



TELL THE WORLD: NURTURE AND RECLAIMING

June 20, 2015

Sermon:
“Feed My Sheep”

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, especially in the western world, little is known of the role of a shepherd and perhaps even less is known of the characteristics of sheep. If one asks the average person about what they know about sheep, they would probably say that sheep taste good. But as one searches throughout scripture, one will find that, yes, there are a few references to the eating of sheep’s meat, but there are also numerous references to the behavior of sheep and shepherds and the relationships between the two.

The care and concern that a shepherd has and demonstrates for his/her flock is a depiction of the care and concern that Jesus has and demonstrated toward His people. Jesus has also demonstrated an example of the care and attention that the church should have and exhibit toward the members of the “flock,” the church of God.

Commissioned by Christ

In John chapter twenty-one, after the apostle Peter, along with his fellow disciples, had resigned to the notion that he had disqualified himself from the privilege of being a worker for Christ, he returned to his old vocation, that of catching fish. He had come to the place in life that he thought that if he couldn’t do what he really wanted to do, at least he could do what he knew how to do. Sometimes what we used to do is not what Christ has called us for.

Often, what we used to do is a back-up plan for when we become discouraged in our walk and ministry for Christ. Sometimes we don’t travel too far from what we used to do just in case we will need to go back there some day. But as we read the story in John chapter twenty-one, Jesus revisits Peter where he used to be, doing what he used to do, and reminds him of what he was called to both be and do.

Notice the focus that Jesus gives as He reminds Peter of his calling and reaffirms him in his ministry:

“When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Feed My lambs.’ He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’ And he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed My sheep. Most assuredly, I say to you, ‘when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.’ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, ‘Follow Me’” (John 21:15-19).¹

Jesus clearly affirms Peter as a shepherd whose primary responsibility is to care for the Lord’s sheep. As important as the commission to evangelize is, Peter’s role was to shepherd the sheep. Jesus said, “‘Feed my sheep.’”

We Are His Sheep

There are reasons that Jesus likens His people to sheep. Sheep and livestock farming had played a major role in the lives of God's people from the very beginning. Shepherding was among the occupation of earth's first family, and it continued among God's people until the time of Christ. They had a good understanding of the role of shepherds and the behavioral characteristics of sheep. Research today helps the layman to gain an insight into some of the unique features of sheep behavior:²

- Sheep are among the first animals to have been domesticated.
- They are among the most defenseless of all animals, and this makes them very vulnerable to predators.
- Sheep are naturally fearful and are not comfortable in darkened terrain or with new objects and people.
- Sheep's only defense against predators is to flock together. This is a behavior that is learned from a young age and therefore makes them very dependent on one another and on their shepherds.
- Sheep are social creatures and crave company. They are followers by nature, so much so that they will follow one another even into danger and destruction. Sheep should be allowed to follow and not driven as with cattle.³
- A sheep that is alone is either lost or sick; either way, it needs the attention of the shepherd.
- Healthy lambs are active and feed well. Healthy sheep always have a good appetite and will eat even when they are not hungry.

As we reflect on these basic characteristics of sheep, it makes it easier for us to understand why Jesus commissioned Peter and the church to care for and to feed His flock, the people of His pasture. God's people are defenseless and vulnerable. Predators are always on the lookout for lost, lonely, straying or sick sheep. They will look for the sheep that appears to be disconnected from the others and will try to lure them further away from the flock. When they are separated from the flock, it is then that they become meat for the prowling predators. It is indeed the lost and lonely sheep that the Lord is particularly concerned about. It is those who are on the periphery of the sheep pen—the church—who need to be brought closer to the flock. The prophet Isaiah states that “all we like sheep have gone astray” (53:6).

Sheep Need Good Shepherds

The vulnerability of the sheep defines the role of the shepherd. It is said that Jesus was moved with compassion as He observed the people wondering about aimlessly like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). The Apostle Paul, following the example of Jesus, demonstrated pastoral care for the flock of God and commissioned the pastors of the church in Ephesus saying, “Guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders. I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28, 29, NLT).

Paul uses pastoral language to describe both the people of God and the role of the leaders of the church; a leader here is anyone who has a responsibility for another. Notice that the people of God are the flock and the leaders of the church are the shepherds; and the shepherds' role is to keep watch over the flock which God has placed under their care.

Who has God placed under our care? It could be the young ones in our children's Sabbath School class; it could be the group to whom we give Bible studies; as parent, it could be those whom we are privileged to nurture and train to be citizens of society and heaven. We

are all responsible for someone, whether it be our own siblings or our peers who look to us for a Christian example. Who has God placed under our care?

God has placed people under our care because we are stewards. Stewards care for their master's property as if the property were their own. Stewards are "under-shepherds" who know the master's sheep as if the sheep were their own. The scriptures point out that there are good under-shepherds and there are bad under-shepherds.

