

John 10:11-18 *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."*

What makes the Good Shepherd Good?

1. He cares about the sheep
2. He cares about the other sheep

In the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, a group of U.S. Army Rangers in World War II France are given the mission of finding and saving Private Ryan, the only son his mother has left.

The Rangers find Private Ryan, but their captain is mortally wounded in the process. As Private Ryan kneels beside the dying captain, the captain grabs Ryan by his shirt and whispers to him before he dies, "Earn this!" (Norman Burger, *Forward in Christ*, March 2013, p. 7)

Every Good Friday we meditate on Jesus' seven words from the cross. What if there was an eighth word? What if that eighth word from Jesus – his dying words – was "Earn this"? How would you like to carry that constant burden of having to earn this? Would you want to get up every morning worried whether your life is good enough? Would you like to live your life worried if God is disgusted or, at least, disappointed with you? Would you call Jesus the Good Shepherd, if you had to earn his love or earn his forgiveness?

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. So many places in Scripture picture our Lord as a Good Shepherd and so it is fitting that we look at that image of our Savior and ask the question, "What makes the Good Shepherd good?"

First, he is a shepherd. In order to be a shepherd, he needs sheep. We are his sheep, helpless and weak, wandering in the wilderness of this world. We like to think that we are strong and in control. Especially when we are younger, we do foolish and dangerous things because we think we are invincible. We overestimate how strong we are and we often fall to temptation. But sooner or later we come to realize how weak we really are.

But we are not only weak. We begin our life in rebellion against our Good Shepherd. We had no true love of God or desire to obey his will. There was no natural bond of affection between us. We stray from him into the muck, like a dumb sheep. We become easy prey for the spiritual wolves who want to devour our souls.

So what makes the Good Shepherd good? He lays down his life for these weak, wayward sheep. *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.* If you owned a business and that business caught fire, you would probably do what you could to try to save your business. You may even put your life at risk, because this is your business. You put your heart and soul into it. You have invested countless hours to make it succeed. It's your livelihood that puts bacon on the stove. But if you are just a minimum wage worker in that business, you wouldn't worry about the business at all. You would just get yourself to safety.

The sheep are the Good Shepherd's business. He cares what happens to them and he will fight the wolf, the hyena, the bear or whatever would attack the sheep. He will put himself in harm's way to keep his sheep safe.

Picture that shepherd standing with staff and club in hand fighting the wolf as it attacks the sheep. But what good would he do the sheep, if he lays down his life fighting for them? Then the sheep would be completely exposed and vulnerable.

What makes the Good Shepherd good is that he put himself in the sheep's place. That is how great his love is. His love is so great that was sacrificed in place of the sheep. He carried your sin and your hell to the cross and laid down his life for you. Willingly. *The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.* It's interesting that the regimental motto of the Army Rangers is *Sua Sponte*, Latin for "of their own accord." Rangers volunteer to be Rangers knowing the risks. No real Army Ranger would

ever say about his sacrifice for someone, “Earn this.” He would make the sacrifice freely because that is what an Army Ranger does. (Burger)

And that’s what makes the Good Shepherd good. He lays down his life willingly for the sheep. And he doesn’t stop there. His love is so great that he reached down to the depths of our sinfulness. He reached into the slimy, murky pit of our death and hell to pull us out. He rescued us, while we were still his enemies. His love rescued you to make you his sheep and to hold you safe in his arms.

You see, his love is so great that he not only dies for us, he wants to have a close, personal relationship with us. *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.* The word for “know” is more than just knowledge, it’s experience, relationship. It’s the word used to describe the relation of a husband and wife. It’s like when you play with Play-doh. You stick your hands in it and got it under your finger nails. You formed it and felt its texture. You smelled it and you would always recognize that smell.

That’s how Jesus came to know us. He didn’t just stick a big toe in our world. He experienced what it was like to be hungry and tired. He saw widows cry. He felt pain and death. He put his hands on lepers and healed them. He felt our sin and guilt. The Bible actually says that he became sin for us. He knows your life. He knows you.

What makes the Good Shepherd good is that he knows his sheep. He pays attention to the special condition of every sheep in his flock. He knows their needs and helps them. He knows their ailments and heals them. He knows their faults and leads them in paths of righteousness. He knows their dangers and protects them. He knows their weakness and upholds them.

Picture a flock of sheep following their shepherd on a grassy hillside. They are calm, feeding slowly. They stay close because they know they are safe with him. Then picture a wolf attacks. How do the sheep react? You can picture them running, kicking, screaming sheep screams. How do we react to anything that would get between us and our Good Shepherd? Do we see false teaching and worldly philosophies as the danger they are? Do we react with terror at the temptations that would lead away from our Good Shepherd? Do we immediately run to him in prayer and spend time in his Word in order to stay as close to him as we can? What makes our Good Shepherd good is that he cares about his sheep, lays down his life for the sheep and has a personal relationship with the sheep. May we strive to also have a relationship with him.

And with the other sheep. *I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.* Who are these other sheep? You. In Judea of the First Century, stone enclosures were built in fields. These had four walls with one entrance in the middle of one wall. A shepherd could take his sheep into one of them for the night, where it would be easier to keep them safe from predators. But Jesus talks about other sheep outside the pen. That is, he is talking about the Gentiles who would join Jewish believers in one flock, the Holy Christian Church.

They, too, will listen to his voice and follow him. We may see no difference between Christians and non-Christians. They live in the same neighborhoods, work the same jobs and go to the same schools. They have mortgages and cars. They look the same. But there is one big difference. The Christians listen to the Shepherd’s voice. They believe his Word. Because of that, they are confident of the Shepherd’s care and they trust his promises.

In the creed, we confess our faith in one holy Christian Church. There is only one flock, one Church of believers. It’s invisible because it is made up of only those who believe in Jesus and we can’t see faith in the heart. But it is real and true. It is Christians all over the world, of all different languages and backgrounds, who listen to and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd. We know there are still other sheep that need to be gathered into Jesus’ flock. That’s why we support missions in our church budget. That’s why so many gave so generously to the churches in Ukraine.

We give to missions because our Good Shepherd is so good. What makes him so good is that he cares about his sheep, even laying down his life for them, and he cares about the other sheep. May we care about them, too.