

## **“What Makes People Good?”**

**John 10:11-18**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor  
Smoke Rise Baptist Church  
Stone Mountain, Georgia  
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Have you ever seen a real, honest-to-goodness shepherd tending his flock? Unless you have traveled abroad, I doubt it. There aren't many roads you can travel in America that will take you by a hillside with a shepherd on it.

Just the opposite is true in Israel and other mid-eastern countries. It is not uncommon to see shepherds as you travel there.

It was most appropriate that I saw a shepherd when I visited Bethlehem last summer. Looking out over the hillside near the place Jesus was born, I saw a shepherd tending his flock. I don't know if the Bethlehem tourism commission paid him to be there, but it certainly made for some good pictures.

Shepherds are a prominent part of our religious heritage. Abraham was a keeper of great flocks. Moses was tending his father-in-law's flock when God called him into special service. David was a shepherd boy when Samuel selected him to be the second King of Israel.

It is no surprise, then, that Jesus referred to a shepherd to reveal his identity and mission. His audience would relate to that image, especially when he said that he was the “good shepherd.” They knew all about bad shepherds who did not know them, much less care about them. They were all too familiar with shepherds, described by Ezekiel, as driven by unbridled greed, addicted to power and blinded by their own ambition.

“Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered all over the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth and no one searched for them or looked for them.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says, ‘I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths and it will no longer be food for them’ ” Ezekiel 34: 2-6, 10.

What did Jesus mean, however, when he said, in contrast to Ezekiel's words, that he was the “good shepherd?” What made him good? Why did he want to be good? Who helped him to be good? I would like for us to address these questions in our time together today and even add another to them. Are we more like Jesus or the people that Ezekiel described?

**What made Jesus the “good shepherd”?** Based upon this text, he was compassionate, courageous and loyal. To put it another way, he cared for people, stood up to evil and did not abandon them when they needed him most.

Being a shepherd was a dangerous job. There were no shortages of enemies to deal with because sheep were so vulnerable. They were defenseless animals that had no sense of direction or danger.

When threatened, many shepherds would run away, leaving their sheep to die or be stolen. A loving and responsible shepherd would not do so. He protected his sheep at all cost. He also nurtured and cared for them so they could live long and productive lives.

Jesus wanted to be that good shepherd for his neighbors and friends. This was why he walked in their shoes, knew their names, faced their struggles, used his influence to make life better for them and did not run away when threatened.

He did this at great cost. Risks were taken. Sacrifices were made. Personal desires were set aside. Temptation was overcome, all for the sake of others.

“Let this cup pass from me,” he prayed the night of his betrayal and arrest, “nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.” I don’t think this was the first time he voiced this prayer. All along his journey he had to decide if he was going to honor God and be faithful to his divine mission or abandon it for an easier life.

In recent months, we have witnessed far too many people abandoning the needs of others for an easier life. It’s been disappointing if not appalling and disgusting. Exit packages numbering in the millions of dollars have been taken by CEOs of companies days away from filing bankruptcy and laying off hundreds of employees. The words of Jesus and Ezekiel are still relevant, aren’t they? The need for good shepherds has never been greater in my lifetime. How grateful I am for Jesus’ example.

**Why did Jesus want to be the “good shepherd”?** He knew how much the people needed him. They had no other voice that would speak on their behalf and no advocate that would plead their case before the power brokers. They needed him and he knew it. This was the time and place where he could use his talents and resources to make the world better and he was determined to do it.

In his heart, he knew this was his mission and the reason the Father “sent” him, a favorite word of John’s. It became his passion and fed his spirit in ways that nothing or no one else could. Speaking truth to power, confronting injustice and using his authority for the common good fulfilled him.

**Who helped him to be good?** The One who sent him to this world empowered him. It was his Father’s loving presence, encouraging spirit and quiet approval that motivated and empowered him.

**Are you more like Jesus or the leaders about which Ezekiel wrote?** Perhaps this question can best be answered by asking another one. What do you need to **lay down** for the sake of a relationship?

What is the theme that runs throughout this passage? It is Jesus’ willingness to make sacrifices to help others. Listen to how many references there are to this in our text.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd **lays** down his life for his sheep. 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** my life down for the sheep. For this reason, the Father loves me because I **lay** my life down in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I **lay** it down of my own accord. I have the power to **lay** it down and the power to take it up again” John 10:11, 14-15, 17-18.

Let me ask that question again. What do you need to **lay down** for the sake of a relationship? Is it your pride, ego or desire to be in control? Is it bad memories, hurt feelings or the need to cast blame? Is it envy, a temper or an addiction?

What will happen and who will suffer if you don’t lay it down? What will happen to your marriage, your family, that special friendship or your job? What could happen if you laid it down?

How can you do as Jesus did and make sacrifices on behalf of others? This is certainly not easy. How did he do it? I believe he relied upon his Father. He sought His will and His power and so can you. The same One that helped him will help you.

I love the last part of our text. Speaking of his life, Jesus said, “I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again” John 10:18a.

I believe you and I, with God’s help, have the power to do whatever is necessary to help someone else, especially someone dear to us. Will you do it? Will you be as compassionate, courageous and loyal as Jesus? **Will you be someone’s real, honest-to-goodness “good shepherd” this week?**