

"The Good Shepherd Knows His Sheep"

There's certainly much more than a momentary feeling that forms the loving relationship between the Good Shepherd Jesus and his sheep. In our text Jesus speaks of this relationship as a living, vibrant relationship. He is speaking of the closeness between him and his followers when he says: "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." "The Good Shepherd Knows His Sheep." He knows them as his own because he's called them. His sheep hear his voice and follow him.

You can see why the Bible describes people as being like sheep. We are like lost sheep. We have strayed from the Lord. Our character by birth is such that we do not look for the right things but end up choosing what is wrong. We were lost and hopeless. And we couldn't find our way back home. Sin had blinded us to God and to the way to heaven. We were separated from him and his life. Like sheep, there's no way that we could ever save ourselves, either. But we sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" because Jesus was a real Shepherd, a Friend to you. Someone has said that a true friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you! A young boy defined a friend as "somebody who sticks to you after he has found you out." That's who Jesus, Your Good Shepherd is – he knows you all too well. Knows your faults and weaknesses, knows how petty and hurtful you can be and He still loves you, He's still willing to "stick" with you, He wants to do what's best for you!

So the Shepherd Jesus went looking for us to bring us back to God. That was part of a shepherd's job – not only to feed and water the sheep but also to protect them and go after them when they strayed. He would often place himself in danger to protect the sheep. The Good Shepherd Jesus Christ acted out of love to save us. It's important to see that Jesus is describing what he chose to do for us and he's saying that this act of love on his part is to be the basis of our new relationship with God. To emphasize that this is so, the Savior mentions what he did 3 times in this Gospel lesson. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." "I lay down my life for the sheep." "I lay it down of my own accord." By his own choice, Jesus willingly gave up his entire being in order to win back our life.

This is what makes him a one-of-a-kind shepherd, the Good Shepherd. Years ago a shepherd knew that he was in a dangerous occupation and he could expect to encounter some ferocious animals from time to time. But no shepherd started shepherding with the expectation that he would actually lose his life protecting the sheep. That wasn't part of the job description. Jesus is a one-of-a-kind Good Shepherd because he became our shepherd knowing that he would have to lay down his life to save the life of the sheep. He knew that he would have to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sin in order to remove our sin and win us back to God. He knew that he would have to pay the price of death required to save us from death. This had been predicted for centuries by prophets like Isaiah: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." We have been brought back into God's family but that happened at great cost to the Good Shepherd who "gave himself as a ransom for all men." While visiting a friend, hymnwriter Albert Reitz read the following motto hanging on a wall: "The Lamb is My Shepherd." Then he realized a smudge on his glasses distorted the second word of the motto. Actually it read: "The Lord is My Shepherd." (Psalm 23) The mistaken reading was correct, too! The Lord who guides his sheep and leads His sheep also offered himself as the sacrifice for the sins of the sheep!

Look at your Good Shepherd – he won your life! See the love of your Good Shepherd – he sacrificed himself for your life! When you are confronted by the uncertainties of life, by doubts, fears and death itself, this is the voice you are to remember: "I have laid down my life so that

you can live with me!" See his love – there's only one Good Shepherd. He knows you and he knows what you needed the most. That's why he gave himself for you. And how he continues to gently guide and even carry his children in his arms! Give yourself to him and follow. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." "I lay down my life for the sheep." He calls you now by name to follow him.

Listen instead to your Good Shepherd as he speaks to you in His Word! As he speaks to us in His Word he makes us his followers and he keeps us as his followers. We still need to listen. And we still need to obey. In this chapter of John's Gospel the Savior says that there are two characteristics which distinguish those who are Jesus' sheep: "My sheep listen to my voice; and they follow me." Jesus' sheep, those who are God's children, listen to God's Word and they follow in obedience to His Word.

In his 1533 sermon on this text Martin Luther observed: "The Lord God so created sheep that among all the animals on earth there is none with better, sharper hearing. There may be a thousand sheep in a flock and yet, each lamb recognizes its mother's voice and runs after her. Its hearing is extremely acute and perceptive." The reason a sheep would follow a shepherd was because the sheep recognized the shepherd's voice. The sheep recognized the shepherd's voice because they heard it so often! They had become trained to respond to one individual's voice. There's application here for you and me. Being able to distinguish between a good voice and a bad voice doesn't come naturally for us. We like to think of ourselves as intelligent people who always make good choices but easily forget how soon we can be led astray! We even speak about the value of experience but often don't realize this is true as well with our contact with the Word and with God! It's only through regular contact with the Good Shepherd's voice in the Word that we will be able to tell more and more what is good and what is best for us. In other words, we can't afford to have just a casual contact with him and His Word. We need to be reading His Word and thinking about His Word every day. Then we will live in keeping with his will for us. What voice is being heard today in our homes?

Remember that this is what also characterizes the follower of Jesus – his sheep follow him in obedience. As his sheep listen to his voice daily, the Good Shepherd works in the hearts of his sheep so that they follow him. This is the blessing of regularly listening to his voice. As we listen, he is at work in our hearts moving us to follow him.

A young man sent a love letter to his girlfriend: "Darling, I'll climb the highest mountain, sail the widest ocean, cross the hottest desert just to see you. P.S. – I'll be over Saturday night if it doesn't rain." We may chuckle but it's true – we've all made empty promises and received many, too! But Jesus is never like that. Always dependable, always faithful, he laid down his life for us.

Won't you trust Him to lead you in the right way? We're his true followers if we listen and obey! Jesus would have us faithfully follow and wait on Him, as a Christian expressed it years ago: "Each delay is perfectly fine for we are safe within the hands of God." Postponements are reasons to pray rather than grow anxious, impatient or annoyed. Those "delays" of God – when He makes us wait – are opportunities for His sheep to build those hard-to-acquire qualities of humility, patience, serenity and strength. As God gently leads you along the path of life He has chosen for you, you can always trust Him to lead you in the way that is eternally blessed!