Jesus, in John 10:11-15, states that a good shepherd will care for the sheep to the extent that when danger threatens he/she will risk their own well-being for the safety of the sheep, but the bad shepherd, who is working only for the money, will run away in the face of danger because they do not really care about the sheep.

There are quality characteristics for a good shepherd. Psalm 23, the "Shepherd's Psalm", identifies some of these qualities:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need.

He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life,

And I will live in the house of the Lord forever" (NLT).

Notice how the psalmist, David, outlines the characteristics of a good shepherd:

- A good shepherd is personal. He/she gives personal attention to the sheep. Sheep are individual, even though they belong to a flock, and so each sheep can comfortably say that they have a shepherd ("The Lord is *My* Shepherd . . .")

- A good shepherd is sustaining. He/she provides everything that the sheep will need because they give attention to the needs of the sheep. The sheep are never in want.

- A good shepherd provides the best. The grass is always green, the water is always peacefully refreshing, and the food is always in abundance.

- A good shepherd protects. He/she is equipped to protect the sheep. The psalmist recognises that the rod and staff are put to good use.

- A good shepherd is reassuring. The shepherd walks alongside the sheep, especially when they are going through difficult and challenging terrain; they never walk alone.

Jesus Is the Good Shepherd

Unashamedly, and without apology, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). He is the Good Shepherd because:

- He was willing to lay down His life for His sheep. By the mere fact that He was willing to lay down His life suggests that He takes ownership of the sheep. The sheep do not belong to somebody else; they belong to Jesus. He is not a hireling.

- He knows the sheep by name and the sheep know Him. One can get to know someone only by spending time with them and giving them one's attention. How touched are we when someone remembers our name? The good shepherd does not merely remember the names of the sheep; he knows the names of the sheep. "Jesus knows us individually, and is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He knows us all by name. He knows the very house in which we live, the name of each occupant. He has at times given directions to His servants to go to a certain street in a certain city, to such a house, to find one of His sheep."⁴

●Every soul is as fully known to Jesus as if he were the only one for whom the Savior died. The distress of every one touches His heart. The cry for aid reaches His ear. He came to draw all men unto Himself. He bids them, “Follow Me,” and His Spirit moves upon their hearts to draw them to come to Him.

●He searches for the lost, even though it might be only one. This accountability for the sheep was somewhat expected from all shepherds. In Luke 15:4 Jesus raises the question as to, “‘What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?’ It was obviously expected for the shepherd to not be content with anything less than the full quota of sheep. He/she must have invested time and resources in the nurture and care of each sheep, so why would they not naturally be concerned for the loss of one?”

●He gently leads the sheep home. Luke 15:5-6 states, “‘When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’” Sheep are safe only when they are with the other members of the flock. Sheep need community! It is in the community that they are nurtured and cared for. The good shepherd builds a strong community so that the sheep feel at home.

Concern for the Lost

Jesus’ mission was to seek and to save the lost sheep. Concerning Zacchaeus, the tax collector, “‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost’” (Luke 19:9, 10). He clearly states in Matthew 15:24 that He “‘was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’”

In Matthew chapter ten, when He first sent out His twelve disciples to minister, He commanded them to give particular attention to the lost sheep. He said to them, “‘These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: “‘Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’” (Matt. 10:5, 6).

Christ’s concern for the lost and straying sheep must become our concern. The heart of Christ is a heart for the lost, and every disciple of Christ demonstrates the same care and attention that Jesus demonstrated for the lost and straying. Christ’s love for people must become our love for people. We neglect our duty as shepherds of the flock when all sheep are not accounted for. We must not be satisfied with ninety-nine when it is possible to have one hundred. Our first and primary responsibility is to the lost sheep of God.

The command to “Feed My Lambs” is a command that impacts eternity. “The Sovereign Lord is coming in power. He will rule with a powerful arm. See, he brings his reward with him as he comes. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young” (Isa. 40:10, 11, NLT). “He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand” (Ps. 95:7).

Jesus promised in John 10:16 that the day is coming when He will gather all His sheep together into one fold. Then the search for lost sheep will be over. All His sheep will hear His voice. There will be one flock and one shepherd. The book of Revelation, continuing the theme, reminds us that Jesus, the Lamb, will shepherd His flock and lead them to springs of living waters (Rev. 7:17). The sheep of God will be with their Shepherd, and they are His forever.

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references in this sermon are from the *New King James Version of the Bible*.

² [Http://www.sheep101.info/201/behavior.html](http://www.sheep101.info/201/behavior.html).

³ [Http://www.sksheep.com/documents/Ex_Understanding_Sheep_Behaviour.pdf](http://www.sksheep.com/documents/Ex_Understanding_Sheep_Behaviour.pdf).

⁴ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 479.