

PATHWAYS

A Message About God's Guidance The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 4)

Do We Recognize the Danger of Poor Paths?

There is a *hidden premise* in our text for the day. When David says that the shepherd “**leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake,**” he is taking for granted that his readers understand what happens when sheep *aren't* actively led along “right paths.” He is assuming that we know the sort of miserable life that would unfold for the sheep if they *weren't* under the leadership of someone who guided them on the pathways that provide the best pastures, the fullest life for the sheep, the greatest credit to the good name of the shepherd himself.

You see, by nature, sheep are much more concerned with finding *convenient* paths than with locating “*right*” ones. Left to their own devices, they will tend to feed on the *same* portion of the pasture hour-after-hour, day-after-day, without any sensitivity to its limitations. Unlike cattle, sheep don't graze; they clear-cut. They will eat the grass right down to the ground, and then paw up the earth to get at the roots. They will walk back and forth in the same foot-trails till they become deep muddy ruts. They will soil the same ground over and over again till it becomes polluted with parasites and disease. These wooly locusts will turn once-productive grassland into a wasteland over time.

But the land isn't the only thing that gets destroyed; the *sheep themselves* are eventually ruined by their own patterns. As depletion, erosion, and disease do their work on the pasture, the sheep grow thinner, sicker, and more agitated, without the slightest clue as to how to correct the situation.

The scary thing is that people can be like that too. We can be creatures of *convenient* pathways rather than of *right* ones. We can feed on the same ground, over and over again, trying to draw more nourishment out of certain people, places, or past-times than is really good for them or for us. We get into ways of thinking, talking, or acting that become muddy ruts from which we can't seem to escape, and sometimes don't even think to. Some of us will blindly follow along the same trails we have seen others walk, rarely asking ourselves: “Is this way really best?” Some of us may criticize, accuse, and discount the people closest to us—in effect soiling the very ground of relationship upon which we feed—then wonder why we or some of our family members are not as healthy as we'd hoped.

Are We Allowing Ourselves to be Led By the Good Shepherd?

Moved by the Again, that is why it is such good news that there is a shepherd. You see a *good shepherd is constantly studying the relationship between the sheep and their environment*. He is continually asking himself: “Is the balance right here? Have my sheep reached the point of maximum benefit from this place yet? Is it time to move them on? Underlying this study is the fact that the shepherd knows the land intimately. He knows the natural advantages and liabilities of every section of the territory. He knows where the flocks

will thrive and where the forage is poor, because it is his land. So, *at strategic intervals, the shepherd seeks to keep his sheep on the move.*

What I want to ask this morning is: Are you allowing Him to do that with you? Are you allowing God to lead you not just in the *convenient* pathways, but in the *righteous* ones—the ones that line up with God’s holy nature and your best interests, and the needs of this pasture we call “the world”? In other words, since becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, how much have you seen the ground beneath you change? I ask that because if you are truly being led by the Good Shepherd, believe me, you’re not going to be in quite the same place today that you were yesterday. He’s going to be constantly leading you toward *higher* pastures.

You may wonder how one even tells; so let me suggest a few questions that have been helpful to me in assessing whether I am walking in right paths or just covering the same old ground. I take as my standard of righteousness, the call of the shepherd himself. For example, Jesus says: **“You are the light of the world... the salt of the earth.”**¹ And so I try to ask myself regularly: “In the last month, how many times have I heard people say: ‘Wow, I see that situation or that value better now because of you.’ In what practical ways have I been a taste-enhancing, purity-preserving spice in my social circle?”

Or here’s another one. Jesus said: **“Whoever among you would be the greatest must become the servant of all.”**² So I ask myself: “Can I name even three occasions in the past month when I deliberately sought out a position of unsung service; when I deliberately forsook being the ‘Top Sheep’ when I might have, in order to be a ‘tail-ender’? Have I done this not with a martyric groan or a condescending smugness, but with true humility, considering it a privilege to serve because it met others needs and emulated Christ himself?”

Jesus said: **“Whoever looks upon a person with lust has committed adultery... whoever gazes at someone with anger has committed murder...”**³ So, I find it helpful to ask myself: Can I clearly identify significant improvement in my capacity to control or redirect my thought-life in accordance with this standard of righteousness? Jesus says: **“Whatever you did or did not for one of the least of my brothers or sisters you did or did not to me.”**⁴ So I try to ask occasionally: “How have I progressed in the past year in my practical care for the least of these? Are there people who have been visited, sheltered, fed, or clothed” because I allowed myself to be led in paths of righteousness?”

Jesus said: **“Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you for my sake...”**⁵ Can I point to a single instance in the last year that I was so passionately living out the values of Christ’s Kingdom that I came into conflict with the kingdoms of this world—that I came under attack from the wolves of the old order? Or then again, Jesus said: **“Whoever would come after me must deny self, take up his or her cross, and follow.”**⁶ Can I name even one instance in the past week when I definitely denied my own desires or rights, and instead shouldered a heavy burden or painful sacrifice in order to help redeem the soul or the quality of life of even one other human being?

