JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:1–21

Key Verse: 10:11

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Today’s passage contains two of the seven “I am” statements of Jesus in John’s Gospel. For this reason, it really helps us grasp the essential nature of Jesus. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Today we want to think about what this means. In these verses Jesus also challenges us to grow to be good shepherds like him. May God speak to our hearts personally through his word today.

Today’s passage is closely linked with chapter 9. In that chapter Jesus meets a man born blind. People despise and ignore the man, but Jesus’ heart goes out to him. Jesus deeply understands his sorrow and fatalism as one who’d been born blind. Jesus doesn’t just empathize with him; he helps him solve his life problem. In sharp contrast to Jesus are the Pharisees. They’re upset that the healing had taken place on a Sabbath. They despise the man born blind as a sinner, intimidate him, and when he doesn’t cooperate with their agenda, they throw him out. They could care less about him. Then Jesus goes and finds the man and plants faith in his heart. The behavior of these so-called religious leaders infuriates Jesus. So he tells a parable of a good shepherd and his sheep.

Look at verse 1. Here Jesus rebukes the Pharisees as thieves and robbers. They were religious leaders, but they didn’t really care for their people; they used their positions for their own gain and glory. To Jesus, those who climb into the sheep pen by some other way have an evil motive. In contrast, read verse 2. A good shepherd enters by the gate. He has only one purpose: to care for the sheep. So “the gate” seems to represent the right motive. Sometimes we may think we have the right motive in approaching people, but actually it’s tainted with our self-serving agenda. Jesus, on the other hand, is our good shepherd because he truly cares for us; there’s not even a hint of a selfish motive in him. Because of this, we can entrust our lives to him. But how can we incorrigible sinners ever really have the right motive in helping others? It’s when we help others in the name of Jesus (Mk9:41; Ro1:5), with Jesus’ compassion, and most of all, when we do it for Jesus’ sake, as if we were doing it for Jesus himself (Mt25:40). When we try to help others only for Jesus’ sake, we get no personal benefit, but with this genuine motive we can be faithful shepherds to the end.

Read verses 3–5. Here, “knowing his voice” is repeated three times. A good sheep listens to the voice of the shepherd. Sheep are vulnerable. They easily get scared. They have no sense of direction. They tend to wander off, following their desires. But sheep do know one thing: the voice of their shepherd. From the time they’re born, they learn to recognize their shepherd’s voice, because whenever he comes, he’s always affectionate, he always helps them find food and water, and he fights off other animals to keep them safe. Sheep sense his genuine care, so they trust him and listen to his voice. The Bible says God is our Shepherd, and we are his sheep. It’s a little bit demeaning, but it’s true. Without God’s gracious care, we all would go astray. But the point here is that we need to learn to listen to our Shepherd’s voice. We listen to his voice as we read the Bible. As we listen to his voice, we get to know him better and trust him more, and we grow in a beautiful shepherd/sheep relationship with him. Each day there are many voices vying for our attention. Above all else, may God help us grow as good sheep who listen to the voice of our good shepherd Jesus.

Read verse 3 again. A good shepherd calls his own sheep “by name.” In ancient times, all the people of a town would keep their sheep in one pen. To an outside observer the sheep would all look the same, but a shepherd would know which were his. It’s remarkable. Through shepherding them, the shepherd would get to know each sheep’s personality and character. Some would be slow, some, stubborn, some, playful, some shy. The shepherd would give each sheep an appropriate name, and each sheep would get accustomed to being called by that name. Knowing sheep by name shows the shepherd’s personal understanding and love of each one. In the same way, God our Shepherd understands and loves us each very personally. He’s the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and of all people, yet he knows each of us personally and cares for each of us dearly. David wrote of him: “You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways” (Ps139:2–3). God is not an impersonal concept. He’s not just an all-powerful and far-removed being, indifferent to us. And he never mistakes us for someone else. He knows exactly who we are—in fact, he knows all about us—yet he still loves us so much. It’s mind-boggling. Though no one seems to know or understand us, God does. We should find comfort in this, that God my Shepherd knows me personally and loves me dearly (Ps23:1–3). We also need to learn to love through understanding. One of the greatest expressions of love is going to the trouble to really understand. May God help us mature in his love as good shepherds who understand people deeply.

Read verse 4 again. This shows us that a good shepherd leads his sheep. A shepherd wouldn’t drive his sheep from behind; he would go on ahead of them, to lead them to good pasture, risking himself first. The Pharisees pushed people to obey God’s laws, but they didn’t practice what they preached (Mt23:3–4; Ro2:17–24). On the other hand, Jesus’ teachings were short, but his good examples were many. How did he lead by example? John’s Gospel illustrates. Jesus was more concerned about helping one lost person than about having a big and popular ministry for his own glory (Jn4:1–4). Jesus would always pray to depend on God, to obey God’s will, and to glorify God (Jn7:6–8,17,18). Jesus lived a holy life in obedience to God, so that those who believe in him might be truly sanctified (Jn17:19). Jesus stayed on his cross until he finished his mission (Jn19:30). Most of all, Jesus was humble. He gave up his glory and power as God’s Son to be with sinners and bring us back to his kingdom (Jn1:14). We can have confidence and joy in following Jesus because of all his good examples. May God also help us grow as good shepherds like him, who lead by example.

