

To God Alone Be The Glory

Good Shepherd Sunday is one of my favorite Sundays in the whole church year. Knowing that Jesus, my Lord, my King, my Savior, takes such good care of me calms my fears like my parents used to when I was a child. Think how our Good Shepherd took us, with the sin condition we inherited at conception, and made us the special, holy children of God, lambs of the Good Shepherd. From that day we've been under the protection of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. Satan can plot and tempt and rage all he wants, but it doesn't change the fact that the Good Shepherd has rescued us from spending eternity in hell. We can find ourselves in a recession resulting from inflation, but this doesn't change the fact that the Good Shepherd supplies all we need for our bodily welfare. The war in Ukraine can go on with Russia taking land that doesn't belong to it and killing civilians and destroying infrastructure, but none of that changes the fact that the Good Shepherd made peace between His Father and us and now offers new life to everyone through Jesus.

When Jesus first spoke the words of our text, he was surrounded by a group of fellow Jews who were hostile and demanding that he tell them plainly whether or not he was the Christ, the Messiah promised to the Jews. It's too bad they were so stubborn. If they had not hardened their heart to the evidence before their eyes, they would have concluded that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of all sinners.

But did you notice how Jesus replies to the people who hated him? He's so tender with them. Doesn't he realize they are looking for a reason to stone him right then and there? Sure he does. But a distinguishing characteristic of the Good Shepherd is that he cares deeply about all people, even the ones who hate him. Right then and there, Jesus invites his enemies to become his sheep, to listen to his voice, to receive eternal life, to follow him, to do good to all, even those who hate them.

Think about that. If Jesus is inviting hardened enemies to believe in him, then how much more does he want us who have been washed clean to follow him. Through this portion of God's Word, **THE GOOD SHEPHERD CALLS FOR YOU**. He wants you **To Listen** (27a), **To Follow** (27b), and **To Trust** (28-30).

Some of you have had sheep as pets, or you have experience caring for sheep. But even if you've never seen a sheep close up, you can still understand this next point if you have had a dog as a pet. In at least one way dogs are like sheep—they know the voice of their master. When I visit the homes of people with dogs, the dogs usually bark at me. They don't know me. After a while they seem to realize, "Hey, this guy my master calls Pastor likes to pet me." Sheep are even more guarded. They have to know your voice and know you won't hurt them, in order to trust you.

Here in the western hemisphere sheep don't usually get as attached to their owners. Western shepherds don't typically put as

much effort into cultivating a relationship with their sheep. The owners help them give birth, make sure they have fresh water, shear them each spring, and send them to the mutton market. But in the eastern hemisphere, shepherds still spend most days and nights in the pastures with their sheep. Naturally the sheep learn to distinguish the voice of their shepherd from other voices. Soon they come to the shepherd whenever he calls. *Do you know what eastern shepherds do to sheep that won't listen and bend their will to the shepherd's? Some shepherds actually break one of the legs of stubborn sheep. Sounds cruel, doesn't it? But an amazing thing happens during the recovery process. The sheep becomes so dependent on the shepherd for food, water, and safety, that the sheep has a complete change of attitude toward the shepherd, and from then on the sheep **listens** when the shepherd calls. The same thing often happens to Christians who experience major setbacks. They realize how much they need the Lord for everything. So don't fret when illness or hindrance visits you. Your Good Shepherd may be seeking to awaken your sense of dependence on him. What a blessing! It may not feel like a blessing at the time, but it will turn out that way if you bend your will to his.

Our GOOD SHEPHERD CALLS FOR YOU. He wants you to **listen**. How does he call? In his Word. What does it mean to listen to Jesus? It means to focus your mind on His teachings, take them in, **trust**

them as truth, **follow** them closely. Coming to church and merely saying the words of the liturgy while we're thinking about something else, or not 'engaging with the Scripture lessons as they are being read so that we can take them to heart and be changed by them,' that's something other than listening. Granted, it's harder to pay close attention now than it used to be. Television shows and movies are so well done—in part because there's about a thousand hours of labor that goes into each hour of programming. There's no way worship can compete with entertainment. Besides, our worship services are purposefully not flashy. We are not trying to create a super fantastic emotional experience. Do you understand why? So that no one comes for purely emotional reasons, having confused their emotional response with a kind of spirituality. You're just going to have to get a good night's sleep and block out everything else for an hour and lean into the message of God's Word, as if Your Good Shepherd is Calling for You through it.

Whenever you have an opportunity to listen to God's Word, you can notice a division inside you, a spiritual battle. One part of you may jump at the opportunity to listen to the Good Shepherd's voice in the Bible. But the other part of you, the sinful part that you inherited from your parents, it gets squirrely about God's Word, doesn't want to **trust** it as truth, doesn't like giving God even five minutes a day for a devotion, certainly doesn't like giving God an hour or two every week for worship and Bible study. When Jesus

says, ²⁷*My sheep listen to my voice*, he's insinuating that when we don't listen (or don't care to listen), we are actually sinning against him. At the same time he's also teaching, "When you crunch down that sinful attitude so you do listen to my voice, this is evidence that you are one of my sheep. I love you. Let's move forward together as Shepherd and sheep to the green pastures and the quiet waters where I can take good care of your soul."

