



## Sermon Transcript April 22, 2018

### Shepherds and Souls The Great Shepherd Hebrews 13:20-21

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 22, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Hebrews 13:20-21**

<sup>20</sup> Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, <sup>21</sup> equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

## Introduction

Out of all the benedictions we find in Scripture, this is my favorite one. “What is a benediction”? Simply put, a benediction is the conferring of God’s blessing on his people. You often find these pronouncements of God’s blessing at the end of the New Testament letters like we find here in Hebrews. We too pronounce a benediction, conferring God’s blessing on you, at the end of our worship services. I want to caution you to be careful to not turn the benediction into simply the signal that the worship service is over. Rather, I really encourage to literally take the posture of receiving God’s blessing as you are being sent out into the world to represent Christ. James Smith says of the benediction that “we are not sent out as orphans, nor are we sent out to prove ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, we are sent out into the world with God’s blessing already upon us.

I remember reading a book a few years ago written by Tim Madigan. He was a reporter for the Forth Worth Star Telegram and he was interviewing Mr. Rodgers. Madigan soon found out that Mr. Rodgers was the same man in real life as he was on television. An unusual friendship emerged from this encounter, mainly sustained through letters. At the end of every letter Mister Rodgers wrote to Madigan, he would write the initials IPOY. These initials stood for “I’m Proud of You.”<sup>2</sup> That is the title of the book. This constant dripping of affirmation had a profound impact on Tim Madigan’s life. It led to deep conversations about God, faith, family, suffering and friendship. But most significantly, it helped heal some wounds in Madigan’s heart left by his own family and it gave him the courage and the strength to be a source of healing for his own family.

Benedictions are designed to have the same kind of impact. The difference, though, is that in a benediction it is God who is assuring us of his blessing through faith in Jesus. Every week we get to hear God pronounce his blessing and declare his steadfast love for us. It is not earned by what you did or didn’t do this week. Instead, it is conferred upon you by God’s grace. Don’t waste the benediction with your haste in wanting to catch up with someone or to go out to eat or whatever comes next in your schedule today. Instead pause and drink in the reminder of God’s blessing—God’s smile upon you—and let that empower you to serve God wherever he sends you this week.

Now that being said, this is my favorite benediction. *“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

Whenever I read or hear this benediction; or whenever I have the privilege to pronounce this benediction, there is a phrase that jumps out at me. I wonder if this is the phrase that jumps out at you as well. It is the title this benediction gives to Jesus that first captures my attention: *“the great shepherd of the sheep.”* We just read from Psalm 23 and you could argue that this might be the most treasured passage in all of Scripture. At the very least, it is the most familiar passage in Scripture. And why is that? It is because the image of God as our shepherd is a tender image. I think of the hymn that says, “Savior like a shepherd lead us, much we need thy tender care.”

Last week we were in Psalm 19 and we saw that *“the heavens declare the glory of God.”* We considered what science tells us about the immensity of creation. Numbers with lots and lots of zeros after them put into perspective for us how vast this universe is and how small we are compared to it. When you ponder these things, it leaves you with a sense of the “wholly otherness” of God. He is transcendent. If you think this universe is grand, wait until you see the one who made it all. But this morning we discover that this transcendent God is also *“the great shepherd of the sheep.”* It suggests to us that God is near. It tells us that God is not too busy for you. It tells us that God is accessible. It tells us that you are of value and you are precious to this great God. It tells us that God is with you. That is the purpose of the weekly benediction. It is to remind you that you leave with the assurance that this awesome God is near and that God loves you.

One thing I want to do this morning is ponder the wonderful truth that Jesus is *“the great shepherd of the sheep.”* We will look at four passages this morning that will help us consider this truth. Here is what we will see:

Psalm 23 - Jesus is My Shepherd  
John 10 - Jesus is the Good Shepherd  
Hebrews 13 - Jesus is the Great Shepherd  
1 Peter 5 - Jesus is the Chief Shepherd

Quite frankly, it is always good to remind ourselves of the tender care Jesus extends to us over and over again. I need reminded of it. I am sure you need reminded of it.

But then I want to take this thought one step further. This wonderful picture of Jesus—*the great shepherd of the sheep*—becomes the template for what it looks like to be a leader in the church. In the New Testament, the leaders of the church are called “elders.” What we will discover is that the words elder, overseer, pastor and shepherd are used interchangeably to refer to the same office in the church. In fact, you only find

the word “pastor” one time in the New Testament, Ephesians 4:11. The English word “pastor” is derived from the Latin word that means “one who cares for sheep.” Which is also the mandate for elders. Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:2 that the elders should “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*” In other words, they are to follow the template we find in Jesus and extend the tender care of God to his people. Why? Because God’s people—you—are precious to God. And so for the next four weeks we want to consider how the New Testament elders are to shepherd the precious people of God. The title of our series is “Shepherds and Souls.”

