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Sermon Summary #30

The Good Shepherd and his Love for “his own” John 10:1-21

As far as the world was concerned, and based on its standards by which “success” is measured, “Steve” had every reason to be miserable. After all, he wasn’t particularly attractive physically speaking. He wasn’t gifted athletically. He was of average intelligence and held down a job that paid him just enough to get by.

Worse still, at least from the world’s point of view, “Steve” was all alone. His wife had divorced him without having biblical grounds for doing so. She had since moved to another state with their two kids. “Steve” didn’t have many friends. His phone rarely rang and the mailman never brought him anything but bills. He spent most evenings at home, alone.

And yet “Steve” was anything but miserable. In fact, he was remarkably happy, filled with joy and a robust zeal for life. He was always willing to give of his time and energy to help others and seemed to want nothing in return. All he cared about was the opportunity to do for others what they were unable to do for themselves.

Is “Steve” just make believe? Is his happiness a façade designed to mask and conceal a deep-seated misery? Or is it really possible to live life like that? “Steve’s” joy was genuine and his secret was simple: he was intimately involved in a spiritual love affair with the Good Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Christ. Steve was more fulfilled, more balanced, and more authentic than most who had more possessions, more popularity, and more power than he did. It was solely because he had come to understand and experience the blessings of fellowship and friendship with Jesus. He knew and felt that, ultimately, only Jesus Christ could do for his life, his soul, his spirit what other people thought only other people could do; or what they thought money could do; or what they thought fame and influence could do.

To put it simply, using the words from the title to this sermon, ***“Steve” had an unshakeable awareness of and a deep delight in what it means to be one of Christ’s very “own”.***

“Steve’s” secret was really no secret at all. It’s right there in front of us in the words of John 10. There is in the relationship of the Shepherd to his sheep everything you need for fullness of joy and life. Even if today your life has reached a crescendo of catastrophic proportions, the Great Shepherd of the sheep can provide you with life that is abundant and joyful and meaningful beyond what most people could only dream about. No matter where you are today, who you are today, no matter what is to come your way tomorrow, the Shepherd of your soul is willing able to supply you with everything necessary for the truly abundant life. It’s all wrapped up in your identity as one of the Good Shepherd’s “own” sheep.

There are two ways of approaching John 10. One is by providing you with a detailed, verse-by-verse explanation of what Jesus is saying, and the other is a more panoramic approach: standing back, as it were, and drinking in the overall impact of the shepherd’s relationship with his sheep. Today we will take the second of these two approaches.

But before we do, let’s be honest about how God’s people are portrayed. ***We are sheep!*** There are several characteristics of sheep that need to be kept in mind.

First, sheep are largely helpless creatures. They lack any defensive weapons to fight off attackers. Shepherds often refer to “cast-down” sheep. They, like turtles, can’t turn over right side up once they find themselves on their backs, making them especially vulnerable to predators.

Second, being somewhat helpless, sheep are incredibly dependent on the shepherd. They can do very little for themselves.

Third, they are notoriously stupid! If one sheep jumps over some non-existent obstacle, it's not unusual for all the others to follow suit! If one wades through a mud puddle, the others follow along. Sheep can be extremely exasperating.

We, too, are helpless, dependent, often more than a little stupid, and exasperating. Praise God that we have a shepherd who loves us anyway!

So, we are now ready to look at John 10 in terms of three groups of people and what the shepherd can do them. You may only fit into one category, or perhaps even in all three.

Why the Good Shepherd is also Great

(1) This shepherd, Jesus Christ, is for those who feel alone and unnoticed (vv. 1-5).

I suspect that many of you have no idea what it's like to feel all alone and unnoticed. For the majority of your life you have been the center of attention. You've always had friends who sought out your company and came to you for advice. But others of you know precisely what I mean when I speak of being alone and unnoticed.

Let's be clear about one thing. It's ok to not want to feel alone and unnoticed. You shouldn't feel ashamed that you long to be known and cared for and loved. Perhaps you find yourself getting mad and frustrated at yourself, maybe even screaming at your own soul, saying: "Stop it! Get over it! Don't be so selfish and so concerned with your needs."

No! There's nothing sinful about longing for community, the longing to be loved. That's the way God made us precisely so that we can glorify him for his being everything we need. In the case of Jesus Christ, the shepherd of our souls, this is revealed in how he loves us and leads us.

First, he loves us! No matter how large the crowd may be, some people still feel isolated, alone, and unnoticed. They see themselves as an insignificant part of an undifferentiated mass. "People may be present, but they aren't there for me. Does anyone really know who I am? Do I matter at all? Does anyone truly care? And if they don't care, why should God?"

