

The Shepherd and Overseer of Your Souls

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 7, 2017

1 PETER 2:19-25

¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

Sheep without a shepherd, straying, jeopardized by predators, walking through a dark valley fearing death, this is the life of the sinner.

The sinner, like a sheep, stays busy. He always has something to do, like a sheep always moving to the next clump of grass; he always is busy, trying to find shelter from the sun, or find a warm place to lay down at night. The sheep does not live a pointless life, there's plenty of activity and busy-ness. But the sheep is able to do nothing about the fear, the danger, the lurking predator.

The sinner does not live a pointless life. At least it doesn't seem that way at the time. There's always something in front of him to be done, moving from one task to another, keeping lids on all the pots; he's always busy, trying to make up for this problem or that one. There's always activity and busy-ness. But the sinner is able to do nothing to answer the fear of death, to address the danger of an unclean conscience, or to rescue himself from the devil.

The danger is, of course, how do I, as a sinner, find peace in my conscience? How do I stand in confidence, with no fear, at the face of God? How will I hear the accusations of the devil and know that this demonic predator has no power over me?

You were, says Peter, ***straying like sheep, but now you have been returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*** [1 Peter 2:25]

We have a Shepherd. We have one who is concerned with us, who is keeping us in life, who, as Peter says, is the Overseer of our souls.

That's the picture: sheep who are unable to rescue themselves from the devil, unable to feed themselves and bring themselves into eternal life, but a Shepherd, who calls us his sheep and leads us with his voice.

The famous atheist Christopher Hitchens once wrote of what it means that Christians consider Jesus to be their shepherd.

Hitchens, who died a few years ago, was a famous and outspoken atheist, and he even wrote a book titled, *God is Not Great*. He was one of the so-called "New Atheists," along with other famous names such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Which means, if you're keeping up with the conversations on our college campuses, you're going to be in contact often with the atheistic theology of Hitchens.

Christopher Hitchens had a biting thing to say about Jesus being the Good Shepherd. He said that shepherds do only two things to sheep. They either shear them, or they butcher them.

And we can concede, Hitchens has a point. That might be, after all what you expect from shepherds in our world—they have the sheep to either shear or butcher.

But Hitchens missed the critical point about this Shepherd, Jesus Christ—the big point, the point so glaringly obvious it's hanging right out in the open on a cross.

Jesus is the Shepherd of the Church. He is the Shepherd for you and me and our families. But he made himself our Shepherd not by sheering or butchering, but by dying. He gave himself to be killed for the sheep.

He makes himself our shepherd not by making us serve him, but by him serving us. Matthew 20:28:

²⁸ **[Jesus said,] “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”**

Jesus is like no other Shepherd. He willingly suffered for the sheep, not they for him. He committed no sin against his sheep, though we had against him.

He did not revile, even when it was deserved.

When he was persecuted and brought into suffering, he did not threaten.

When the fair thing to do would have been to destroy those who attacked him, to destroy every sinner for that matter, he instead entrusted himself to his Father.

Instead of holding us accountable for our sins, he bore them in his own body and put them to death on the tree.

When he saw straying sheep, he spoke kindly to us, he forgave our sin, he clothed us in his own righteousness, he served us with his gifts of grace and life—for he came not to be served but to serve—and he returned us to the sheepfold, making himself, in his mercy, in his kindness, the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

If Jesus were the shepherd Christopher Hitchens spoke of, the shepherd who sheers and butchers the sheep, then he would come to us with no mercy, no grace, no life, but with the Law.

And with the Law he would be making demands on the sinner and coercing us to serve him—but he came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

If he came with the Law he would be, then, just the shepherd the world would expect. If we had as our shepherd a Lord who coerced service, who demanded obedience as the price-tag of keeping ourselves in the sheepfold, who made the sheep know him for his power, his judgment, and his control of all things—if that's the shepherd our Lord came as, then we would have a Lord no different than that of the Muslims or the Mormons, or any other manmade religion, any other religion of works-righteousness under the Law.

But you have been called, proclaims the Apostle, to the life of Christ. You have been called to the Lord Christ who suffered for you, who committed no sin, no deceit, but who, when persecuted, did not strike back, when he suffered, did not threaten, but who, instead, entrusted himself to the Father, and went to the cross in that confidence.

So now, we endure suffering as those who belong to Christ. When reviled, we do not strike back, when persecuted, the Christian does not threaten, when sinned against, we do not hold onto the sin, for we entrust ourselves to God.

And we do this not under compulsion, not under fear or coercion, but we do it freely and with joy, as those who have been returned to Christ who suffered for us, and who is now the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

And when we see where we have treated others in vengeance, or have held onto sins of those who have sinned against us, or have been stingy with our gifts to others and our service to neighbor, when we see, that is, where we are found to be sheep who have gone astray, we entrust ourselves to God, we commend ourselves, body and soul and all things to him who has healed us with his own wounds, who died for us that we might confess our sin and live to righteousness—to him, that is, who forgives our sin and announces himself as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

He is the Shepherd who is kind and gracious, who knows us by Name, who forgives our sin, and is with us through all things.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.