So let's begin by looking at what it means for Jesus to be our shepherd.

### **MY Shepherd: Psalm 23**

There is a very warm and personal tone that emerges from Psalm 23. That first person singular pronoun is prominent within this tender psalm. “*The LORD is MY shepherd; I shall not want. He makes ME lie down in green pastures. He leads ME beside still waters He restores MY soul. He leads ME in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with ME; your rod and your staff they comfort ME. You prepare a table before ME in the presence of MY enemies; and you anoint MY head with oil; MY cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow ME all the days of MY life and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*”

So yes, God is the transcendent holy God who spoke this world into existence; and yet he is intimately acquainted with “ME.” Psalm 139 rehearses how intimately we are known by God. He knows when we get up and sit down. He knows the number of our days. There is no place we can go where God is not at work caring for us. Reflecting on this intimate knowledge that God has of us, David says in Psalm 139:6, “*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high I cannot attain it.*” He knows my past. He knows my present. He knows my future. He knows me and everything about me.

Now admittedly, in our western Christian culture, we make much of our personal relationship with God through Christ. We talk about our personal relationship with Christ all the time. And sometimes we elevate our personal relationship with Jesus above our relationship with the church. Some might even so emphasize their personal relationship with Jesus that they don’t think they really need the church. That is not true and it is dangerous to the soul to think so. Jesus is not a polygamist. He has only one bride and his bride is “the church.” And so yes, the corporate mindset of the body of

Christ is important and essential. But even with that, there is the place for the very personal sense in which Jesus is MY shepherd and his care for ME is deeply personal. We read of Jesus the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine and goes after the one who strays. We read in John 10 of Jesus the shepherd who says, “*I know my own and my own know me.*” We read of Jesus in Matthew 6 who reminds us that if he takes care of the sparrow and the lily, don’t you think he will take care of you. Why? You are of more value. We confess our confidence in the personal care of “MY Shepherd” when in the Heidelberg Catechism we recite the answer to the question: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” We say, “He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my Heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.” Just like when Jesus walked up to that tree and said to Zacchaeus, “*Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today*” - so he singles us out and calls us by name. Jesus is MY Shepherd. He knows me.

### **The Good Shepherd: John 10**

Now in John 10 we discover that Jesus is *the good shepherd*. Calling Jesus “the good shepherd” may imply that there is such a thing as a bad shepherd. Or, at the very least, it ought to cause us to ask the question, “what is it that makes Jesus “the good” shepherd?”

For starters, when Jesus calls himself “*the good shepherd*” he is making a contrast with the religious leaders of Israel. In one sense, they were not “good” shepherds. Instead of bringing people to God, they led people away from God. In Ezekiel 34, God pronounces judgment on the spiritual leaders of Israel. In this chapter, over and over again these spiritual leaders were called “shepherds.” But they weren’t good shepherds. It was because of their influence that Israel found themselves in exile. God says to Ezekiel, “*Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not the shepherds take care of the flock?’*” Caring for the flock sure seems to be the impression you get of a shepherd from Psalm 23. And so in contrast to this, Jesus *the good shepherd* says of himself multiple times in John 10 that “*he lays down his life for his sheep.*” Hence, Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He loves the sheep!

I think when we see the word “good” we tend to think in terms of morality. “Good” vs. “Bad” is like “right” vs “wrong—or “moral” vs. “immoral.” But is that the thrust of the word “good” in the title “The Good Shepherd?” Were you attracted to Jesus because he was the standard of morality? I would say that what attracted me to Jesus is that he came to me and he loved me. He laid down his life for me! The attraction of the *good*

*shepherd* is that “he strengthens the weak and heals the sick and binds up the injured and brings back the stray and searches for the lost.” When I think of the goodness and beauty of the *good shepherd*, I think of the benevolent and kind nature of Jesus.

Nowhere is the goodness of the love of Jesus demonstrated any clearer than at the cross. Our shepherd died for us. Our benediction says, “*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant.*” The cross of Jesus is all over this verse. It is through the cross of Jesus that we are able to have peace with God. The “*blood of the eternal covenant*” is none other than the very blood of Jesus, shed for the forgiveness of sin. All the promises of God are sealed to us through the blood of Jesus. Because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we know that nothing can keep the goodness of God towards us from being accomplished. In other words, when Jesus says that he is *the good shepherd*” he is telling us of his love for us most demonstrated at the cross.

