

Misericordias Domini: Good Shepherd Jesus

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John 10:11–15

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

Of all the images of Jesus, of all the ways that Jesus Himself pictures who He is and what He does in those seven “I AM” sayings in John, of which this is one, none is more comforting, more gentle, more intimate than “good shepherd.” Without a doubt, it is kindest and gentlest picture of Jesus that we have. The good shepherd who cares for His sheep, who leads them to fresh, still water, who restores their souls, who leads them in the pathways of righteousness, who goes ahead of them through the dark valley of death, who anoints their heads with soothing oil, who prepares a lavish table even as the wolves look on, whose goodness and mercy follow them all their days. And in the end, the sheep of the good shepherd can say with confidence, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Clearly, Jesus had Psalm 23 in mind when He said “I am the good Shepherd.” He wants to be known in shepherding terms. A shepherd is one who basically lives with His flock. Dwells with them. He is, for all intents and purposes, one of the sheep. The sheep recognize their shepherd’s voice, and he knows each of his sheep by the name he gave them. He goes in front of them, leading instead of driving them. The sheep follow him because they trust him. They know he will not lead them down any destructive or dangerous path. They will follow him even where their instincts tell them not to go, like through dark valleys with hungry wolves eyeing them from the cliffs.

What a wonderful picture this is of the disciples’ relationship to Jesus. He is their good shepherd, they are the sheep of His hand and the flock that He shepherds. Even if you know nothing whatsoever about sheep and shepherding, it’s still a warm and fuzzy image. No wonder we have so many paintings of Jesus carrying a sheep on His shoulders and everyone kind of thinks to himself “that’s me.” Where would Sunday school pictures and bulletin covers be without Jesus the good Shepherd?

But as comforting as the image of Jesus the good shepherd may be, we still have to wrap our minds around the fact that He has called us a bunch of sheep, and that's not every flattering. Sheep are stubborn, stupid, self-centered, high maintenance creatures who need 24/7 shepherding or they basically die of being sheep.

My in-laws in Kansas are cattle people. I went to a Kansas state fair one year where Karen's niece and nephews were showing their project cattle. It was a lot of fun walking among stall after stall of well-groomed pampered cows. Off in the distance you could hear the noise of the sheep. That's when I discovered that sheep actually sound like a bad imitation of sheep. I also learned that cattle people try to keep as far away from the sheep people as possible. They really get no respect at all from anyone. "Oh, those are the sheep people over there."

It was like that in Jesus' day too. Shepherds were considered on the lower rungs of the social ladder. Their sheep wandered all over and had no respect for property lines and boundaries. And shepherds were always hanging out with their flocks, not exactly the sorts you'd want to invite to your next dinner party. It was shepherds who first worshipped Jesus in Bethlehem, as they were the only ones outdoors that night, keeping watch over the flocks by night.

Like it or not, we are sheep. Stubborn, straying, prone to wandering. We'll drink from every putrid pool, munch on any deadly, poisonous weed, stray off into the wilderness. Like sheep thick with wool, we fall and can't right ourselves up again. We butt heads with one another, stubbornly insisting on having things our way. Just like tracking down straying members of a congregation, shepherding involves a lot of circling the flock with the sheepdogs, chasing the strays back in. The isolated sheep is as good as dead, the very ones the predators look for. So also the straying, isolated Christian is easy pickings for the spiritual wolves.

Jesus contrasts Himself with the religious hired hand. The hired hand doesn't know or care about the sheep; he's just in it for the money. They could be anyone's sheep, rereally. He doesn't care. When the wolf comes, he flees. He has no stake in the sheep. Jesus was referring to the guardians of the Law, the religious leaders of His day who simply beat people over the head with religious rules and regulations, do this and don't do that and did nothing to guard people against the wolves of religion and that self-centered way we have to be our own gods. In fact, the hired hands use the Law to accuse and condemn you. You're sinner. You break the law. You can't possibly be a sheep of the good shepherd. You need to shape up, you need to become better sheep, you need to earn your way into flock. A hired hand would never go

running after the straying sheep; he'd just write it off as a dead asset and move on to other things.

