone X. The commercial showed selfie after selfie, picture after picture, all of them well-lit and flattering, and in the background, "I am the greatest." Kinda funny, maybe, but it also portrays and encourages very real arrogance. "Use the 12-megapixel camera on the new iPhone X to flaunt yourself! Take those pictures, you deserve it, you are the greatest." As if we need that type of encouragement. That's exactly what we already think by nature.

You know, as little kids, we all found things that we were good at and would boast about to our siblings or friends. But as you grew older, you learned that people didn't like it when you boasted, it wasn't socially acceptable. So, you merely stopped talking about it. But the problem wasn't fixed. We started pretending to be humble, but deep down there's that unshakeable feeling, "I am the greatest." Part of the problem is that our society encourages this type of thinking, this self-inflated feeling of great value. So, we become obsessed with showing ourselves off, wanting people to see us and like us. We become obsessed with our own opinions, hearing our own voices, so much so that we're often not listening to anyone else. We become obsessed with our own needs. By nature, we think our needs are more important than anyone else's. So, really, we might not say it, but we certainly think it: "I am the greatest!" But we're not. We're sheep.

And here's the thing about sheep. They're not the greatest at anything. They're not the strongest, or keenest, or slyest of animals. They're not overwhelmingly beautiful or majestic animals. Sure, their wool makes warm clothes, their meat is quite tasty, but that's about it. And that's kind of the point when Jesus says that we are sheep. In our text, He uses this image of Himself as shepherd and we as sheep both to comfort us and to humble us. He's disabusing us of this notion that, "We are the greatest," and saying "Be quiet. Stop listening only to what you say and listen to what I say instead." He says, "You are sheep. I am the Good Shepherd." And so, today, we'll be considering the theme:

How "Good" is our Shepherd?

- I. He's the Greatest—both in strength and in meekness.
- II. He knows His sheep—He cares, even in our weakness.

Now that word "good," it might throw us off a little bit, because we have a strange relationship with that word in English. For one thing, we tend to think of it existing on a continuum of sorts signifying levels of goodness. Like you have bad and then ok and then good and then great and then outstanding, so then "good" tends to be thought of as, "Just a little better than average." If your spouse cooked you a meal and asked what you thought, and you said, "Good," they'd probably be

pretty disappointed. That's how we think of the word "good." And because of that, when we use the word "good" to describe someone like Jesus, we tend to think of it as an understatement. Understatement is where you emphasize how great something is in a sarcastic way. So, if I asked, "Hey, you ever heard of Tom Brady?" You might say, "Yeah, I heard he's pretty good." Tom Brady, seven-time Super Bowl winning Quarterback, "Yeah, he's pretty good." You're using understatement, underselling him to emphasize just how good he actually is.

And people think along these terms in relation to God as well. You hear it often, "God is good!" And then the reply usually goes, "God is great!" Don't undersell Him, He's better than good! But this isn't understatement by Jesus, even though we might think of it that way based on our usage of the word in English. But the use of "good" in Hebrew and Greek, it's just much different. When God created the world and looked at everything and saw that it was good, He obviously didn't mean that it was a bit better than average. It was total, complete, perfect. It was fully good in a way that only God can achieve. And similarly, only Jesus can describe Himself as "good." As he said in Mark 10, **"No one is good except God alone."** (18) Calling Himself "good," He's really saying, "Yes, that's me. I'm God."

And not only that, He's both God and man. Which makes Him uniquely good to be our Shepherd. Because He is the highest and became the lowest. Because He is the Lord and became the servant. Because **He is the Greatest—both in Strength and in Meekness.** That's His point when He says, **"I lay down my life** (that's meekness) **that I may take it up again** (that's strength)." Only God could say this, but God ALONE cannot say this. For God cannot die. But Jesus as God AND man comes as the unique Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep and can take it up again. HE is the greatest.

You know, when we make those types of "greatest" claims, they're full of false bravado. "I don't need your help." "I can do it myself." "I don't need directions." "No one messes with me." From early on, we are bloated up with pride, pretending we're more than we really are. But when Christ makes these claims here, His words are not false bravado. **"No one takes my life from me. . . I have the authority to lay down my life, and I have the authority to take it up again."** These are powerful claims that none of us could make. Our times are in God's hands, but Jesus alone had the power over His life. And laying down His life was the greatest display of His strength *and* His meekness.

For He who had the ability to call down twelve legions of angels to come and fight for Him (cf. Matt. 26:53), did not. He who could have come down from the cross in a blaze of vengeful glory to shut the mouths of all those mockers, did not. Instead, He suffered in silence on the cross for your sins and mine, laying down His life so that our lives of sin would be forgiven. And how the devil must have rejoiced at Christ's death. "I am the greatest! I'm the undefeated champion of the world! I took down God!" Until Jesus took up His life again to prove that *He* was indeed the greatest.

Now this whole act, this laying down of His life, this is the one part of the shepherd/sheep imagery that Jesus is using which doesn't make a whole ton of sense in earthly terms. Many of Jesus' parables do this, He'll make a whole ton of comparisons and then there'll usually be some point of comparison that stands out as not making a whole ton of sense, and that's this point. **"The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep."** Obviously, sheep and shepherds aren't as familiar to our day-to-day lives as they would have been to Jesus' original hearers, but I think we can all recognize that good shepherding doesn't involve dying in the process. A good shepherd would care for his sheep just like you or I might care for a family dog; a good shepherd would maybe even risk his life to protect his sheep. But in ancient Palestine, if a shepherd knew that by protecting the sheep he was absolutely going to die, he would never do it. Because what would he gain by dying? What would the sheep

gain? If he lost his life and left the sheep without a shepherd, then undoubtedly ALL of the sheep would eventually be killed by some predator. A good shepherd wouldn't lay down his life and leave the flock defenseless! Yet our Good Shepherd lays down His life.