I was struck by what President George W. Bush said of his final moments with his mother as she passed away this week. In an interview he was asked about what final words were shared between him and his mother in his last moments with her in this life. He said, “this was not a time for philosophical conversations.” Instead, he simply told her that he loved her and she responded in kind. President Bush said, “this was a time for simply affirming our love for each other.” That is what I see in the title “Good Shepherd.” It is the affirmation that Jesus loves us. He lays down his life for his sheep.

### **The Great Shepherd: Hebrews 13**

In our passage this morning we see Jesus referred to as “The Great Shepherd.” So far we have seen that Jesus is “My Shepherd” and he knows me. We also saw that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and he loves me. Here we discover that Jesus is “the Great Shepherd” and it speaks to his authority and the fact that he leads me. You get a hint of this in our benediction when Jesus is called “*our Lord Jesus.*”

Perhaps the tenderness of this title for Jesus causes us to lose sight of the authority conveyed in this title for Jesus. God is often pictured as a shepherd in the Old Testament, and coupled with this title are strong words of authority. For example, in Psalm 80 we read, “*Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned above the cherubim.*” It is interesting that in Revelation 2:27 it says of Jesus, “*He will rule them with an iron scepter.*” The word “rule” is actually the word “shepherd.” It is the same word we read in Matthew 2:6 where we read of Jesus, “*But*

*you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people.*” So when we come to this title “*great shepherd of the sheep*” we must see that Jesus is our ruler. It speaks to his authority and that he leads us. He is the head of the body of Christ.

Obviously, when it comes to the position of authority, Jesus is at the top of the ladder. Paul tells us that the Father has “*exalted [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name.*” Consequently when we get a glimpse into heaven, we see all of heaven worshipping Jesus. Every creature sings, “*To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever.*”

And yet, even when we talk of the authority of Jesus, we discover *the great shepherd* who is a servant leader. He who was at the top of the ladder came down to the bottom of the ladder and took on the form of a servant. Most people spend their lives trying to climb up the ladder. Jesus climbed down the ladder. When the prophet Ezekiel points out the failure of the religious leaders, the shepherds of Israel, he tells them that God will set up a shepherd to care for his people and in Ezekiel 34:23-24 this coming shepherd is called “*my servant David.*” He is talking about Jesus, the Messianic Son of David. Here he says that “the servant” will also be the “prince” among them. In Revelation the picture of Jesus is both the exalted Lion of Judah who also happens to be the humble Lamb that was slain. He is Savior and Lord. That is what makes Jesus *the great shepherd*. The one with all authority leads us by taking on the form of a servant and being obedient unto death. He is the Great Shepherd and he leads me.

### **The Chief Shepherd: 1 Peter 5**

In this passage, Jesus is called *the chief Shepherd*. It says in 1 Peter 5:4, “*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you shall receive the unfading crown of glory.*” Who shall receive this crown of glory when Jesus returns? Well in the context he is speaking to the elders of the church. He says at the beginning of the chapter, “*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder . . . Shepherd the flock of God that is among you . . . And when the chief Shepherd appears, you shall receive the unfading crown of glory.*” It almost reads like an organizational flowchart. Jesus is the head and under Jesus, elders have been appointed to shepherd the flock of God. If nothing else, these elders will have to give an account when Christ returns, because the people they shepherd are precious to Jesus. So precious are they that he died for them.

This tells us that there needs to be a sense of order to the church and that order has been



established by Jesus. How do you know when a group has become a church? It is a good church planting question to ask. At what point does this endeavor transition into a viable church? The Reformers identified three key markers that need to be present in order to be a viable local church. First of all, it needs to be marked by the preaching and the teaching of whole council of God's Word. Second, there needs to be the proper administration of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the ordinance that identifies you with Christ and the church and Communion demonstrates your ongoing fellowship with Christ and his people. Thirdly, there needs to be the proper oversight of the congregation. In other words there are elders who serve under "the chief shepherd" who are shepherding the people of God. In fact when the Reformers spoke about the oversight given to the church, they referred to it as church discipline. It is not only church discipline in the negative sense, but it was more the recognition that the elders are there to equip the people that the body may mature in Christ. Don't we see that emphasis in the benediction this morning? The aim of the benediction is that the blessing of God may "*equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ.*"

There are four fundamental resources that have been given to the church to help the church mature as followers of Jesus.

The Headship of Christ: First of all there is the recognition that Jesus is the head of the church. That means that the church is not a democracy. We serve a king and that king is Jesus. It says in our benediction that this one who rose from the dead is the *Lord Jesus*. And so we start with a posture of submission as we seek to be conformed to the image of Christ.

The Authority of the Bible: The Word of God is our authority. Paul says of the Word of God that it is "*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*" To what end do we come under the authority of God's Word? Paul adds, "*that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.*" In fact the reason why we are talking about elders and church leadership is because we want to bring our structure under the authority of God's Word. In our current governance structure we have an Executive Board. We don't have "elders." We have pastors. But the pattern of the New Testament is that there are a plurality of elders who are to shepherd the church. We need to consider how to align our structure of leadership with the Scriptures.

