Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

“The good shepherd”

Happy Father’s Day men. Today we are going to give you a model that you can follow in your lives and an image for yourselves that you can take with you for the rest of your life. That is the image of a shepherd. On Mother’s Day I mentioned that we each think our moms are the best, like mine was, but today I can definitively say that I had the best dad ever. He was a lot of fun and coached some of my teams. I’ll never forget when he had a big meeting in NYC that Saturday afternoon and Saturday morning he was coaching my basketball team in a suit. Some kid put gum on the bench, he sat on it, and went to the meeting with gum on his backside. He was a great dad.

There have been some not so great dads in the news lately. Did you hear about the dad who had 22 children with 14 women and in an interview he stated that he had been ambitious. The reason why he was in the news was because he hadn’t paid any child support and the state was pumping $7,500 a month to raise his kids while he had no contact with them at all. Not much of a shepherd, more like a wolf than anything else.

Today men, you become shepherds, good shepherds, beautiful shepherds, model shepherds. Both of our Scriptures provide examples of shepherds whose responsibility of the sheep they take on gladly. Both describe God as our shepherd. This is not an unusual example. The most common description we have of God in the Bible, is the Father, which is appropriate today. Our God is seen as a Father, a perfect Father, who loves us unconditionally. The image of Shepherd is also seen throughout the Scripture and that’s what we are looking at today.

We are going to see fatherhood today in light of this shepherd imagery which is defined in John as having two fundamental characteristics that ought to define who we are: 1) sacrifice and knowledge of the child.

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I’ll never forget when I was asked to pray for a city council meeting and then the mayor said if you don’t mind carrying us over into the pledge of allegiance. I got through the prayer, turned toward the flag and I completely blanked. I couldn’t remember how it started at all. So I said the first thing that came to my mind, and I said it confidently and convincingly: I believe in God the Father Almighty, and before long the entire room was saying the Apostles’ Creed. If you are a leader and speak and act with authority others will follow along.

The shepherd in the Bible is a very familiar image and it is used consistently to describe, at least in the Old Testament, the political ruler of the people of God, or the religious leaders of the Israelites. Psalm 23 describes the Lord as the Shepherd who provides peace and prosperity not only for an individual but for an entire nation as well. Both David and Moses, leaders of the nation of Israel in very different times in the life of God’s people, were shepherds who tended their sheep before they took a more political role.

In the Old Testament the mention of shepherds is not always in a very positive light, like David and Moses are seen. If you turn to Ezekiel 34 the entire chapter is devoted to the Shepherds of Israel who have turned their backs on the people. They had abandoned the people and were only looking out for their own interests. Ezekiel states: You shepherds who are feeding yourselves, you have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. The shepherd was the leader of the people and God here is not very happy with them.

The shepherd, the one watching over the people and watching over this family, very simply had to care if they were going to be an effective shepherd. If you are going to take on the responsibility of a family, whether it is as a political leader, a leader in the church, or a parent in your family, you have to care and love the people and your children.

Jesus describes himself here as the good shepherd, and we know how much he cared. It’s interesting because this term that we have which is good is kalos in Greek which means beautiful. Jesus is the beautiful shepherd which doesn’t sound too unusual if you look at I Samuel 16:12 that describes David as “ruddy, had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.”

But it isn’t the physical attributes that make a good shepherd or a good father for that matter. But there are two attributes that we find Jesus laying out here in these verse of who we should be as fathers. These attributes are sacrifice and knowledge of our kids. And remember, as we know Jesus was not a biological father, these are attributes applicable to anyone who is in that type of a fatherly role.

Let’s look at sacrifice. 4 times in these 8 verses Jesus describes the act of laying down our life for the sheep. We know that there is no greater love that we can have for a person than to lay down our lives for them. We know that is what Jesus did for us not just to set a fatherly example, but to redeem us from our sin.

But this whole concept of sacrifice is not really embraced in our culture. We aren’t willing to sacrifice for our kids so that they might be able to see us more often. We understand the long hours of work as a sacrifice so they can live better lives by having more stuff. Jesus talks about laying down his life, dying for our sake. That is not the type of sacrifice he is describing because our kid would rather have more of us and less stuff. The sacrifices that we have to make for our children is to put our desires and our priorities behind us so that they are able to see and feel our shepherding presence. The disappearance of the dad is a phenomenon in our culture that is incredibly widespread.

Ultimately biology does not a father make, no matter how fertile your race may be. Joseph becomes Jesus’ father in Matthew 1:25 because he is the one who names him, he is the one who claims him. The claiming and naming of a child and the willingness to sacrifice for that child makes us fathers. So often father who may be estranged from their children will tell me of those individual times that they sacrificed for their kids, as if they were some superhero because of it. I gave them money to buy a phone, I drove all the way to see them graduate. As if this somehow makes them a father, and a good father at that. A shepherd, a father has to live a life of sacrifice for their kids, and enjoy doing it. It isn’t always convenient and doesn’t always fit into our schedule, but we have to care enough to make it work and want it to work.

I guess this is where I stop and say that there are no fathers who fully embrace this role and understand it and live in it. It doesn’t always come naturally or easy, but you have to want to be a father in order to be a father.

You see, in verse 13 we read of someone who may have fathered a child, but doesn’t really care for that child, or in our society normally the child and the mom fend for themselves. The distinction of a good father is such that sacrifice is made not out of obligation or guilt, but because the father genuinely cares. It is a lifetime of sacrifice that is not regretted. And Jesus says that to proves he cares for us he is willing to lay down his life for us, which in fact he did.

The second attribute of what it takes to be a good father, or a good shepherd, is what Jesus states in verse 14 that he knows his own and his own know him. We mentioned last week what Jesus meant when he said that the shepherd calls his sheep by name and they respond to him. They know him. Jesus calls us by name. They know him. Elsewhere in Scripture we read that God knows even the number of hair on our head, in Luke 12:7, I guess that means that he knows some of us better than others.

But what does it mean to know our children as our heavenly father knows us? Especially as children migrate from clinging to you in public, to holding your hand, to not wanting to be seen with you anywhere in public, back to holding your hand, to clinging to you at the end of life. There is a natural progression of more or less knowledge of our children, but the key is never to stop trying to know them.

The relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is a mutual one if not an unbalanced one. Sheep don’t tend to be the smartest animals. They will eat anything put out in front of them and get sick, and do this habitually. They will fall down and not even try to get up, which is why that shepherd’s crook comes in handy.

We are the sheep of God’s pasture and in spite of our cluelessness I Corinthians 8:3 states that anyone who loves God is known by him and II Timothy 2:19 tells us: “The Lord knows those who are his. Only to be matched by Jesus in vs. 14 when he states I know my own and my own know me, and then he continues and states that his own father knows him just as he knows us. Sacrifice and knowledge of God and God’s knowledge of us.

There is a point in Israel’s history where God realizes that the leaders he put into place to rule over his people simply are not ruling and are completely leaving their sheep to fend for themselves. As a result, he says, he will remove them and then, in vs. 11 of Ezekiel 34 he himself will have to be the one who goes and gathers up his children and protects them and keeps them. The fathers had given up their responsibilities.

As a church we ought to look for opportunities where we can be surrogate fathers to those children in our midst. We have 4 on our own property who need our help. New Beginning is looking for some people who can help watch the kids once a week as we help the shepherd of the home in a whole variety of ways. It is our opportunity put before us, right on our front step. There are times we have to take on that responsibility with thanksgiving that God has placed us in the right place at the right time. Amen.