

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ
 SERMON: **Good Shepherds and the Great Shepherd**
 SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 13:7-25
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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Many years ago Allen Funt took his Candid Camera television show to an elite prep school out East, posing as a vocational guidance counselor. Most of the students in this school anticipated being college presidents, bank presidents, or famous corporate lawyers. The producer called the young men in one by one to give them the results of the vocational test they had taken, secretly filming their reactions.

A very fine young senior came in, veritably trembling with anticipation of the result of his examination. He was confident that he would be told that he would be a corporate executive or a successful politician or a renowned surgeon—surely there was a bright future for him. Funt looked at the young man and said, “Now, we have gone over your test very carefully and we have discovered that the best career for you is that of a shepherd.” The look on the boy's face was worth 1,000 words (and it wasn't a sheepish grin either!). He was completely taken aback, and with a nervous laugh responded, “Surely you're joking! A *shepherd*?”

Well, I am unable to empathize fully with that young man's disdain and contempt, for I am a shepherd, of sorts, and I take comfort in the fact that down through history God has solved many problems by laying hold of a shepherd. When He decided to have a people of His own, He chose a shepherd named Abraham. When He wanted to build that people into a great nation, he took another shepherd named Jacob. When He wanted to save that nation from famine, He called another shepherd—Joseph. When He wanted to save the nation from slavery and take them back to the Promised Land, He called another shepherd—Moses. And when that nation was in terrible disunity and needed a great leader, God called upon still another shepherd—a young man named David. Even Jesus was not embarrassed to be called “the Good Shepherd.”

Our text today, which is the concluding portion of the Epistle to the Hebrews, has a lot to say about shepherds, though the word “shepherd” is only used once. Please turn with me to Hebrews 13:7:

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring

city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

Greet all your leaders and all God's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.

Grace be with you all.

Likely you noticed that the author, in drawing his letter to a close, covers a number of rather diverse subjects. In fact, he started that at the beginning of chapter 13. Josh talked last week about five different commands given in the first 6 verses—loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, loving strangers in Christ, loving those who suffer for Christ, honoring marriage, and being content. He also mentioned that there are seven more commands in the remainder of the chapter, which I think you will pick up this morning, though I will not be organizing our thoughts specifically around those commands.

The variety of topics addressed caused one commentator to introduce this chapter with a limerick:

*There was a young poet in Japan
Whose poetry no one could scan.
When told it was so,
He replied, 'Yes, I know,
But I try to get as many words in the last line as I can.*

This commentator wondered if the writer of Hebrews didn't likewise try to squeeze everything he could into this final chapter. But the topics in chapter 13 are not completely disconnected. While the word “shepherd” appears only once, there are several references to church leaders, who are really spiritual shepherds, and there are several important references to Jesus Christ, our Great Shepherd. So I would like to organize our thoughts around these two principal concepts:

Good shepherds deserve the respect of God's people.

The Great Shepherd deserves the praise of God's people.

Good shepherds deserve the respect of God's people.

This point is made in several ways.

Good shepherds should be remembered. (7) Verse 7 says, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.” He is evidently referring to spiritual leaders in the church who are now gone, some of whom may have moved on to other cities, but others who have died, perhaps even through martyrdom. Why is this instruction necessary? Because we so soon forget. We get so wrapped up in the latest book, the newest exciting communicator, and the currently hot contemporary issue that we tend to forget where we received our most significant growth as a Christian—perhaps from an ABF teacher, a BSF leader, an AWANA helper, someone who disciplined us in the things of Christ, or some ordinary pastor. Go back to your spiritual roots, he says, and “remember the shepherds who fed you the word of God.”

Not all shepherds feed the sheep well, of course. In fact, in the 34th chapter of Ezekiel there is a powerful passage about the shepherds of Israel that has caused me often to stop and evaluate my leading and feeding of sheep.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 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 34:7-10)

Friends, there are shepherds like those of Israel in abundance today. I received a brochure from a mainline church advertising a conference entitled, “Three Rings, Sideshows, and a Parade, An exciting Workshop for Clergy, Laity, and Music Leaders.” In the clergy sideshow it stated that “special emphasis will be placed on the use of creative, NEW concepts for celebration of worship!!!,” the first of which was “Using the Bible in Sermons.” That is a *new* concept in worship!?! Another was entitled, “Using Clowning in Worship.” This is no joke, friends. This kind of thing gives shepherds a bad name.

