

## **Jesus, the Good Shepherd**

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus says that He has sheep “*which are not in this fold*,” (John 10:16). This does not mean, “Sheep that are outside the Christian Church.” Some people want this passage to mean that Christ accepts many people of many different religions, even if they do not believe in Him. But Christ is very clear that “*no one comes to the Father but by Me*,” (John 14:6).

We are also sometimes tempted to think that God will receive into heaven those people who were good in this life, even without faith. If we think this way, we are being tempted to judge with our eyes who is good and who is not. We might think that righteousness is attainable by human effort. What it amounts to, in the end, is that we think that people in general (and us in particular) are basically good and loving. Surely God would not bar them from heaven’s gates.

But we must affirm with Scripture who are all sheep that have strayed. We are all wanderers from the paths our Shepherd wants us to follow. There are no “good people” apart from faith in Christ.

When Christ talked about “sheep not of this fold,” He was talking about the Gentiles. Christ did not want to limit His saving work for only one nation on earth. For a time, His earthly ministry was mainly restricted to His own people, the Jews. Yet it was His plan all along that those men who were once not of the sheepfold of Israel, would be included as His own.

You also, regardless of race or nationality, are included among God’s people because of faith in Christ. Neither pride in good works nor pride in who your fathers were counts before Christ. All are sinful, yet all sins have been atoned for on Calvary by the Good Shepherd.

Another way that men sometimes try to centre Christianity upon good works instead of Christ is in the “hired man.” Christ spoke of one who is not the true shepherd. Instead, the hired man serves the sheep in and of himself. He attracts people to the church by his personality, or by his appearance of goodness. He tries to draw people into the church by drawing them to himself.

A true shepherd draws men to Christ, and only Christ. A true shepherd brings the Good Shepherd’s service to them. The Good Shepherd desires to serve men with His grace and mercy. He wants to pour out redemption and forgiveness. So you know a true shepherd because he points you away from himself and points you toward Christ and His works for you.

The question is never whether my shepherd is good enough. That is to judge self-righteously, although that is the way sinful human nature works. “Is that man worthy of my time? Is he good enough for me? If not, I will go somewhere else where there is a pastor who will deserve my presence in the pew.” See how it revolves around the goodness of the individual who passes judgment. It is all about me, and who is worthy of me.

But the real question should be whether a pastor delivers the Good Shepherd. Does He give you Christ?

How easily we can be led astray by a “hired man” who is full of personality and appeal. We adore the shepherds who appear loving, and those who do not seem loving to us we dislike. The sinfulness of us sheep means we have a roaming nature that leads us to follow other shepherds based upon their person, rather than upon the Word.

We should follow the shepherd for the sake of the Word. Even if he is the most miserable toad as a person, yet he preaches Christ, we should thank God for putting such a man in our midst. We should follow a shepherd because he points us to Christ, whom straying sheep need so badly.

We all were straying sheep from the beginning. We feel that it is fun to explore, to try new things, to find new and exciting pastures. In spiritual terms, this means to trespass, which is to go where it is forbidden to go. The law says, “Do not covet,” and we say, “Coveting, hey? That sounds interesting.” The law says, “Do not bear false witness,” and we say, “Well, how much false witness can I get away with?” We love to stray.

Because of our straying, we were in the mouth of the satanic lion. His fierce power and terrifying jaws are too powerful for any of us sheep. How could a sheep overpower a lion? So we were doomed to have him tear us apart, lost forever by our own fault, because we wandered into the lion’s den.

To free us, Christ thrust Himself into the lion’s mouth. He let Satan and death devour Him, but He was too much for them. The devil’s teeth and jaws are now broken, and death’s sting has been removed.

He, the perfect Lamb without blemish, became the sacrificial Lamb. He sacrificed Himself in our place, so that we could go free.

These are the powerful words that Christ says to us today. “*The Good Shepherd lays down His life,*” (John 10:11). This is the defining moment for our Shepherd. That is what makes Him better than any other shepherd. A shepherd on earth that we call a pastor may be faithful and point us to Christ. A pastor may even sacrifice of himself in different ways. But the Good Shepherd who saved us is Christ the Lord. The one who rescued us from the satanic lion’s mouth is the Lamb of God.

Now He continues to defend us against the prowling lion, who would like nothing better than to snatch us up again. Christ strikes him with His staff, the Word, and feeds us from the pleasant pastures of the Sacrament of the Altar.

May we never abuse His grace by using it as an excuse to wander. How many sheep over many centuries have said, “He has saved me, so I do not need to do what is right”? What a terrible attitude, and how incompatible with faith! Using forgiveness as an excuse, multitudes of sheep have treated the Good Shepherd as if He were not their shepherd at all, and flung themselves back into the jaws of the lion

The Spirit protect us from this. He will surely work to create works in us, to avoid trespassing from our Shepherd’s path, and to sacrifice of ourselves, since He has sacrificed far more for us.