Moses and the Law don't lay down their lives for you. Rather they demand your life from you. All of your life. But Jesus, the good shepherd, lays down his life for His sheep. Jesus is likely referring the practice of the shepherd sleeping at the opening of the sheep pen. In this way, the shepherd also comes the "door" for the sheep. You literally get to the sheep over the shepherd's dead body. Sleeping Jesus on the cross is the good shepherd laying down His life for the sheep. You are died for. Your sins are atoned for. The Law and its accusations can only get to you over Jesus' dead body.

The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. That's the major point of comparison. All of Jesus' I AM sayings have a point of comparison. When Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," He explains the point of comparison: "No one comes to the Father except through me." When Jesus says, "I am the Vine, you are the branches," He explains what that means, "Abide in me and you will be fruitful; apart from me you can do nothing." And so it is here. "I am the good shepherd." And the point of comparison is "The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

This self-sacrifice, self-giving love is what sets Jesus apart in the world of religion. Religion is full of examples to follow, paths to explore, ways to enlightenment. But there is only One who lays down His life even for those who were not following Him, for those who hated Him, yes, even for His enemies. Jesus even hinted that His flock was bigger than His disciples in their narrow of things could see or appreciate. Jesus had "other sheep" who were not of Israel's fold. He's referring to the Gentiles, the non-Israelites, ultimate to you and me. We're tucked into that little sentence too!

The good Shepherd lays down His life as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is not simply Israel's but the world's shepherd. He is not simply the Savior of the chosen few but of the inclusive many. His death on the cross, His rising from the dead, His ascension to the right hand of Majesty is His gathering of all of humanity into His humanity. And in the flesh and blood of His own humanity, Jesus takes all of humanity as one flock through death to resurrection and on to glory. Jesus isn't only a one man Israel, He is humanity reduced to one man, a second Adam, one who embodies all men through all time and makes them one flock under one shepherd.

So some might say, “Ah, so all are going to heaven because they are one flock under one Shepherd,” and the answer would, of course be “No.” In the parable of the sheep and the goats, sheep and goats were one flock under one shepherd until the close of the age and the judgment. And even separated, they still are one flock under one Shepherd, the only difference is the damned goats refuse to recognize the only Shepherd they have.

He lays down His life. He does it intentionally, voluntarily, in obedience to His Father. He has been given authority, permission to act, by the Father, to lay down His life. Jesus’ death was no accident. It was not due to weakness on His part. Someone in our Thursday morning Bible class, which is reading the Gospel according to St. John, noticed that Jesus had this knack for slipping out of the crowd and eluding capture. Time after time, they tried to lay hold of him, but Jesus slips through the crowds as though He were covered in grease. They can’t seem to lay hold of Him. Even in the garden where He was finally arrested, His simply saying the words “I AM” caused the soldiers to fall to the ground. That’s the power He had that He was refusing to use at that moment.

Before Pilate, Jesus said that if His kingdom were of this world, He could call up thousands upon thousands of angels to conduct a heavenly jihad the likes of which this world has never known. His own disciples were armed with swords. Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest. But Jesus healed the man’s ear and chided Peter to put away his sword. That’s not how the good Shepherd operates. He lays down His life for the sheep. In the end, on the cross, Jesus dies on His own terms, at the moment appointed for Him when the lambs of Jerusalem were being slaughtered for the Passover. He lays down His life; He takes it up again. He is the Lord of Death and Life. He runs the show even of His own death.

You don’t. You do not have the authority to lay down your life or to take it. You are a sheep, not the good Shepherd. But we don’t know what we’re doing anyway, and the best thing for us is that our life is in the hands of our good Shepherd who laid down His life to save us.

Perhaps it isn’t flattering to think of yourself as a sheep. But the great good news of this Good Shepherd Sunday is that sheep have a shepherd, and you have a good shepherd, who laid down His life so that you might have life in Him and dwell in His house, His flock, His green pastures, forever.

The Lord is your Shepherd, and in Him you lack nothing.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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