If you have had faithful shepherds in your past, remember them. If they're still living, write them a note and tell them how much they have meant in your life. Just this past week I received a letter from a long-term parishioner that remembered both my predecessor Tom Macy and me. I want to read a few relevant paragraphs.

I've been meaning to thank you for quite awhile. I'm most thankful that you started the Career Class before I ever came to this church. This group really helped me out when I came to Wichita to work at Boeing. They really cared and we had a lot of fun and learning together. My life turned a big corner at a retreat where Pastor Macy taught about how we should quit worrying about finding a mate and start working on being a person someone else would want to marry. I met my wife in class.

I'm thankful you came to Wichita and stepped in when Pastor Tom left. My wife

and I were quite upset - we thought Tom was a great pastor with great morals and teaching. He taught at a lot of our retreats, did our pre-marital counseling, married us and dedicated all 3 of our kids. We almost left the church but felt we shouldn't leave when the church was in such crisis - we should stick it out and help get the church back up on its feet again. I appreciate that you expressed your admiration for Pastor Tom.

I also appreciate your weekly teaching and leading of the church. I know people must complain to you and you probably see some pretty ugly sides of people. You have hung in there and continue to work and study hard. You've worked to find a possible replacement (Josh) and have helped him become trained which will be good for the whole church whether or not he becomes our lead pastor.

Keep on running the race in a manner to win!

That was a huge encouragement to me, and I'm sure to Tom.

If the faithful shepherds in your life have died, you can do something else that will be even more of a tribute—"Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Every year in Seminary there would be a few young preachers who tried to imitate Billy Graham, and today there are those who try to imitate Chuck Swindoll or Charles Stanley—walk like them, talk like them, gesture like them, and even steal some of their sermons. That's not the point. See where their faith took them and imitate that. Good shepherds should be remembered.

Good shepherds should be listened to. (9-10) There is one task of a shepherd that stands out above all others and that is feeding sheep. If the shepherd fails at that he fails at his most important task. But there's a responsibility on the part of the sheep too. To change a well-known aphorism slightly, "a shepherd can lead the sheep to grass but he can't make them eat." In verse 9 the author speaks to the need for sheep to listen to the words of the shepherd: "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them."

Believe me, there is a huge variety of strange teachings out there in the church today. There are, of course, the well-known cults and world religions, but I doubt if that is what the apostle is talking about—those are not usually attractive to people who have been exposed to sound Christian truth. I think he probably has in mind teachings that are close to Christianity but just far enough away to distort the Gospel or water it down. The most dangerous false teachers are always those who operate under the guise of orthodoxy.

How do sheep grow? They grow on grace, and good shepherds preach grace, not strange doctrine, certainly not legalism. Apparently there were false teachers who were telling these Hebrew Christians that they could gain favor with God through what they ate or didn't eat. This was a common error in NT times, because all their lives the Jewish people had been taught that diet was extremely important to God, and they failed to grasp that when Jesus died He took away the written code and nailed it to the Cross (Col. 2:14). All the ceremonial rules and regulations over diet were abolished. That is why Paul told the Corinthians that "food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do." Later he said to the Romans, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and

joy in the Holy Spirit.”

Friends, the keeping of *any* list of do's and don't's is of relatively little value in achieving spirituality. Verse 9 actually says it's of *no* value. And Paul says the same thing in Colossians 2:20-23:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (See also 1 Tim. 4:1-5).

The Christians of the first century had none of the visible apparatus which was habitually associated with religion and worship—they had no sacred buildings, no altars, no sacrificing priests. Their pagan neighbors actually thought they had no God and called them atheists. The Jewish people also criticized them because they made no sacrifices.

But the author retorts in verse 10: “We *have* an altar”—and to him it was a better one than the Jews had under the Levitical system. Our altar is a symbolic one—it stands for the sacrifice of Christ Himself. However, those who practice legalistic religion have no access to it, as verse 10 goes on to say, “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.”¹ Participation in the efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice is limited to those who recognize in the Cross the grace by which the heart is truly strengthened.

Now skip down to verse 17 for the third reference to spiritual shepherds.

Good shepherds should be obeyed. (17) “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” The leaders referred to here are probably the successors of those whose memory they were exhorted to cherish in verse 7. The author has as much confidence in the present leaders as in their predecessors. I believe this injunction refers not only to the pastors and the elders of the church, but also to ABF teachers, Bible study leaders, parents— anyone who exercises spiritual leadership and responsibility over us. We are enjoined to obey them and submit to their authority. But it’s important to realize that obedience is not a requirement in respect to every shepherd, but only to biblical shepherds, good shepherds who lead and feed the sheep properly.

