

¹³ But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

¹⁶ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷ encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Dear Friends in Christ,

A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23 is just what the title says. A shepherd shares what he learned through decades of sheep herding. The author says this: After eating grass, the thing sheep most enjoy is wandering. As soon as a shepherd takes his eyes off a herd he is going to have trouble. Sheep are gone, lost in some hedge or caught in a fence or turned around over the hilltop headed the wrong direction. Kind of like when you gently set fresh eggs on the countertop. Take your eyes off them for a second and they get a mind of their own.

Several times, the Bible compares people to sheep for just that reason. Some just wander, not really looking where they are going. Others seem intent on going where they know they are not supposed to go. The only reason for a “No Trespassing” sign must be because there is something good back there.

Nowhere is this more true than in spiritual matters. The very flesh we have urges us in the wrong direction. There are people who say that they have genetic predispositions to one sin or another. They are right! We know that for some reason some people’s DNA makes them susceptible to alcoholism or anger or a hundred other sins. Such people do have a great burden in life. There is nothing more frightening than the enemy lurking within. (Consider the stress caused by home-grown terrorism.) Add to it that all of us, however wonderful our parents or guardians were, were raised by people infected by sin. Those parents may have steered us in the right way, but we also know that they had their own weaknesses. And we know that we are always surrounded by ungodly influences. If both nature and nurture, both genetics and environment, were corrupted from the beginning, it is no wonder that we wander.

So, no wonder that the Christian Church has its difficulties. One of the perpetual difficulties in any church is that some people stop coming to church. Beyond church they stop praying before their meals. Bibles are never opened and conversation never turns to things spiritual. Those sheep are on the fringes of God’s pastureland.

And they all have their own reason. “Church is mostly about rules. Can’t I worship God on my own time? I can read my Bible just as well at home as hear it at church. Etc.”

Or the temptations to wander come in stronger doses. The promises of illicit pleasures are on the television, on the so-called smart phone, heard over the radio morning show, while sitting in the cafeteria. And so people wander. It really isn’t very surprising. The most surprising thing is that more don’t!

It then falls to the church to pick up the pieces.

Eventually the people at church notice, and one of them stops by. He pulls up in a car and the person inside the house knows why they are there. Nine weeks of no church and you start seeing

people who never stopped by before. Or stuck in a cycle of sin, you know who will come after you. They will come in and start asking uncomfortable questions. No, at a point like that it is better to just sit there real quiet like and let them ring the doorbell four or five times, peek in the window and then go. It's too much shame or bother or hypocrisy or an unwanted speech. What can the church do?

Here is something most guys will understand: Few things as satisfying as hammering a nail good and square. Got that steel hammer in your hand, biting your tongue just a bit, eyeing up the nail, a couple swings and that nail is pounded in flush. Nothing so satisfying. I don't know what the equivalent would be for ladies. But for guys its good drive a nail once in a while.

But it gets to be a problem when you are a church elder or a pastor, or go to school with a bunch of people who have no concept of morality. It sure is nice to just take the hammer and whack a few nails. Except—we know that it really doesn't help. We know that that approach to sin and wandering people drives them far, far away – kinda like a nail if there were no board to stop it. And even more, we know that that is not how Jesus wants us to deal with sin.

So now we have three problem. A problem of wandering people, a problem of wandering people who don't want to be shepherded back, a problem of shepherds who don't always act with obvious love.

Does this sermon seem rather negative to you guys? It sure does to me. It always does when we focus on problems rather than the solution. But we need to know the problems so that we can find the solution. Let's go back to the word of God for today. Let's find some answers.

Solution to problem #1: Wandering Sheep

When it comes to the problem of wandering sheep, remember that this applies to all of us. There is no one, no matter what they say, who can claim pure thoughts, words and deeds at all points of life, even for a single day. So what I say about wandering sheep isn't the sort of thing where we first point at others.

What is the solution? Start where God started. ***“From the beginning God chose you to be saved.”*** God planned it all out. How? ***“Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.”*** When it comes to the beginning of faith, two things are always together: the Holy Spirit and God's Word. The Holy Spirit is the workman, God's Word is his tool. The Holy Spirit works through the Word so that we may believe. The power is not ours. ***“He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** (13-14) Only one thing can bring people to know Jesus Christ, and that is hearing the Gospel.

In the same way, there is one thing that *keeps* us sheep close to the Shepherd. God's Word is the water that caused our faith to germinate. That same water causes our faith to grow. When we want to know God's direction for our lives, we need to go back to the source of life. Paul emphasizes this: ***“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you.”*** ***“Stand firm*** in God's Word.”

Standing your ground is where you find victory. In the past month there was an attack by rebels in Nigeria. The soldiers of that country fled the field. (To be fair, those soldiers have serious problems like having to pay for their own uniforms.) Witnesses said that the soldiers were throwing away their guns, tearing off their uniforms, stealing civilian clothes so that the rebels would not target them. Of course the battle was lost. The army did not stand its ground.

Unlike soldiers with only three rounds in the magazine or who have to buy their own uniforms, Christians are well equipped. ***“Stand firm and hold on to the teachings we passed on to you.”*** The Christian is well-equipped as long as he stays close to that word. That is why it is so important for people to regularly come to Sunday worship.

When we wonder why Christians don't act the way we might expect, we have to remember this. You cannot expect people to act like Christians when they are not hearing God's Word. Underequipped, undertrained, undernourished athletes and soldiers will lose ground and just plain lose. But when we stay close to God's Word, the result changes. ***"God will encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word."*** That Word of God strengthens us to do what God wants and to say "No" to temptation. That is how the problem of wandering sheep is solved.

Solution to problem #3 – Shepherds who sometimes don't show love

At many times, you get the idea that the Christians under Paul's care were a very frustrating lot. In spite of that, almost every single one of his thirteen letters in the Bible start with words like the first words of our reading. Christian parents, take note. Pastors and elders, think about this. Every Christian, learn. Look at Paul's attitude in our reading.

He said, ***"We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord."*** When you give thanks for something, you take care of it. Think of a treasured gift. On my tenth birthday my dad walked me down to the local hardware store and I got the pocketknife of my choice – within reason. Still have it. You probably have a similar gift from half a lifetime ago or longer. Thankfulness for a gift leads to care of that gift.

And when we are thankful for our fellow Christians, like Paul was here, we start to take care of them. Mixing my metaphors, no longer are the wandering sheep merely nails to be hammered back into place. They are "brothers and sisters" (to use the Bible's word at this point), "brothers and sisters" I am thankful for whether we see eye to eye or not, whether they are wandering or not. Even if I as the pastor must speak strong words, I hope that my joy over you is evident. Let it ever be obvious to others, that the Christian first and foremost rejoices in every soul saved no matter what they do.

And here is the Solution to Problem #2 (Yes, I know that I mixed up the numbering. It just seemed to work better that way.) – Wandering sheep who don't want a shepherd.

When you give thanks to God for fellow believers, you rejoice in them, and they see that. They start to open the door instead of hiding behind closed curtains. OK, I won't be unrealistic. Some will still hide. But in general, when you show your joyful Christianity to people, they are willing to listen. Indeed, they are eager to have a conversation. A chance for change has dawned.

Stand your ground in God's teachings. When we do, we stop wandering. We are strengthened, and we will strengthen those around us. Amen.