Isn't that amazing? Jesus not only knows how to point out our sins so we repent and fight against them, he also knows that as his sheep we really do love him. Yes, he loved us first. But is it not awesome that our Good Shepherd knows us? He knows when we get into our cars to drive to work or to school or to errands. He watches over us the whole way. Think how many times you have driven your car somewhere and not gotten into an accident! *He knows how much stress we can take. He arranges godly ways for us to de-stress-ify. Sometimes this means resting up from a nasty cold or the flu or a more serious illness or a job loss. *He knows we worry about our loved ones, and he takes good care of our loved ones anyway.

Our Good Shepherd also calls for us to **follow** him (27b). Picture the Good Shepherd standing out in front of us, calling to us by name. "Marianna, Trevor, Jill, Freddy, come on, I'm leading you to a pasture with more blessings." Now picture some of the sheep saying things

like, "Naaa, I like it here better," or "Over there the grass is greener; I wanna go there instead," or "Frankly I'm just too tired; I'm going to stay right here and take a naaaap." Do you ever do that? Refuse to **follow**? How kind then that the loving Savior comes right over to us and says through our conscience or through a fellow believer or sometimes even through a disapproving unbeliever, "Don't you think you ought to do what is right?"

*Sometimes we get up grudgingly and **follow** our Savior, obeying what he says, but not with a happy heart. *And then when we look around at where Jesus has led us, wow!—it IS a better pasture. And if we have a conscience, we go to Jesus, sad because we were reluctant and joyful because he got us to **follow** him anyway. And since we know he forgives us, we tell him, "I'll be more willing to **follow** you the next time you call me. I promise to obey you."

It can take a few years, sometimes a few decades, but eventually we learn to **trust** (28-30) our Lord. And why shouldn't we? He says, ²⁸*"I give them eternal life."* Did you catch how carefully he worded that? See, our Lord doesn't want us to think that it's because we **follow** him so well, or because we **listen** to his Word so faithfully, this is the reason we have eternal life. If that were the case, Jesus would have said, "I let them work for eternal life, and when they really prove that they're sincere, then I finally write their names in the Book of Life." No, our Good Shepherd comes to sheep that love

to wander and says, “I have a very special present for you, my beloved sheep. I want you to be with me forever. I laid down my life for you to make this happen. The wicked wolf came to steal you and devour you, to make you one of his own. But instead of you dying in his mouth, **I** died in your place. If I had been any other shepherd, I would have stayed dead. But I came back to life. By dying and rising, I have delivered a crushing blow to the wicked wolf. Now the only way he can get you is if you decide to not to listen when I call to you. I am your Good Shepherd. I want you to **trust** me because I’m leading you on the path of eternal life.”

A while back I read in *Rolling Stone* about an organization which was trying to radicalize Christian young people to fight the culture war. Now maybe you’re wondering about journalistic bias; *Rolling Stone* is hardly a friend of Christianity. But the writer (Jeff Sharlet) spent most of the article reporting what he saw and heard. And it’s pretty scary what he saw and heard. We not only have culture pulling our young people away from God through music and clothing and sexuality and drugs, we have radical Christian groups trying to pull our young people away from God by substituting an angry, ticked-off savior, who supposedly cares more about taking back American society than rescuing souls through the forgiveness of sins. Shall we worry?

Jesus says about his sheep, ²⁸“*They shall*

never perish.” The original Greek is actually much stronger. “They most certainly will not ever perish.” See? We can **trust** the Good Shepherd. He says, ²⁸“*No one can snatch them out of my hand.*” He rose from the dead so he could keep this promise. And we can warn each other to stay in the middle, with the Holy Scriptures, and not be radical in any direction.

As true God, Jesus is powerful enough to protect us. But he wants us to be so sure of this that he lets us in on one of God’s secrets: great God the Father is watching over us too! ²⁹*My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.*

Jesus says one more thing here that sounds a little confusing: ³⁰*I and the Father are one.* The original Greek makes it clear that Jesus is not saying “I and the Father are one and the same person.” The word for “one” is neuter. So Jesus is saying, “I and the Father are the same thing.” In other words, “We’re both God. I will protect you. The Father will protect you. We work together because we are one God.”

How blessed we are! Our Good Shepherd wants us to listen to him so we understand how huge our sins are. But then we can also know that God’s love for us is huger. We can follow him, trust him, obey him. He’s going to bless us in just the right way and at just the right time. Our shepherd is the Good Shepherd!