Why is it that we are exhorted to obey our shepherds? Because as sheep we are prone to wander. Some of us have unfortunately received our knowledge of the behavior of sheep from Little Bo Peep. You remember that nursery rhyme:

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep, and doesn't know where to find them.

Leave them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them.

Good luck! Sheep are in fact known for their inability to find their way home. In fact, sheep are one of the most helpless of creatures. They have little wisdom and no weapons. And so God gives to shepherds the responsibility of protecting them.

Now please realize that the obedience called for here is not absolute. The elected leaders of the church are never given the kind of authority over the lives of their people that determines whom they should marry or how they should vote or how much they should give. The Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 5:2-3,

“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

His point is that shepherding is as much a responsibility as it is a privilege. Good shepherds *serve* the sheep. Our passage puts it this way: “They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.”

Now that can be a heavy load, though most of the time it's a joy. It becomes a burden when there are sheep sideways in the road who refuse to budge and who resist every effort made to help them. That's why in verse 17 the author urges the congregation, “Obey your leaders so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” If we resist those whom God has provided to help us we only hurt ourselves.

Good shepherds should be prayed for. (18-19) Verse 18-19 reads, “Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.” The author who writes these words had himself shepherded these Hebrew Christians. He had discharged his responsibilities well, conducted himself honorably in all things, and his conscience was clear. On that basis he asks for prayer.

Sometimes we glibly ask people to pray for us when the problem we are facing is a problem of our own making and when we know how to solve it but lack the self-discipline to do so. I'm not sure that's legitimate. It would be much more honest if we would pray that our rebellious and indifferent spirit might be dealt with by God, rather than asking that our problem be solved.

As one of the shepherds of this particular flock, and in behalf of the others, I ask you this morning to “pray for us.” Despite our efforts to shepherd well, people sometimes fall through the cracks. There are weak aspects in our ministry. Several of our pastors have had difficult medical issues that have put them out of commission for a period of time. Others have been discouraged. Pray for us. Satan knows that if he can undermine the leaders, many others will go down with them. If he can get them to compromise, to fail morally, to lose heart, he can bring great damage to the cause of Christ.

Well, enough on good shepherds. We should remember them, listen to them, obey them, and pray for them. But throughout this entire letter the focus has been not on church leaders, not on ideas, not even on theology, but on Jesus Christ. And that is true right to the end. While good shepherds deserve the respect of God's people,

The Great Shepherd deserves the praise of God's people.

The Great Shepherd is changeless and therefore completely reliable. (8)

Go back to verse 8 with me for a moment. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” That is a powerful verse and you have heard it quoted many times. But think for a moment about its context and see if you can determine why it's found here, right after the exhortation to remember their former leaders.

May I suggest to you that human leaders come and go, and it can be very disconcerting to a flock when old shepherds are replaced by young ones. I suspect our own church will be going through that process within the next year. Some will respond eagerly to the change, but others will naturally resist it. But we can all be confident that in the middle of change we have Someone who is an anchor, the changeless Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Pastors change, elders change, parishioners change, times change, but Jesus remains the same. And because He never changes He is always completely reliable.

The Great Shepherd sacrificed Himself for us and calls us to identify with Him.

(11-14) Verses 11-14 are difficult to interpret, but the key thing we need to grasp is that the author is returning one final time to the subject of the one true sacrifice for sins, namely Jesus Christ. These Hebrew Christians had been brought up under Judaism to believe that sins could be atoned for through animal sacrifices and that they had to keep coming back to the altar in order to maintain a relationship with God. All through his letter he has stressed that when Jesus died on the cross all that changed. Jesus inaugurated a New Covenant, one not based on animal sacrifices but on his own once-for-all sacrifice of Himself.

Only this time the author offers a new twist and a new application. He refers to the fact that on the Day of Atonement the animals sacrificed in the Holy Place were taken outside the camp and burned. Other sacrifices on other days were eaten by the priests, but never the sin offering on the Day of Atonement. In this he sees an analogy, because Jesus, the final sin offering, was also taken outside the city gate to be crucified. That was a sign of rejection by the Jewish people and a symbol of disgrace. “Therefore,” he exhorts us, “let us go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”

This is a direct appeal to the readers to make a final break with Judaism and identify themselves wholly with Jesus Christ. Yes, that will probably mean marginalization and ostracization from family and community; it could mean persecution and disgrace for many of them; but that is only what their Savior Himself experienced.

