

John 10:11-18 The Good Shepherd

Some of you know that I am in the process of buying the little house that I have been renting for the last 2 1/2 years. Many of you have been through this experience and know some of its procedures and implications. Those of you who have not may yet someday.

One of the requirements is a down payment. A down payment is a commitment to go through with the purchase until it is completed. It has in common with a tithe that it represents the time and energy, the resources and ingenuity, the sweat, the tears, sometimes the blood, in short, the life of the person that went into making it.

Now an offering, is the acknowledgment that every good thing comes from God and that our lives are a precious gift, and that we belong to and have dedicated our lives to God. A down payment means the willingness to be responsible for the care of the property.

When I was renting and something went wrong, I just called the management company and they sent someone to fix the problem. When I become the owner, it will be my responsibility to make repairs at my expense, and to see that things are done right.

Part of what that means is knowledge about the little details. I have paid more attention to the condition of things since I have been considering becoming its owner.

Shepherding

Let me speak for a moment about the shepherding imagery found here in John's gospel, and also in the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd," and in Isaiah 53. "All like sheep have gone astray . . .," and in Matthew's gospel in the parable about the shepherd who left 99 sheep to rescue one, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

There is obviously a parabolic intent here, that is, it is an illustration. No one believes that Jesus was a shepherd, he was a carpenter, nor any of his disciples, some of them were fisherman. Nor does anyone claim that shepherding is the only way to understand the relation between God and human beings. We also find imagery from politics and economics, and law, and family; God is a king, a merchant who redeems, a judge, a parent, etc.

This illustration can work even for those of us who are not farmers and do not raise sheep and are not as close to it as Jesus and his hearers were. It illustrates the relationship between one who is responsible for the care of others and the ones for whom they are responsible.

Two Emphases

There are two emphases in our text to which I would like to draw attention. Both are concerned with God's credibility as the source of salvation for human beings. The first is that the Good Shepherd, acting on God's behalf, has "laid down his life for the sheep." The second is that he, Jesus, and the sheep, know one another, and are not merely acquainted, but know each other well.

Sacrifice

The first emphasis tells us that Jesus has "laid down" his life for his sheep. That is to say, has become both a living and a dying sacrifice. The shepherd is a living sacrifice because other pursuits are given up for the sake of taking care of the sheep. Time and energy are spent. Harm is sometimes suffered, or at least the risk of harm. The shepherd is also a dying sacrifice because in the case of Jesus, it came to that.

That is the way a good shepherd behaves, like the secret service for the president, a good shepherd is willing to take a bullet for his sheep. David, who *was* a shepherd, spoke of dangers from lions and bears, and there were also bandits, and danger from exposer to the elements, that shepherds endure for the safety of the sheep. Jesus has done this for his disciples. In the theological sense, God has done this for us. Sacrifice is God's way of life.

Knowledge

The second emphasis is about relationships. Jesus says that he knows his sheep, and that his sheep know him. This kind of knowledge is not primarily factual, although one can not completely eliminate factual ways of knowing from consideration.

Instead, this is relational knowledge. Jesus knew his disciples like we know our family and friends; not merely what they looked and sounded like, but also their personality and character, a kind of knowledge only possible in long hours spent together.

Baptists have often spoken of "regeneration," to distinguish between knowledge *about* God and Jesus and a personal relationship *with* God through Jesus.

We claim to have this kind of relationship with Jesus. It is personal. The spiritual life itself acknowledges this personal relationship and offers ways to seek and engage it; worship, prayer, the study of the scriptures, service to others, and Christian fellowship, the development of Christian character.

The point of all this is that God is invested in us. There has been a great "more than a down payment" made. for God has paid in full, and a weighty commitment to be responsible for our well being, in this life and for eternity.

And we are known. The idea of God's knowledge of us can be taken in a negative way and then it can be very intimidating. Nothing escapes God's notice. One can't put anything over on God. But it is not negative here. God knows everything and has accepted us, has made the sacrifice and is invested in our salvation. At Easter we celebrate God's great expression of love to us because it does not lead to our destruction but to salvation instead.

Implications - Love

Since we are reading from the Gospel of John, it is right for us to speak of the implications, that Jesus is a Good Shepherd, in the terms John uses, primarily that of unselfish love. "I give to you a new command, that you love one another." "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend." "For God so loved the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son . . ." And from the first epistle, "God is Love."

What it means to love each other as God has loved us *can* be thought of as unique to each different relationship, but there are some general statements we can make.

Love must be authentic, a concern for the well-being of another without the intervening complication of undue selfishness. Love must be honest. Voluntary.

Love must be compassionate and kind. If you have heard that from me before, be patient, learning often comes through repetition. It is well to remember that the idea of God as compassionate and kind is a relatively new one, and even after 2,500 years or so of its proclamation, it has never been fully learned, we still need to say it and hear it over and over again.

Love must be ready to forgive. It must not demand its own way, (I know, this is Paul's language, not John's). And it must seek fairness and be applied to everyone.

Love must be grounded in God's love for us, demonstrated through Christ who is the Good Shepherd, who is invested in our well-being, has laid down his life for us, a sacrifice, who knows us through and through, and who has accepted us each one as we are.

Jesus says that his sheep will trust his guidance and follow his example. Such love is the example.

Isaiah writes, "We all like sheep have gone astray. . . ." We might also say, "We all, like sheep, have been gathered by the good Shepherd, to whom owe our lives, both now and forever, and to whom we give thanksgiving and praise for this wonderful grace.

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