Some of you probably feel this way even in a large gathering like this morning. Several hundred people simultaneously talking to God in prayer, singing praises to God in worship, while you wonder: "How can he possibly know about me when so many others more important than myself are demanding his attention at the same time? How can he possibly love me and meet my needs with so many others competing for his attention?"

But Jesus, being the good and great shepherd that he is, knows all of his sheep **by name**. He knows them personally and intimately and, yes, simultaneously! "He calls his own sheep by name" (v. 3).

Look again closely at vv. 3, 14-15.

"To him [i.e., to the shepherd of the sheep, Jesus] the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . . I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:3, 14-15).

The image here in vv. 1-5 is of a walled courtyard attached to a village house. It has a gate and a watchman on duty where a number of flocks could be kept together. In the morning, the various shepherds gather, each sounding out their own peculiar calls. Jesus speaks and his sheep immediately respond, recognizing the voice of their shepherd. He calls each one "by name," perhaps: "Hey long-ears! White nose, come here! Shorty, it's me!" The sheep know him. They are assured that he cares personally for them. And he cares personally for you. If another shepherd should try to lure them away, or try to imitate the voice of Jesus, they don't listen.

In vv. 14-15 Jesus says that our knowledge of him and his knowledge of us is like the knowledge shared by the Father and the Son! Our intimacy with Jesus is just like his intimacy with God the Father!

“He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40:11).

This means, among other things, that you don’t have to leave here today and ever feel unloved again. Did you notice how Jesus describes you? Twice he refers to you, his sheep, as **“his own”** (vv. 3-4). Consider how Jesus will speak of this same relationship later on in John 13.

We read in John 13:1 that “having loved his own **who were in the world**, he loved them to the end.” What’s the point of describing his disciples as being “in the world”? It seems so obvious, so trite. Of course they are “in the world.” Where else could they be? Surely, something more is intended by this phrase.

I believe it is **John’s way of magnifying the love of Christ by highlighting their unloveliness**. Jesus didn’t wait for them to experience final glorification in heaven before he loved them. He didn’t suspend his love for them on their being perfect, sinless, spotless, pure, and rid of all those annoying habits and personality quirks that would otherwise appear to make them unfit for being loved.

Jesus loved his own in the midst of their weakness and immaturity and ignorance and brokenness! And he loves you in the midst of yours as well! As his eyes glanced around the room, he saw men whose failures were obvious, yet he loved them. There was *Matthew* who probably still struggled with greed, who perhaps still lamented leaving such a high paying job to follow Jesus. Then there was *Andrew*, possibly dealing with lingering resentment against his brother Peter for being so prominent among the disciples and having been chosen to be part of the inner circle. And I hardly need to comment on *Peter’s* repeated failures and impulsive actions. He knew them all. He knew everything about them. He knew things deep in their souls that not even they had discovered: their secret sins, their lust, greed, pride, selfish ambition, etc.

They were still in the world and the world, to a certain extent, was still in them. But he still loved them. Don’t miss this point. It wasn’t in anticipation of their final deliverance from sin and corruption that he loved them. He didn’t blink at their sin and weakness and frailty and say, “Well, one day they’ll be loveable. One day they’ll finally live up to my expectations. One day they’ll deserve my affection.” No, he loved them then, while they were yet in the world, while they were yet weak and immature and broken and unwilling to stand by him in his hour of greatest need.

Some of you struggle to believe that God truly loves you **now**. Are you inclined to think that he will only love you once you’ve cleaned your house and received a substantial pay increase at work and overcome all your sinful habits and your pride and your doubts and your bitterness? Jesus knew their sinful fantasies and he knows yours as well. He knew their arrogant ambition, their secret sins, their lust and fears and anxiety, and he knows yours as well. But he kept on loving them while they were yet in the world, and he will keep on loving you as long as you are in the world!

Observe also in v. 1 that “he loved them **to the end**.” The NIV renders this phrase, “he showed them the full extent of his love,” with emphasis on love in its highest intensity. But I believe the word “end” more likely refers to his impending death, hence he loved them **“to his last breath.”** Thus he loved them **“all the way to the cross.”** In spite of all that he was about to endure, he never stopped loving them.

In any case, the point is that **he never grew weary** in his love for them. **His love never wavered, never weakened, never waned.** When he most needed to **be** loved, he loved. With every reason in the world not to love them, at least from a human perspective, he loved them all the way to the end: **unendingly, unceasingly, incessantly, without pause or hesitation or a second thought.**

Think of it. Peter is about to deny him three times. All the others, except for John, are about to run off into the night, frightened beyond words, leaving him to face his accusers alone. Dare I say that you and I would have acted in the same way? And yet his love for them (and for us) continued, unchanged and undiminished, all the way to the end.

