

And every time we fail, we go back the Good Shepherd, *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"* (Jn 1:29). We pray, "Forgive me, Lord Jesus." And he does; he already has. *"The blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from every sin"* (1 Jn 1:7). In love, God continually calls us back to him—confessing our sin, trusting in Jesus for forgiveness, and asking for his help to overcome and do even better in the future. It's in this way that shepherds lead.

3. And we admonish. To admonish literally means "to place in the mind." It means lovingly to warn someone of the consequences of sin. Sometimes this is known as "tough love," where a family member has to be told that if they continue in a certain sin, there will be consequences. Paul puts it this way: *"Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."* When we shepherds lovingly admonish the sheep in our care, we serve as God's conduit to bring his blessings to them. Shepherds admonish their sheep.

4. We care for our families. Referring especially to the pastors of the church, but not excluding the pastor of the family church, Peter says, *"Be shepherds of God's flock"* (1 Pt 5:1). This means that we care for our sheep who are fearful, needy, struggling, and weak. It means that we pray for them and that we support them emotionally, physically, and, above all, spiritually. *"Train children in the way they should go,"* God says, *"and when they are old they will not turn from it"* (Pr 22:6) (ordination story). Fellow shepherds, know your Bible and love your sheep; love them to death.

5. Finally, shepherds equip their sheep. We know that the fields are white for the harvest and that, ultimately, only sheep can produce sheep. This becomes an opportunity for us to train the sheep in our care for ministry, for service, to the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd of the sheep, and to many others who fall into our area of influence. Included in this is the idea of a RAWKS Fund, a Random Acts of Worship Kindness Fund, for us to put legs and feet and arms and hands on our love for others. We want to make sure they have what they need for service. For sure, shepherds equip their sheep.

My friends, whether we're pastors of the congregation or pastors of our family churches, we're all shepherds of God's flock. May each of us be encouraged to shepherd the flock in our care. For Jesus once said, *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. ...This is my command: Love one another"* (Jn 15:13, 14, 17). Amen.

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The Good Shepherd. Is there any other image that depicts the relationship we enjoy with Jesus that is more beautiful than that? The stained glass window behind you was designed to remind us, every time we leave church, that we are safe in the Good Shepherd's arms. How many of us haven't been comforted at the death of a loved one by the words of Psalm 23, often called The Shepherd's Psalm? Isaiah spoke of the Messiah to come in these words: *"He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young"* (Is 40:11).

Sheep, and especially lambs, are very cutesy animals. After a lamb has been sheared, its skin is soft and smooth, and it's a delight to touch. The picture of a lamb portrays tenderness and weakness, not strength and resolve. I don't know of any professional sports team that has the lamb as its mascot. Lions, yes, and wolves and tigers and bears, but not lambs. Fans of the lamb would have to chant:

*We are the sheep. We don't make a peep.
Victory is yours to keep. But count on us if you want to sleep.*

Doesn't that make you shake in your shoes in fear and trepidation?

Why, then, would God use a poor, defenseless animal like a sheep to represent us? It really shouldn't surprise us. God often uses an animal to picture a person's character. For example, he uses the evil cunning of a snake to describe Satan. He uses a ferocious lion to picture Satan's roaming back and forth in the world. He uses horses to depict soldiers in war and donkeys to represent messengers of peace. So, where do sheep fit in and how do they represent us?

Just as sheep are not the most intelligent of animals and cannot find or smell their way back to the sheep pen, so are we dumb and defenseless when it comes to spiritual things. Let me tell you a story (Tom Miller, sheep, and fence). The fact of the matter is that in some ways we are even more stupid than sheep. A sheep will always follow its shepherd's voice but, sadly, there are times when we won't.

Today we're going to look at the family church and consider how God wants us, regardless of our station in life, to serve as shepherds to the flock under our care. We especially want to insure that our family is a safe place where faith is fed and living for Jesus is encouraged.

In our text the Apostle Paul is speaking to the elders, or pastors, of the church in Ephesus. He knows that this is probably the last time that he will ever see them. He says, *"Now I know that none of you...will ever see me again."* Soon Paul will be arrested, put on trial before the authorities, and eventually executed for his faith.

Paul maintains that, because he has been faithful in proclaiming *"the whole counsel of God,"* his pastoral obligation to the Ephesians has been fulfilled. He leaves the results of his work to the Holy Spirit and the continuation of his work in the hands of the elders. He reminds them to take care of each other. He says, *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."* Paul goes on to tell them why this is so important. He says, *"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."*

What underlies what Paul is saying is that, while we pastors have been called to be the overseers of the flock, ultimately, the flock is responsible for the flock. That means that each of you is a shepherd to the people in your own area of influence. Paul is addressing the pastors, to be sure, but every single one of us is a pastor in our own specific area of influence. In the context of our current worship series, *Family Church 2.0*, we're applying this to our family churches. The challenge before each of us is to join Paul and boldly declare, *"I am innocent of the blood of any of you."*

Did you note that Paul makes three direct references to sheep and shepherd in our text? As Mr. Fitzsimmons pointed out in our elementary school's opening service last month, anytime the Holy Spirit repeats something, he wants us to sit up and take notice. Such is the case here. It's in the relationship between shepherd and flock where we see and appreciate the relationship between Jesus and his sheep. In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Philip Keller writes that sheep need four things in order to lie down.

1. They must be nourished, because hungry sheep look for food.
2. They must be unafraid, because fearful sheep are skittish.
3. They must be content, because aggravated sheep won't relax.
4. They must have unity, because sheep won't lie down where there is friction with others of their kind.

We live in a spiritually dangerous and unsafe world, where sheep are afraid to lie down. We live among savage wolves. None of us can live on an island, nor did God intend for us to be an island. We were created for fellowship, for family, for family church. It's here that we've been called to provide a safe haven for others. To help us fulfill this calling, not only has Jesus promised, *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you"* (He 13:5), but he has also provided shepherds to watch over us and fellow sheep to walk with us. As Paul reminds us, God has positioned us to be shepherds to feed the families in our care and keep them close to him. In our family churches, it's the head of the household who's been called to do that. No matter what the family church looks like, its shepherd has a P.L.A.C.E., an acronym for Protect, Lead, Admonish, Care, and Equip.

1. The shepherd protects. Speaking of himself, Jesus says, *"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be safe"* (Jn 10:9). At night the shepherd herds his flock into the pen and stretches out across the doorway. In the morning he steps aside to let the sheep out. Shepherds do this to keep their flocks safe from roaming packs of predators. If predators do try to get in, they have to get through the shepherd. The shepherd risks his life to protect the sheep.

Picture Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as he says to you, *"I am the gate."* Jesus risked—even gave—his life for you. Like a ravenous wolf, Satan wanted to gobble you up and gulp you down. *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"* (1 Pt 5:8), the Bible says. But Jesus battled and beat the devil for you. He laid down his life for you. God now assures you, *"There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* (Ro 8:1).

Similarly, we pastors protect our families and keep them safe. As Paul says, first, we guard ourselves; then, we do the same for our sheep. We're on guard for savage wolves, the wolves of false teaching, substance abuse, materialism, isolation, and depression—all agents of Satan looking for easy prey. Shepherds protect their sheep.

2. And we lead. As already mentioned, sheep are instinctively stupid and need leadership. We shepherds are sheep, too, and thus stupid, but we are still to lead. We lead by our words, especially the words of God that we teach our sheep, and by our works, our modeling what we believe and teach. That's a scary prospect, but we do it with the strength God provides, as Paul once reminded the Corinthians, *"Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God"* (2 Cor 3:5).