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Grace, mercy, and peace to all of you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've got to do a real obvious check right at the beginning here. In the Bible, very often sheep are not sheep. Sheep are people. God has to have some way to describe the relationship between Him and us. It's not equal to equals. God does not love you as another God. He loves you as a human that He created. So one of the ways He can try to help you to understand that relationship between you and God is this image. And it's all over the Bible. A shepherd and a sheep. So we got to get this. I guess, we've got to be careful that our minds don't just wander out into the green pastures. Yes, there is this image where, yes, there's the still waters and the green pastures and God is taking care of us. But it's much more than just that. It's a deeper relationship. God's relationship to you is like a Shepherd protecting his sheep from the wolf also.

So one of the closest things we might have today is if you have pets that you have loved. I know not everybody is a pet person so it doesn't work for all but most of you have probably had a pet in your life that you've loved more than just an animal. You treated this pet like part of the family. So it's something like that kind of a relationship that you would do a lot for this pet. You're not raising this pet to take him to market or fleece him or something like this. So we got to keep trying to understand, "What is this relationship then God has to us like a Shepherd to a sheep?"

Well, David, when He was a younger man, was a shepherd so he knew this. He knew that some of his sheep were like family to him. They weren't just animals that He was raising for the market. They were animals He cared about. He loved. So when David really screws up and takes Bathsheba, even though she is married to her husband Uriah who is off to war, and has Uriah killed, Nathan comes to him and what kind of a story does He tell David? A story about a sheep! Do you remember? Nathan says, "There was this poor man who had one lamb and He loved this lamb like one of his own children. And the lamb ate from his hand and ate at his table and was part of the family. And then the rich man, when He gets a guest and he needs to feed his guest, he doesn't take one of his own sheep. He comes and steals the lamb from the poor man. Like taking one of his family members. And David, because he knows the relationship between a shepherd and sheep and because he gets it, he gets so angry and says that man deserves to die. The guy that stole the sheep.

And then Nathan says, "David, you're the man! You're the man! You are the one that took Uriah's wife." I'm just trying to impress on you this relationship. We have to understand this is not raising sheep for market. It's raising sheep for the kingdom. Our Shepherd cares about us so much as sheep that He was willing to become a lamb, one of us, a sheep as one of us, and to then lay down his life for yours. So that's got to be point one. Understanding this very close relationship of a Shepherd to a sheep.

Now then, we move into our first verse. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." That does not mean "good" like we're out in the green pastures and, "Oh the birds are singing and the shepherd is playing on his harp a tune and, oh, it's just paradise." It can mean that. But that's not the biggest meaning when He says I'm the Good Shepherd. In English, it would be better to say, "I am the right Shepherd," or "I'm the true Shepherd." I'm the one who actually owns the sheep, in other words. What He's trying to do is not just tell you how nice and kind He is, but to tell you He's the right one and all the hired hands are the wrong ones. That's the point. He is the good and right one. Everyone else is not. They don't own the sheep like He does.

Well, I need to be more clear to you. No one else owns you except the right Shepherd. Everyone else that wants to act like they own you and know what's best for you—they don't cuz they're not the true Shepherd. There's only one true Shepherd. So let me add another Old Testament story, if you bear with me, to show what He means that He's the right one. This is a very familiar story. I can tell it real quickly and you'll remember. King Solomon was the wisest man that ever lived before Jesus. And to show his wisdom we get this story of when two Moms come to him and they both claim that this baby is their baby. During the night they both had babies. One of the women—her baby died—and she went and took her baby and

switched it with the other mom's baby. So when she woke up in the morning her baby is dead. But she says, "Wait a minute, this is not my son." So they go to King Solomon to figure it out. And if you remember, in his great wisdom, He says, "Well, let's cut the baby in half. We'll give half to each mom." And what does He know? Only one of these is the true mom. There's only one real true mom. Only one good mom if we use the language of John 10. And so the bad mom, who's not the true mom, says, "Okay, go ahead." But the real mom says, "No, no, give it to her." She lays down her own self to protect her baby because she's the real mom. That's what the real true Shepherd does. All the other ones that act like they're caring for you, they run away when the wolf comes. But the true Shepherd, the good one, says, "I'll lay down my life to protect my sheep."

One more way I want to drive this home. I put in the sermon insert a little picture of the temple. This is being told in the temple--John 10. So we're presuming they're in the temple. And in the middle of the temple there are these 15 steps in a semicircle that go up to the main door, the main gate, the Nicanor Gate, these big brass doors at the time of Herod. So Jesus, right before our lesson today, says, "I am the gate. I am the gate." They're right there. They're seeing this gate. They're thinking the gate into the temple. He is the only way into the temple of God. Into the kingdom of God. Going through that gate. And Jesus is the gate and right when you get in there—guess what's there? The altar where the sacrifices are placed.

So putting this all together. There is only one true Shepherd. There is only one true gate and that's Jesus. And when you come through, Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the Sheep. I'm the sacrifice." So all of this is to tell you and me that if you're not with the real true Shepherd, then where are you? You are lost! You are lost. We have got to stop pretending that there are other gates somewhere and that there are other Shepherds somewhere. There are not. There's only one. So if you have a friend or a family member who does not know where to go, where the gate is, does not know the Good Shepherd, the real true right Shepherd—then they are lost.