Frankly, the Christian Church today in our country needs to hear this appeal as well. By and large we have not gone to Him outside the camp, we have just moved to the suburbs; we have not borne the disgrace he bore, rather we have tried to make His message palatable to the hedonism of our society. We have quit looking for the city that is to come, and have decided to be as comfortable as possible in this one.

Friends, we need a major new dose of commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the

willingness to go wherever that takes us. The Great Shepherd sacrificed Himself and calls us to identify with Him.

The Great Shepherd is the One through whom we offer sacrifices of praise to God. (15-16) While the Christian worshiper doesn't need to offer continual animal sacrifices, there is another kind of continual sacrifice he is called upon to offer: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name" (verse 15). Such a sacrifice is always in order, and that's exactly what we should be doing when we sing hymns and worship songs or when we give testimony about what Christ has done in our lives.

Even in the OT the superiority of sacrifices of praise can be seen, as in the 50th Psalm (verses 12-15), where God speaks:

*If I were hungry I would not tell you,
for the world is mine, and all that is in it.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?
Sacrifice thank offerings to God,
fulfill your vows to the Most High,
and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me.*

Be careful, though, lip service without life service is unacceptable. That's what the next verse says: "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." In other words, praise has a practical side to it. James adds on the very next page of your Bible, in chapter 1, verse 27, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." John adds in his first epistle, "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18).

The Great Shepherd is the source of everything good in the believer's life. (20-21)

The book of Hebrews essentially ends with a beautiful benediction, followed only by a postscript with a few personal comments.

"May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

By the way, this is the only reference to our Lord's resurrection in the entire letter. Great emphasis has been given to His sacrificial death, and some to his exaltation at the Father's right hand, but this is the only mention of His resurrection. Even here the blood of Christ is intimately connected to the resurrection, the meaning probably being that His resurrection is the demonstration that His sacrifice has been accepted by God. Notice, too, that the covenant established by the blood of Christ is called an "eternal covenant." There is no possibility of it becoming obsolete and another being needed.

This benediction is essentially a prayer that God will equip His church and produce His pleasure in His people. God has a plan for your life and mine. It is a plan that first of all involves our character. He wants to bring us into conformity to the image of His Son. It is also a plan that involves worship and praise. He wants our lives to focus upward rather than outward; he wants us to learn that our horizontal relationships will never be right until our vertical relationship with Him is right. Then it is a plan that involves service. He wants us to find the great joy and reward that inevitably comes through serving Him and serving others.

Now that sounds like a formidable plan. How will we *ever* be able to accomplish it? The answer is simple: we can't, but Christ can. He is the One through whom God does all this. Paul speaks of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The great miracle of the new birth is that those who receive Christ actually *receive Christ*. He comes to live in them; He gives them a divine nature; He provides His Holy Spirit to empower them, encourage them, and help them. Everything we need to do the will of God is provided—the gifts, the talents, the intelligence, the motivation, the resources, the endurance.

Not one of us can ever say that we failed to do the will of God because the resources were unavailable. Our Great Shepherd has provided everything. It has been well said that He who has Jesus and everything has no more than he who has Jesus alone.

Conclusion: The book of Hebrews has confronted us with many great and powerful truths, both doctrinal and practical, both encouraging and alarming. In this final chapter the focus has been largely upon church leadership. Church life is difficult. Relationships get strained because the church is full of real people. But when church leaders lead well, living lives worthy of imitation, and when church members follow, the kingdom is built. God is pleased. This helps and benefits all.

But what comes across more than anything else in this book is the Superiority of our leader, Jesus Christ. He is the Great Apostle (3:1), the Great High Priest (4:14), the Great Shepherd of the sheep. He surpasses all other shepherds—Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David. Jesus is Lord.

Is He your Lord? Have you grasped the amazing message that He has died for your sins and lovingly embraces you in the New Covenant. Do you belong to His flock? Are you fixing your eyes on Him as the author and perfecter of faith? Have you given Him free reign in your life? Have you surrendered your career, your health, your wealth, your future, your family to Him? Do you go to Him for nourishment when you are spiritually hungry or thirsty? Do you go to Him for protection when your body or mind or emotions are being threatened? Believe me, He is completely adequate.

i. This is a difficult and much-debated statement. It is possible the author is speaking of the Lord's Table and saying that those whose entire focus is on religious ceremonialism, like the

Jewish legalists of his day, have no right to come to the Lord's Table; it will do them no good. Communion is only for those who desire to be nourished on God's grace.