

“I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD”: WHERE TO TURN WHEN LEADERS FAIL

If you were an animal, what would you be?

You might like to think of yourself as a lion... or an owl... or an eagle.

The Bible's answer is: no, you're a sheep. Not because you're stupid. Or cute. Or fluffy.

We are all like sheep because we need *shepherds*. We rely on people to *lead us*.

It's true in the political world. A country without a clear leadership structure soon dissolves into chaos.

But we have other shepherds too.

The fact that companies pay big money to influencers shows that we look to others to lead us.

You might not hold influencers in very high regard. But you didn't reach even *this conclusion* by yourself. You got there by relating to other shepherds.

Our parents have been shepherds to many of us. Lecturers, friends and media figures shepherd us too—as do the thinkers we've never heard of, but who shape how we see the world. These shepherds all claim that our lives will be better if we follow them.

So the question isn't, “Do I have shepherds?” but “Are my shepherds any *good*?”

The problem is that, like sheep, we have the tendency to be easily misled, to wander away from the most trustworthy voices.

In this light, hear Jesus' claim:

I am the good shepherd.

Not just, "I am a good shepherd, amongst a range of others." No, "I am *the* good shepherd. Every other shepherd must measure their shepherding against mine."

Jesus is speaking to the same leaders he addressed when he claimed to be the gate. These men consciously thought of themselves as shepherds, responsible to lead the nation to life.

Yet they'd been shown to be *bad shepherds*.

This was most recently shown in their treatment of a man born blind. He'd been given sight by Jesus. But his healing didn't fit with how the religious leaders thought things *ought* to work. It provoked their hostility. So they abused the newly-healed man. Their opposition to Jesus hardened too. These were the very men who would eventually put Jesus to death.

They were *bad shepherds*.

Their understanding was wrong, so they were guiding the flock in the wrong direction. More importantly, they didn't have the necessary *character* to shepherd well. They threatened the flock's well-being.

Jesus sharpens his criticism by describing three groups who have contact with the flock.

Each poses as a shepherd but, in truth, is something very different.

Jesus says some who pose as shepherds are actually *thieves*. Their contact with the flock isn't honest. They want to take, eat and destroy the sheep. Thieves represent leaders who *use* those they're leading for their own agenda.

Other leaders are *strangers* to the sheep. They never get to know the members of the flock. Each sheep is the same as any other, rather than individuals with struggles and a story. So specific sheep are under-cared for. They never hear the particular warnings and encouragements they need.

Finally, says Jesus, some leaders are like *hired hands*. In Jesus' day, shepherds sometimes hired others to help them. But a hired hand never *owned* 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

These leaders aren't committed to the flock. So, in a situation of danger, they flee. They're focused on their own survival, not on what happens to the sheep.

Jesus is asking the religious leaders to see themselves. They pose as shepherds—yet in fact, they are thieves... strangers... hired hands.

And sadly, bad shepherds weren't confined to Jesus' day.

Today, we're very aware of how leaders can fail. Politicians, powerful people and even church leaders can damage those in their care, sometimes inflicting deep wounds.

Some of us may feel personally betrayed by bad shepherds. As a result, we find ourselves keeping *everyone* at arm's length. It feels threatening to let anyone in, leaders or even friends.

These feelings are understandable, and the path to recovery may be long and hard.

Yet, even in our pain, we can draw upon the care of the *Good Shepherd*.

Six hundred years before Jesus, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel promising that, one day, he would come. He'd boot out the bad shepherds, freeing his people from those who prey on them, and shepherd the flock himself.

As Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd", he's saying: that moment has come.

Because, unlike the *thief*, Jesus never *used* people to selfish ends. He doesn't make the once-blind man a pawn or *use him* to establish a power-play. Indeed, his care for the man takes Jesus on a path towards disapproval, scorn and ultimately death.

It hints that, as Good Shepherd, Jesus is committed to bringing us life—even at cost to himself.

Unlike the *stranger*, Jesus knows his sheep by name. Jesus claims a God's-eye perspective on our lives. He alone knows the end from the beginning; how the threads of our stories tie up. He cares enough to count his sheep in ones.

And as Good Shepherd, he offers to live in us personally, tenderly ministering by means of his Spirit.

Finally, unlike the *hired hand*, Jesus doesn't run in the face of danger. As death approaches, he lays down his life for the sheep. He pays for our sin; he dies our death. That's how committed he is to us. Other shepherds may leave us, but he never will.

One day, we will know his leading in its fullness. On that day, every bad shepherd will be held to account.

Knowing this about the Good Shepherd may, in time, allow us to heal.

But he must shape how we relate to others, too.

None of us is immune from wanting to feed our ego, build our kingdom and establish our reputation. That means each of us is prone to abuse our influence, even amongst our friends at uni (perhaps even in the CU).

Yet we reflect the living God when we use our influence *for the good of others*.

What could that look like?

Following the path of Jesus requires us to use our influence sacrificially—with truth, humility and love. As we do so, we showing the world that, when all others fail, there is one shepherd who is always good.