I don't know if any of you have ever read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. If you haven't, you should read it. Great book which Lewis wrote as a parable of sorts about Jesus. The witch in that story is a picture of the devil, and she laughs at Aslan the lion who is a picture of Christ, because Aslan said he was going to give his life in the place of Edmund, the traitor, so that Edmund could go free. And as Aslan is bound to the stone slab to be killed, the witch calls Aslan a fool. She says, "I'm going to kill you and then there will be nobody to protect Edmund from me." But what she didn't understand is what the Devil didn't understand. That He who had the power to lay down His life—it wasn't taken from Him—He who had the power to lay down His life also had the power to take it up again. And so, on the third day He rose again in a blaze of glorious light, as if to say, "I am the greatest! I am the undefeated champion! I have conquered, so I am your Good Shepherd." You and I, as sheep, we are weak. But we have a Good Shepherd, who is the greatest both in strength and in meekness. And He's the Good Shepherd because **He knows His sheep—He cares, even in our weakness.**

You know, knowing and caring, those are two things we often claim about one another. "I know him. I know her. I know him, he would never do that." We often think that we know people so well that we can predict what they'll do. But how often does it happen that someone does something, we say, "I didn't think he'd ever do something like that!" Or "I guess I didn't know her so well after all." The truth is, we don't really know even the people closest to us nearly as well as we think, and people don't know us as well as they think, because we hide stuff. Oftentimes, the things we're most scared of, the things we feel most guilty over—we hide those things away. So, we don't know people as well as we often think we do.

Nor do we care about people nearly as much as we say we do. How many times have you seen a commercial from some company that claims it cares about you. That's often a claim of insurance companies, "It's true, we care." Every year, companies spend millions of advertising dollars trying to convince you they care, and it's because they actually don't, and they know that you assume they don't care. But that's ok, we want their product and they want our money. It's a business transaction, we don't need their care. And that's really the distinction that Jesus makes when He compares Himself and His shepherding to that of the hireling. The hireling is just in it for the money, he doesn't care about the sheep. But that's not the case with your Good Shepherd.

He says, "***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.***" Think about that, that's a rather startling statement. We might say something like, "I've known so-and-so forever." And obviously that's overstatement. We talked understatement earlier, well overstatement is pretty similar, where you say something over the top to make a point, but everyone understands you don't mean it literally. You've not been around forever so you can't possibly have known anyone *forever*. But who has been around forever? The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They have known each other *forever*, literally. Their knowing is total and complete and full and perfect. And Jesus is bringing you into that unity, into that circle.

By laying down His life for you, cleansing you of your sins, erasing your past and even your future guilt, He brought you into His flock. And He says that He knows you *just as* Father and Son know each other. Think about what this means. As completely and perfectly and thoroughly as the Father and

Son and Holy Spirit know one another as one God together, so God knows you. He knows you entirely. From all your deepest fears and concerns and trials and guilt, to the very minor details, like the number of hairs on your head—He knows it all. And knowing it all, He *still* cares about you. And that is startling.

I mentioned early how we often hide certain details from one another, and I'm pretty sure that's because we're afraid that if people knew *everything* about us, they wouldn't like us anymore. But God knows everything about you. He knows all of your darkest secrets, He knows all of your sin and shame, and that DOES NOT REDUCE His care for you one bit. He still comes and lays down His life for you. He does not love the lovely, His love makes you lovely. He does not love what is already good, but His love makes you good.

This is not a business transaction; He is not the hireling. As Jesus says, the hireling ***"leaves the sheep and flees."*** Why? Because he says, "I didn't sign up for this! I'm only here for the paycheck!" He cares more about his own life than he does the sheep. And we're like the hireling when it comes to our earthly relationships. You care more about yourself than you do about the people around you. Sure, we're great at making grand pronouncements about how much we love and care for people. Think about some popular love songs, "I would walk 500 miles and I would walk 500 more." Or "I've loved you for a thousand years, and I'll love you for a thousand more." That's obviously nothing but overstatement. Our care doesn't stretch nearly that far. In fact, our care for one another is often no more than a business transaction. Our care often only extends as far as our personal interests. As long as they bring us something in return, as long as we're getting something out of it, then we care. But as soon as it's hard, as soon as it's a burden—how quickly our care disappears.

But that's not Christ's care. He's not the hireling. He does not leave you and flee. He does not care more about Himself than He does you. You are everything to Him. In spite of you being *you*, in spite of you having no value in and of yourself to Him, the Shepherd dies for sheep that love to wander. He lays down His life for you. Not just in that final act on the cross, but His entire life He laid down for you. From His first breath at His birth, His growing and learning, His keeping of the law, His poverty and His pain. All of it for you. Finally culminating when the Shepherd took the place of the lamb. So that He could take you His lambs up into His arms, and say, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know you, I care for you. I have loved you for a thousand years, and I will love you for a thousand more." And when Jesus says that, it's understatement, not overstatement. Because it doesn't even begin to describe His care for you.

So **How "Good" is your Shepherd?** Pretty good. *We* are just sheep. Weak and worthless. But we have a great Good Shepherd, both in strength and in meekness who lays down His life for us. We have a great Good Shepherd who knows us and continues to care for us in spite of all our weakness. *He* is the greatest. And He is yours. Your Shepherd, the good one. Thanks be to God. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.