And we're going to talk about—if they are lost we can't be hired hands who run away and say, "Oh well. Well, they're just sheep." Now remember, He's comparing himself to these others, hired hands. Which maybe I should even just slow down and say, "Of course, a hired hand is a term for someone—you pay them to take care of the sheep. You hire them to be your hands." So Jesus says hired hands don't own the Sheep. So when they see the wolf coming they run away and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. Now our goal, as we're going to get to in a minute, is to be good hired hands. We want to be hands of Jesus that don't run away. But He says a lot of hired hands run away when the wolf comes. So John chapter 9 we had an example. This man that Jesus healed, who was blind—Jesus healed him and what did the shepherds, the religious leaders, do with him? They said, "Forget him. We don't care about him." They cast him out of the synagogue. So again, here's an example of someone who's supposed to be a shepherd treating the sheep like they're just cheap. They're expendable. We can lose them. It doesn't matter.

In Ezekiel we got the same thing. God is saying, "I have to be the shepherd," because the ones that are supposed to be the shepherds are not taking care of the sheep. They're taking advantage of them. They're fleecing all the sheep. So this is an example of bad hired hands.

Now this is actually one of the biggest points I want to make to you right now, in this spot of the sermon. We want to be hands of Jesus that do not run away when the wolf is attacking our friends and our family. We do not want to run away and protect our own hides or protect our own reputations or say, "Well, if I get in the middle of it they may not like me. They might get offended by me. People might think I'm some kind of fanatic." We cannot do that. Sheep are not cheap. These are human souls. We are not talking about sheep for market. We're talking about sheep for the kingdom of God. There's only one gate. There's only one Shepherd. And we're going to lay down our lives to protect them.

So let me give you some examples. Our friend or our family member, someone we love and care about, is not going to church. This obviously is a big one because it's happening all the time today, all over the place. Church attendance is plummeting. So we've got a friend or family member—we care about them. We see the wolf is attacking them. The devil is

attacking them saying, "You don't need church. You don't get anything out of it. You can talk to God anywhere." The wolf is attacking. Now are we going to be hands of Jesus that want to protect them from the wolf and lay down our own selves even if it means they might get frustrated with us? Even if it means they may not like us? Or they get offended? Are we going to be willing to lay down ourselves to protect them from the wolf? Or are we going to do what is often our greatest temptation? Run away? Run away?! And say, "Well, they're not my sheep. Oh well, they're lost. Nothing I can do about that. I guess they're never coming back."

Do you see how the devil works on us? He wants us to be afraid to lay down ourselves like Jesus has laid down himself for you and me. That's exactly what Jesus did. The wolf was attacking us and it cost Him His very life. He laid down his life to protect you.

How about another instance? We see this is one of the biggest in our day right now in 2024. The wolf is attacking by the beliefs of our culture. The wolf is tearing God's word apart by the entire cultural move for abortion, for all the LGBT, the transgender. The wolf is attacking our children. And the temptation is to run away and say, "Well, they're not my sheep. Well, I can't do anything about it. Well, I guess they're lost. I don't want to offend them. They may not like me if I say something." But sheep are never cheap! These are human souls. Will we lay down our lives as Jesus has laid down his life to get in front of the wolf and protect them? We've got to. We can't run away and hide.

Now to drive this home I want to use an image Jesus uses to show you again you are not just some sheep for the market. You are a sheep for the kingdom of God. How does He explain this? He says, "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." So do you see what image now He's introduced in with sheep and Shepherd? He's given us another image—dad and son. Now we know that image. Dad and son or mom and daughter or mom and son or dad and daughter. We know that moms and dads aren't going to say, "Oh well," if the wolf attacks their children. They're going to say, "I'll lay down my life for my child, for my son or my daughter. That's the relationship we're talking about. That's how Jesus knows you, as a father knows a son.

So just think about if it's your mom or your dad. Will you just say, "Oh well, I guess they're lost?" Sheep are cheap? No big deal? If it's your son or your daughter, will you just run away and say, "Well, I can't do anything? Or I don't want to upset them?" If it's your brother or your sister, of course you wouldn't! For family you're always going to be willing to lay down your life. So that's what Jesus is teaching us. For the whole family of God, for our Brothers and Sisters in Christ, for all those we love and care about! Jesus knows you as a father knows his son and He lays down his life as a father would lay down his life for his son. He lays down his life for us so that we can then lay down our lives for one another.

Finally, I'd like to bring that all together in one. This image is not just an image. For instance, in the Psalms, it says to God, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock." This is not just an image. It's a reality. This is a flock. This is a group of people who are part of the one flock of God, the one Church of God, under the one Shepherd, who is the one gate into eternal life. So we've got to be careful we don't live in the realm of metaphor here. We're in the realm of reality. And when it says my sheep hear my voice, we're hearing his voice in his holy word.

And so my last point was to make a little plea to you for why we make such a big deal about the liturgy. In the liturgy we're hearing together the voice of our Shepherd. The liturgy keeps us in the word of God and doesn't drift us off into our own thoughts. So I put in the bulletin all the examples, when we go through a Divine Service, how often we're hearing the voice of our Shepherd. Together we're hearing it. We're hearing Jesus. As we just sang a little bit ago, "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God." We're hearing his voice over and over again. We're hearing his voice in the words of institution, "This is my body. This is my blood." We're hearing His voice in the benediction, "The Lord bless you and keep." We heard His voice many times in Psalm 23 today, "The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want." So we're always coming to hear that voice together. One flock under the one Shepherd. And none of us are cheap. None of us are



expendable. None of us are for the market. We are all for the kingdom. And Jesus loves you so much He lays down his life for you.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.