The Work of the Holy Spirit: While the church is an organization, it is even more so an

organism. It is people. The church is not a building. We are living stones and dwelling place for God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that baptizes us into body of Christ, indwells us and gives us gifts that we might build up each other in the faith. That is why the elders must pay attention to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. We can do a lot of organizing, but without the power of the Holy Spirit, we have nothing.

The Spiritual Oversight of the Elders: The final thing that God has given to the church to equip the church to be more like Christ is the oversight of elders. In 1 Peter 5:2 Peter says, “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.*” The oversight given by the elders is to be of such that they “*equip the saints for the work of the ministry.*” This is what builds up the body of Christ.

So what is it that leads to the maturity of the body of Christ?

- The headship of Jesus Christ over the church
- The authority of the Word of God
- The work of the Holy Spirit
- The spiritual leadership of the elders

Now one of these four are fallible. Clearly it is not Jesus. Clearly it is not the Word of God. Clearly it is not the Holy Spirit. That leaves us with the elders. They are no better than anyone else. But at the same time, there are expectations that they be marked with a measure of spiritual maturity. Next week we are going to look at the qualifications for a shepherd in the church. Peter says in 1 Peter 5:3 that the elder leads by being an example. And while they are not perfect, they are to be mature in the faith. In spite of their shortcomings, they are vital to the work of the church.

So Jesus is our chief shepherd. He is chief over many elders who serve in the local churches all around the world. As the chief shepherd he equips us. “*Now may the God of peace . . . equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen*”

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of the sermon I told you that I wanted you to see two things this morning.

First of all, I wanted you to consider the wonderful picture of Jesus your shepherd. Erwin Lutzer said of sheep, “No domesticated animal is as helpless as sheep. But don’t tell them that! Shepherds tell us that most sheep think that they are quite capable of living on their own. They are stubborn, manipulative and determined to find their own pasture. No matter how many years the shepherd has cared for them, they still acts as though he might do them wrong.”<sup>3</sup> Haddon Robinson put it this way. “Some commentators insist that the only reason God ever created sheep was to have an illustration of what Christians are like.”<sup>4</sup> But doesn’t that add to the tender picture of Jesus our shepherd. In spite of what we are like we can say:

Jesus is MY Shepherd - He knows me  
Jesus is the Good Shepherd - He loves me  
Jesus is the Great Shepherd - He leads me  
Jesus is the Chief Shepherd - He equips me

This picture of Jesus becomes the template for the shepherds who are accountable to God to serve his church. We need to know the sheep. We need to love the sheep. We need to lead the sheep as servant leaders who are willing to sacrifice much to lead. We need to equip the sheep so that together we might be mature as we seek to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to this generation.

For the glory of God!

---

<sup>1</sup>James K. A. Smith *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) 207

<sup>2</sup>Tim Madigon *I’m Proud of You: My Friendship with Fred Rodgers* (Los Angeles: Ubuntu Press, 2012)

<sup>3</sup>Erwin Lutzer *The Shepherd and His Sheep* [www.moody.church.org](http://www.moody.church.org)

<sup>4</sup>Haddon Robinson *Psalms Twenty-Three* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968) 15-16

**Sermon Title:** The Great Shepherd  
**Sermon Text:** Hebrews 13:20-21  
**Sermon Date:** April 22, 2018

## COMMUNITY GROUPS

### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Now that the weather is finally getting warmer, what outdoor activity are you most looking forward to do? What do you enjoy most about that activity?
2. What did you learn about benedictions from the sermon? What are some practical steps you can take to actively receive the weekly benediction?
3. What is one thing you took from the sermon this past week?

### Diving Into The Word

4. Read Psalm 23. Which phrase from this psalm is of most comfort to you and why? Read also Psalm 139:1-12. How does this passage encourage you?
5. Read John 10:7-18. What is it in this passage that makes Jesus “the good shepherd?” What causes you to doubt God’s love for you? How can this passage reassure you?
6. Read Hebrews 13:20-21. As the “Great Shepherd” Jesus is worthy of our worship. What in this passage inspires you to give thanks to Jesus?
7. Read 1 Peter 5:1-4. What are the instructions given to elders? How do you see the character of Jesus reflected in the instructions given to the elders?

### Taking It Home

8. Spend some time praying for the leaders and the leadership of WEFC. Pray that they would know the sheep, love the sheep, be servant leaders of the sheep and equip the sheep.
9. Have a member of the group pronounce the benediction of Hebrews 13:20-21 over the group before you leave.