

# The Life of the Good Shepherd

John 10:11—18

## Introduction

Happy “Good Shepherd” Sunday! The Gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday of Easter for each year of the three-year lectionary is taken from **John 10**, where Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. The Psalm reading is always **Psalm 23**, the “Shepherd” Psalm. Having raised sheep (see my book, ***Parables of a Twenty-first Century Shepherd***), this has become my favorite Sunday of the Easter season, not counting Resurrection Sunday, of course. Raising sheep has given me a new perspective on being a pastor, a shepherd of God’s flock. Even with the differences in methods of sheep-raising, I can still relate. There is one difficult aspect, though: “*The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep*” (**John 10:11**).

## Dying for the Sheep

Our sheep were raised in fenced-in pastures. These fences helped keep predators at bay. And if we heard of a pack of coyotes or wild dogs around, we would keep the sheep in the barn overnight. But the people in Jesus’ audience would have understood; a shepherd out in the open country may very well have to risk his life for his sheep. He must protect his flock at all costs.

## Laying Down His Life

Jesus mentions four times in these eight verses that He *lays down His life* (**v. 11, 15, 17, 18**). He’s not speaking figuratively, nor merely potentially, but prophetically. He’s not just *willing* to lay down His life, He *will* lay down His life. To lay down His life is not just to die for the sheep, but to *willingly* die for them. He emphasizes this when He says, “*I lay it down of My own accord*” (**v. 18**). But why would He do that?

## Redemption

In a word, redemption. The ***Explanation of the Small Catechism*** says: *Christ voluntarily humbled Himself in order to “redeem me, a lost and condemned person” (Q: 133)*. By His death on the cross, He took our sin, which causes our eternal death, upon Himself. And through His resurrection, gives us new life. Theodore of Mopsuestia said: *[Jesus gives] new life to men and women after taking death from them* (**Commentary on John 4.10.10—11**).

## His Motivation – Love

He did this willingly. What could have motivated Him to go through death for us? Love. But this is not the pabulum love the world talks about and knows. That love is

touchy-feely and anemic. It's attractive because it's cheap. There's no risk, no danger involved. Peter Chrysologus says about the love Christ showed on the cross: *The face of love makes a person brave because genuine love counts nothing as hard, or bitter, or serious, or deadly* (**Sermon 40**). Motivated by genuine love, Jesus risked it all for the object of His love, His sheep.

## A Word for Pastors

In our Epistle reading, we read this from John's first letter: *By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers* (**1 John 3:16**). John is saying in His letter that we are to imitate our Good Shepherd. The application for pastors is obvious. As I shepherd God's flock here, I am to have the love of Christ in me. This love then motivates me to live for and, if needs be, die for the sheep God has entrusted to my care. Yet, I am not to do this out of a sense of duty. It is not a drain or a nuisance. It is a joy because it is motivated by love.

## Pass It On

But John isn't writing this letter to pastors. He's writing to all Christians. He's saying that we are each responsible for our brothers and sisters in Christ. And imitating Christ, His love motivates us to live and die for each other. But how can we do that?

## Through His Resurrection

Because Christ laid His life down of *His own accord, He was able to take it up again* (**v. 18**). Because He has taken it up, He still lives and is still our Shepherd. He has not left us alone. He is not just our Example; He's our Savior and our Sustainer. By His Spirit, through His Word, He gives us the power to live for Him and to live as He would have us to live. Receive that power today through Word and Sacrament and remember that:

Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed, Alleluia!**

---

*And the peace of God,  
Which surpasses all understanding,  
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

---