

Follow Your Good Shepherd!

The story of two shepherds. The first shepherd lazily let the sheep wander wherever they wanted. They settled in a swampy area near some woods. The swamp water was not the best for the sheep. Wolves and other predators hid in the woods. Each week, sheep died. The second shepherd carefully searched for a good place near a calm stream with just a few shade trees. He worked very hard carrying large stones to form a large enclosure for his sheep where they could be safe. The shepherd slept in the opening in the stone fence so that no sheep could wander away at night. It took a lot of time and effort to lead the sheep to the quiet stream for their water and to lush pastures with healthy grass. He always had his rod and staff by his side to protect them. His sheep were healthy, content, and safe. If you were a sheep, which shepherd would you like to follow?

Throughout the Bible, the Lord pictures himself as a shepherd and we, his people, as his sheep. (Ps 23, Ps 100, Isa 53, Jn 10, etc.). Sheep are a perfect illustration of us. They are pretty helpless. They can not protect themselves. They wander away from their safe zone. They eat whatever is in front of them – good or bad. Without a shepherd, they would die. Like sheep, we often wander away from our Lord Jesus and stumble into sin. By nature, our hearts do not follow Jesus. We are spiritually lazy. We carry guilt, shame and regret. We are skittish and fear the future, as if our Shepherd won't take care of us. We can easily be misled by false prophets. We need Someone to watch over us spiritually. We need a Savior. We need Jesus as our Good Shepherd. We want to follow him.

Just like the second shepherd in my story, Jesus did not shy away from work. He did everything for us that we needed. He was willing to sacrifice his life for sheep who loved to wander. He protected us even though it meant his own body being bruised and bloodied. He drank the poison of our sin and guilt and it killed him. When we wandered away from him, the voice of his Word called out for us and brought us back to him. Just think how many times in our lives when we were headed in the wrong direction, but our Lord used someone or something to call us back to him so that we are sitting here this morning feasting on the banquet of salvation. He drenches our heads with blessings and our cups overflow. He chases after us to grant us goodness and mercy. He forgives our sins

and prepares a place for us by his side in paradise. We want to follow him.

As the Apostle John wrote to the early believers, he urged them to follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd. In this section, John uses the word “spirits” to refer to teachers. He warned them that there were many – already in the first century, MANY! – false prophets. Could he be any more clear? 4:1, **“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit [teacher], but test the spirits [teachers] to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”** And in verse 3, **“every spirit [teacher] that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”** Every false teaching in against, anti-, Christ, an attack on Christ. Every false teaching is spitting in the face of Jesus who is true God. Every false teaching is poison to our soul.

Sadly, many people are misled by false teachers who deny that Jesus is true God in the flesh and that all of his Word is true. The trend in our culture is to be “permissive,” to let anyone say or do whatever they want. It seems like the only sin is saying that something is a sin. If we are to follow Jesus, though, then we need to take a stand and speak out against false teachers. All false teaching is poison to the soul. There is such a thing as right and wrong. There are moral absolutes and we are accountable to God. The loving thing for us to do is to point out teachers who do not proclaim what the Bible tells us.

Here are some examples: Duke Divinity School (where church leaders are trained) had a worship service in honor of “the great queer one,” blatantly disregarding what the Bible says about sexuality. There is an organized religious group called, “The Coven of the Queer Goddess.” Let's not forget Wicca, an organization of witches. The ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) officially says that homosexuality is not a sin and some congregations have even invited Drag Queens to lead in worship.. First Congregational Church (of the UCC) here in Port Washington, says on their website that they are “theologically progressive ... and do not read the Bible literally.” If you don't read the Bible literally, then you can literally teach anything you want. Friedens church here in town says on their web site that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are only symbols and have nothing to do with salvation. The churches along LL say on their webs sites that in order to be saved, you have to make a decision for Christ. That's like the sheep looking for the shepherd, instead of the shepherd looking for the sheep. The Roman Catholic church

officially continues to tell people to pray to Mary and that they have to do something in order to be saved and that their teachings are based the Bible and Tradition, which means whatever they decide they want to teach. I could continue with examples of mysticism, astrology, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and dozens of other examples. They do not teach what the Bible teaches. They are like the bad shepherd who let his sheep wander into dangerous places and die.

The Apostle John dealt with false teachers during his ministry and he was not tolerant of them. He knew that they were leading people away from Jesus and into hell. He urges us to follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus. He explained (:2), **“This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit [teacher] that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”** The heart and core of our faith is founded on the FACTS that even though we have earned hell with our sins, Jesus Christ who is true God became flesh, that he lived, died and rose for us; that faith in Jesus alone is the only way to get into heaven; that baptism is a means by which God gives and strengthens faith; that the Lord's Supper gives us Jesus' very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. The common reply from people is, “That's just your interpretation.” I've even had a pastor from a different church body say that to me. No! When I read last week's local newspaper and tell you that the Port Washington High School baseball team won their game by a score of 6-5, I am not “interpreting” anything. I'm telling you what the newspaper said. The problem is not that God's Word is not clear. The problem is that respect for God's Word is rare.

Basing your beliefs and teachings on what you “feel” or “think” is like building a house with no foundation. It might look nice until a storm destroys it. That is why we do not choose our church based on its appearance, or location, or quality of music, or the pastor's personality, or other such things. Recently a lady told me that she left her solid Lutheran church to go to a false church because they have an active youth group. Would you take your children to a fitness center if they served poisoned water there? Of course not! ***False teaching always damages faith and can finally kill it.*** I was blown away to read a recent survey which found that 78% of evangelical Christians believe that Jesus is God's first creation. In other words, they do not think that Jesus is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father. If Jesus is not completely true God in the flesh, then he can't be our Savior. That's why we confess the Apostles' or Athanasian Creeds as part of our worship – God from God, Light from

Light, true God from true God, etc. We are proclaiming to the wicked world what that Bible says and in the process, we ground ourselves in the truth of God's Word.

Listen how sincere John is (:4), **“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them.”** Notice who gets the credit. God and God alone. John says that we are **“from God.”** He gave us faith so that we have overcome the world, that is, we have resisted the false teachings in the world as we follow our Good Shepherd. It is not that we are so serious about doctrine or try so hard or demand so much training for our seminarians, or live such morally pure lives, or anything else. The only reason that we follow the Good Shepherd is because he has called us. John continued that **“the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world,”** namely the devil. Again, God gets all the credit. We dare not pat ourselves on our backs for being such good Wisconsin Synod members. Our only response can be to fall on our knees and give thanks to God for reaching out to us and touching us with the power of his saving love. With genuine humility, we give thanks to God for his word and do what we can to share the message of salvation with others.

Before we go to a new restaurant, we ask our friends if they liked it. Before we order something online, we read the reviews. How much more will we check to make sure that we are following the truth of God's Word. That probably means that our church will not be the biggest in town. John explained (:6), **“We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us.”** As we reveal the truth to everyone we can, we know that not everyone will agree with us. We feel sad for them. We would not help them, though, by telling them that it's OK to believe whatever they want. Listen again to verse 1, **“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit [teacher], but test the spirits [teachers] to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”** Watch out for false teaching as you listen to Jesus in his Word, the Bible. Follow your Good Shepherd all the way to heaven. Amen.