Again in v. 1, notice how those whom he loved are described: **“his own.”** The same language is used here that we’ve just encountered in John 10. His own peculiar and personal possession. They are “his own” because they were given to him by his Father and he will redeem them by his blood (see John 6:37-39; 10:29; 17:2). Although he is the sovereign proprietor over all things, he has a special affection for “his own.”

I find it significant that it doesn't say he loved "his disciples" or "his followers" or "believers" or "his sheep" or even "his friends." They and we are here described as "his own"!

You who don't feel you belong to anyone else, you are "his own"! You who live alone and doubt if anyone cares, you are "his own"! You who live in fear that you may never achieve anything of significance in this life, you who think of yourselves as complete failures, you are "his own"! You who often wonder aloud, "Why would anyone ever want me?" you are "his own"!

The Creator of heaven and earth regards you as "his own"! You may find yourself saying, "I'm not much in the eyes of others, but when it comes to Jesus, I'm 'his own'"!

Whether you are in the office or at school or down in the dumps or over the hill or driving a car or eating your breakfast, you are now and ever will be "his own"! You may hate your job, or be wondering if your spouse will ever love you the way you hoped they would, but nothing changes the fact that you are now and ever will be "his own"!

You may never read your name in the local newspaper or hold office in the church, but you are now and ever will be "his own"! I have no way of providing you with a guarantee that your physical and financial and marital circumstances will ever change, but I can guarantee you now and forever that if you believe in Jesus you are "his own"!

Were ever more precious and endearing words spoken? Was there ever a more glorious privilege, a more exalted position, a more intimate relationship? Now, let's return to John 10 and the second way in which the Shepherd's love for his sheep is seen.

Second, he leads us! Jesus not only knows us personally and intimately, he not only loves us as "his own," but he also speaks to us in a voice that is immediately recognizable. This is how he leads us. At the end of John 10:3 we see that he "leads them out." In v. 4, "he goes before them, and the sheep follow him."

Hearing God's voice is essential to any truly personal relationship. Fellowship and intimacy are impossible without communication. *Mute affection is a contradiction in terms.* He speaks to us primarily in and through his written Word. Do you realize that the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is speaking to you today, personally and intimately? He is doing it through the very words you see on the pages of your Bible. Seeing and reading Scripture is not only a supernatural experience, it is an expression of the shepherd's voice being heard by the sheep!

Unlike shepherds in the modern, western world who drive their sheep, often using a sheep dog to keep them under control, shepherds in the ancient near east lead their flocks, their voice alone providing the guidance necessary. Thus we read in Psalm 23 that as our shepherd "he leads" us beside still waters and "he leads" us in paths of righteousness (Ps. 23:2b, 3b).

God isn't surprised by your trials. He doesn't just follow along behind you mopping up the messes of your life. He goes before you, he leads you, stepping out ahead and setting a straight path. Joni Eareckson Tada put it this way:

"God is more than an emergency phone number. He's more than a clean-up crew with hammer and nails and glue. He's more than an insurance adjuster with a sharp pencil and a big checkbook. He's out in front of you . . . preparing, planning, going before, leading and guiding you every step of the way" (100).

And what happens when we do wander off the path and fail to follow? What happens when sin causes us to swerve off the path of his leadership?

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost' (Luke 15:3-6).

(2) This shepherd, Jesus Christ, is for those who feel unhappy and unfulfilled in life (v. 10).

In view of the metaphor of Shepherd and sheep, “abundant” life means a well-fed life, a joyful life, a life in which we are guarded and provided for by the shepherd; a life that lacks nothing that is essential.

You know what happens when you turn away from the Shepherd in an effort to find joy in another. At first, it seems to work. There’s a rush, a thrill, excitement. But then it begins to fade. You feel hollow inside. Guilt and shame overtake your soul. It is only when we seek after and follow the Shepherd, Jesus, that we can experience a life that is exuberant and joy-filled and free.

This life that Jesus says he came to give us “*abundantly*” isn’t a promise of material wealth, but one of inner contentment that money, whether a lot or a little, can’t touch (Phil. 4:13). This isn’t a promise of perpetual physical health, but of spiritual and emotional happiness that the ravages of disease cannot diminish (2 Cor. 12:9ff.). This isn’t a promise of always faithful friends, but of joyous fellowship with Jesus that no loneliness or betrayal or abandonment can destroy. This isn’t a promise of earthly fame, but of a calm assurance that no word or deed in service of the savior will go unrewarded. This isn’t a promise of appreciation and acceptance by others, but of the peace that comes from knowing God loves you so much that he is always singing over you.