When the Pharisees didn’t understand what he was saying (6), Jesus said something again. Look at verses 7–8. Here he seems to be referring to the man born blind. The Pharisees had acted like thieves and robbers toward him, trying to rip him out of Jesus’ sheep pen. But the man didn’t listen to the Pharisees, even though they tried to force him. It was because he was protected by the grace and love of Jesus the gate. Read verse 9. Here Jesus extends a gracious invitation to all of us, and to all people. We may be terrible sinners. We may be nobodies in the eyes of the world. But when we come to Jesus the gate and enter through him, we are saved, and we can come in and go out, and find pasture. He keeps us safe from spiritual thieves and robbers, and he satisfies our souls. We need to learn to enter through Jesus every day, to be kept spiritually safe and to have all our needs fulfilled in him. Read verse 10. Here Jesus contrasts himself with “the thief.” The thief wants to steal, kill and destroy. This represents false religious leaders, and ultimately, the devil who steals people away from God, kills and destroys them. A good shepherd, on the other hand, has only one purpose: he wants his beloved sheep to have life, and have it to the full. He wants to see his sheep whole, healthy, content and full of joy. When we follow Jesus our good shepherd, he promises us life to the full. He doesn’t promise us wealth or us a problem-free life. But he does promise a life full of meaning, full of joy, full of purpose and full of true satisfaction. We can have such a full life, even as we live in this problem-filled world, when we live in a deep love relationship with our good shepherd Jesus.

Read verse 11. From the beginning God had a shepherd’s concern for his people. He raised Moses as their shepherd, but when he became old Moses worried that after he was gone, his people would become like sheep without a shepherd (Nu27:17). Centuries later, David the shepherd boy grew to become a shepherd of God’s people (2Sa5:2). But in fact, the history of Israel was ridden with bad shepherds. Once God rebuked them: “Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally” (Eze34:2b–4). God was talking not about literal shepherds of animals but about leaders of people. God wanted all his people, through learning of him, to grow as good shepherds, not just for their own people, but also for all the people of the world. In their selfish human nature they failed. Because of our selfishness we also fail to be good shepherds. But Jesus came to fulfill God’s hope.

Read verse 11 again. Jesus knew the Pharisees hated him so much they would kill him. But he would willingly lay down his life on the cross. And he knew why: He would shed his own blood as the Lamb of God and die, so that he might be the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and also for the sins of the whole world (Jn1:29; 1Jn2:2). He would sacrifice his own life so that we might be reunited with our Father God and have life. Later he would say, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). When he laid down his life for us, Jesus became our best friend. When we realize this truly great love of God for us in Jesus, it is like our souls wake up from being dazed and confused, and we finally find true satisfaction and rest. We can even begin to sing, “No one ever cared for me like Jesus!” Every day we need to remember the great love of our good shepherd Jesus, who laid down his life for us. So many people feel like they have no shepherd. But Jesus is the good shepherd for all human beings. More than anything else, each person needs to come to the deep realization that Jesus is my good shepherd and my best friend.

Read verse 11 again. Jesus is indirectly teaching us here how to become good shepherds for his flock. Actually, this was why he called and trained his disciples in the first place. In the end he told Simon Peter, “Do you truly love me more than these? Feed my lambs” (21:15–17). Jesus not only was a good shepherd for his disciples; he also wanted them to become good shepherds for God’s flock. He wants us, too, to grow as good shepherds for his flock.

Read verses 12–13. A hired hand enters by the gate and takes care of the sheep during ordinary times, so he looks like the shepherd. But at a time of crisis he runs away, revealing his true colors. It’s because he doesn’t want to risk his own life or sacrifice anything. In running away he reveals he is taking care of sheep for his own gain and security—for the money (1Pe5:2). In reality, he cares nothing for the sheep. Why did Jesus mention the hired hand? It was to rebuke the religious leaders, and, to help his disciples live not like hired hands but like true shepherds. Later, John wrote in one of his epistles: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1Jn3:16). We don’t like to risk ourselves for others or to lose things for others. But while serving people, if we never make any real sacrifices, if we never lose anything, we can’t be like Jesus, who laid down his life for the sheep. Though it’s hard, may God help us look at Jesus our good shepherd, overcome ourselves and sacrifice for others like he did.

Read verses 14–15. Here we learn that a good shepherd has a deep personal relationship with God. Jesus deeply understood his Father’s will. He understood his Father’s heart for sinners. Because he understood his Father’s heart, he could sacrifice himself, just like a good father sacrifices himself for his children. Good shepherds have this same personal relationship with God the Father through Jesus.

Read verse 16. A good shepherd also cares for the “other sheep.” Who are they? Here, “other sheep” refers to all the peoples of the world. At that time the Jews in their racial pride disregarded the Gentiles. But Jesus cared for the Gentiles. Jesus wanted them all to become members of his Father’s house. His crucifixion was approaching. But his was concerned with God’s will for world salvation (Isa42:6; 49:6; 56:6). Likewise, good shepherds learn God’s heart not only for their own sheep, but also for all the people of the world.

Read verses 17–18. Finally, we see that a good shepherd is a good sheep to God. God loved Jesus because Jesus chose to obey his will. In turn, Jesus obeyed God because he loved God. In this way, Jesus himself was a good sheep to God. When he was a good sheep to God, he became a good shepherd. Good shepherds are those who love God and obey God.

Today we learned that Jesus is our good shepherd. We also learned that he wants us to grow as good shepherds for his flock. May God help us especially to listen to the voice of our good shepherd Jesus.