

John 10:11-18 – What Does It Mean to be Good?

Good is such a vague term. Somebody shoves some new food in front of us and we taste it. It is “good” but that does not necessarily mean we want to eat it again. We say that a movie or book was “good”, but it is a comparative term. It is not great but slightly better than expected or than the last one we saw or read. And then there are the lies. How do I look in this outfit? You look good. Where do you want to eat? Thai food? Good. We say good when we mean not good. It is part of the game of words.

God plays no game of words. To call Jesus the “good” shepherd is not a game of words. We do not define this goodness but Christ defines it for us. Real love is sacrificial. His love for us is tried and tested. Christ is our Good Shepherd because His love is authentic – it is tested by the betrayal of one of His own, by the suffering of the cross, by the lonely death He died for you and me, and by the days He lay in the grave so that you and I might rise with Him to new and everlasting life.

Christ is the Good Shepherd not because He is better than the shepherds who went before Him or better than the hirelings who love not the sheep (though certainly He was). No, Christ is the Good Shepherd because He dies for the sheep. This is not a claim of a name but a job description which He fulfills perfectly. He defines “good” by a holy life, a life-giving death, and rising to eternal life. I am the Good Shepherd ... I lay down my life for My sheep ...willingly.

I am the Good Shepherd, says Jesus. Our Lord does not shepherd for fun or profit. He shepherds His sheep for their great need. They are victims of evil prey, duped by fake shepherds, left to their own to find pasture and water, and waiting for death. Jesus comes not for Himself but for us, not for His purpose but for our need. Remember how Jesus gazed upon the crowd and saw them as they were – victims, soon to be scattered, easy prey for the predator ... like sheep without a shepherd. For this reason He has come.

Jesus is not simply a better shepherd than others, though, indeed, it is true that He is. No, His goodness is defined by His life given in exchange for ours. He defines goodness by standing between us and our enemies of sin and death, bearing the full brunt of their weight and pain, dying the death we should have died, and rising to fulfill His promise of eternal, green pastures.

Our Lord does not run from death but runs to it when His sheep can be saved by nothing less. He has no death wish but a life wish for you and me, His sheep. When the hirelings and all who went before Him shrunk from the price of loving the sheep, Christ loves His sheep to death. Yes, you and me.

Jesus says this. I lay down My life for My sheep. He is not comparatively good but good in word and deed. His death proves that His concern is His sheep – you and me. To call Jesus the Good Shepherd is to point to the cross where His goodness is defined and we discover what it means for Him to love us. He is not a shepherd of sentiment, He does not speak for picturesque imagery, and He does not identify Himself as the Good Shepherd for idyllic pastoral setting. No He is the Good Shepherd because of His love of the sheep for whom He died.

He is the Good Shepherd and there is no other. We do not esteem Him good but He shows us what it means to be good. As my dad lay dying, he lamented to me that he was not a better father. At the very same time I was wondering inside if I was as good a father as he was. We make these comparisons all the time. Children and even adults are prone to define goodness comparatively or as the one who gives us what we want or like. But Jesus is compared to no one and He comes to give us what we need.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He does what no one else can or will do – He dies for His sheep. This He says not to comfort you or to make you feel better about things but to save you. He is the Good Shepherd to save us from the punishment our rebellion deserves, to forgive our sins, and to bestow on us the life death can no longer steal – a gift more than we deserve. So today when we come to appreciate Jesus the Good Shepherd we are acknowledging that there is salvation in Him and in no other and that He is good because He dies for us, His sheep.

Love is one thing – it is sacrificial and it bears the full cost of loving. It is the Good Shepherd who gives His life in exchange for the sheep. That is why we call Him our Good Shepherd – so we rejoice in Him who dies for worthless sheep, who rescues the lone and the lost, who leads us to green pasture, who gives us the still quiet waters, and who sets us a table in the presence of our enemies. God's goodness is found not on how easy or full or long or rich this life is but in the life our Lord offers in exchange for us. His life for His sheep. That is why He is our Good Shepherd.