Our friend “Steve” whose life as I described it would be considered by many as a disaster, a mere existence devoid of joy and purpose, was living a truly “abundant” life. He knew that no matter what anyone else might say to him or think of him, he was one of the Shepherd’s “own” sheep. That is what shaped his identity. That is what empowered him every day. And he wouldn’t trade in that life for all the material abundance in the world!

(3) This Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is for those who feel guilty and condemned and without hope (vv. 11-18).

If you are still burdened by guilt and wracked with shame, listen to what this shepherd does for you. He dies for you (v. 11)! Unlike the hired hand who runs away at the first sign of danger, this shepherd sacrifices his life for his sheep. All shepherds are willing to risk themselves on behalf of their sheep, beating back a marauding bear or wolf (cf. 1 Sam. 17:34-36). But it is never the intention of the shepherd to die for his sheep, for that would leave them exposed and unprotected. But Jesus does not merely risk his life for us, he lays it down voluntarily. His death isn’t accidental, but planned.

And ***his death is a substitutionary sacrifice, in the place of his sheep.*** He doesn’t die for us by jumping into a raging river and yelling: “See how much I love you!” That doesn’t do anyone any good. Rather, the sheep are in mortal danger and in their defense the shepherd loses his life so they might live! His death is redemptive and atoning and brings eternal life.

His death is not that of a martyr who sacrifices his life for a social or political cause. I can still recall the numerous Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire to protest the war in Viet Nam back in the 1960’s. Numerous others over time have killed themselves in an effort to make a political statement or perhaps motivate their friends to make sacrifices for a good cause. That isn’t what Jesus did. As the good shepherd he puts himself on the cross in the place of his sheep so that the judgment and punishment they deserved to suffer is poured out on him.

We read in vv. 12-16 that when caring for the flock isn’t too difficult or dangerous or demanding, the hired hand is adequate. But ultimately, he’s in it for the pay, not for the people. Such is the false shepherd whose only interest in the sheep is to fleece them!

We see in vv. 17-18 that the death of Jesus was not a slip-up, an accident, an unforeseen misstep or even something that the Father forced on his unwilling and reluctant Son. Jesus died of his own will so that he might rise again and bring us life.

There are many today who reject the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement because it seems to them that this entails envisioning the Father as an abusive bully who compels his Son, Jesus, to sacrifice himself for sinners like you and me. Penal substitutionary atonement asserts that Jesus voluntarily and from love offered up himself as a substitute in the place of hell-deserving sinners to endure and exhaust in himself the divine wrath and judgment that we deserved to suffer as the penalty for our sin.

But listen to what Jesus says about it. “I lay down my life that I may take it up again” (v. 17b). Again in v. 18 he says, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” The Father didn’t ask the Son to do anything that Jesus, the Son, didn’t first want to do of his own accord. It was in his hands to offer himself on the cross, and it was in his hands to receive back his life by being raised from the dead.

Yes, it was a “charge” from the Father (v. 18b). But it was a charge or a request that he alone had authority either to embrace or to reject.

And to what end? Why did he do this? Was it to secure for you and me the forgiveness of sins? Yes. Was it so that we might be adopted into the family of God as sons and daughters? Yes. Was it so that we might be justified or declared righteous in the sight of God? Yes. But none of those glorious realities was the ultimate aim in Christ’s death for his sheep. Salvation is not primarily forgiveness or adoption or justification. Salvation is primarily a relationship of intimacy and affection and joy and fellowship with God in which we enjoy and delight in him forever. We had to be forgiven to *get God* because the guilt of our sin kept us away from him. We had to be adopted to *get God* because we were otherwise alienated from him and under his wrath. We had to be justified to *get God* because we lacked a righteousness that was acceptable to him.

But the ultimate aim and goal of it all was that we might *get God*, that we might be restored to a relationship of love and intimacy and unimaginable joy in his presence as we behold his beauty. The apostle Peter said it best in 1 Peter 3:18 – “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”

And how did the people in Jesus’ day respond to this? The answer is given in John 10:19-21. “Many of them said, ‘He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?’ Others said, ‘These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”

Conclusion

So, what do *you* say? Jesus has given us only two options: either he is demonized and insane, hardly worthy of our attention, or he is God, the Good Shepherd who loves his own and leads his own and gives them abundant life and removes their guilt and restores their hope and brings them to God. There is no neutral ground on which you can stand. There is no neutral fortress where you can hide. There is no third option that allows you not to make a choice.

“But Sam. How can I know that I am one of his sheep? How can I know if I am one of his own?” This is how you know. You don’t ask to read the Book of Life to see if your name is written down. You don’t pry into God’s sovereign decrees. You listen. And if, when Jesus, the Good Shepherd speaks, you hear the voice of God and you come in simple faith and trust, you are his. You are one of his own, now and forever. So, will you come?