Or one more test. Jesus said: **“Take no worry for tomorrow...⁷ Trust in God. Trust also in me.”**⁸ And so I ask myself: “How much progress have I seen in the past year in the arena of

anxiety-reduction? Am I learning to live through changes and challenges with a greater attitude of gratitude for my existing blessings and a greater trust in God for the future?" This isn't an exhaustive list by any means, but they are clearly some of the attributes that are meant to mark the life of someone who is truly walking in "**paths of righteousness.**" How about you? Are you walking those higher pathways, or are you still covering the same old muddy ground?

Do We See the Way to Higher Ground?

If you are anything like me, then you answer that question somewhat sheepishly! You have to admit, "Lord, I've been pretty baaaaaad!" That's no big surprise. For as the prophet Isaiah says, "**We all like sheep have gone astray, each one of us to our own way.**"⁹ We may sing about how "He Leadeth Me, O Blessed Thought," but when it comes to doing more than singing—when it comes to leaving behind the familiar, convenient ground, and venturing forth to the higher pastures—a lot of us are hard-headed, stiff-necked, and slow.

Again I say, that's why it is such great news that we don't just have any shepherd, but the *Good Shepherd*. He doesn't give up on you and me. When you go back out of this fold into the pasture today, He will be there waiting for you. He'll be there, deliberately taking measures to lead you off whatever barren or muddy ground you may be walking, and onto the right path. In fact, let me close by suggesting that there are two specific measures the shepherd may take to move you on. Watch for them.

In the FIRST place, pay attention to the dogs. For centuries, shepherds have used dogs to herd the sheep in the right direction. Now sheep aren't particularly fond of dogs, and I can't really blame them. Who likes to be barked at or nipped in the heels? But the truth remains that many a sheep has gone on to a fuller life because the Shepherd put such creatures in the field. I know that's true of me. At my best moments, I'd like to hang a sign around me neck like the one once seen posted on the back of a trailer on the highway. It read: "If I'm not heading west, please stop me and turn me around!" I don't want to be travelling the wrong path. And so, as much as I hate to be barked at by other people, as much as I'm annoyed by those who keep nipping at me to change, I know I need them. I don't think I would have traveled very far in life without them.

Who are the dogs in *your* life? I don't mean the wolves. There is a difference. Wolves sink their teeth in and don't let go, because they're working only for themselves. They're out for your blood. But sheepdogs bark, maybe nip, and then back off, because they're working only for the Master. And He'd give His own blood to meet your deepest need. So, do yourself a favor—look for the shepherd's dogs this week. Let them move you along. Dare, perhaps, but dare humbly and with much prayer, to even *BE* such a dog to a brother or sister who has gotten stuck on merely convenient ground.

Then, FINALLY, as you go out into the pasture this week, follow the bellwether. Have you ever heard that word before? Do you know what a bellwether is? I'm told that a good shepherd will select from among his flock a strong sheep, one that is respected by the others, yet who was also responsive to the shepherd's leadership. Many times, this bellwether sheep is one who,

at one time had been a rebellious and wandering animal, yet whose ways had gotten him or her into serious trouble. Because the shepherd has rescued him or her from that mess, often personally nursing that animal back to health, now that sheep will follow the shepherd anywhere. The shepherd will actually put a *bell* around that sheep's neck so that the others can hear him. Thus, rather than putting all his energy into trying to corral and cajole the whole flock, the Shepherd will simply concentrate on leading that one sheep. And—to improve upon the old rhyme—everywhere that bellwether went, the lambs were sure to go.

Look around you this week and listen. Somewhere not too far away, the shepherd has placed a bellwether—someone who is modeling what it looks like to follow Jesus. She may be modeling what it looks like to stand up for kingdom values in a compromising and corrupt world. He may be modeling what it sounds like to be more concerned with building up others than with advancing self. She may be truly caring for the least of these. He may be simply keeping his promises to his family. The bellwether may be someone who gives sacrificially or shares the light of the gospel; someone who confesses sin and asks for forgiveness; someone who puts more faith in the promises of God than in the power and possessions of man. The bellwether may be someone who works to reconcile relationships or gives generously.

I don't know what aspect of righteousness that person's life will ring out with. But this I do know. The bellwether you need most to follow will already be out there in the field. How do I know that? Because as clueless as I am in many areas of life, this much I do know—I know the shepherd. I know the heart He has for his sheep. Were even one of them to get lost—to get stuck in some rut or overly fixated on some barren turf... Were even one among millions to become so sick of soul that he or she didn't even know how lost he or she was... the shepherd would go in search of them, become a Lamb Himself if that's what it took to win their trust. He would lay His life down for the sake of the sheep, if need be. He would do all that—and indeed He has—to lead us in the right paths—to the higher pastures.

Won't you come with Him?

Let us pray...

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What's one area of your life where you may be walking merely on "convenient ground" versus the "right path"?
2. Where's an area where you feel like you've seen some progress in following Christ's leading?
3. Think of someone who has been one of the Good Shepherd's "dogs," barking or nipping at you. How have they helped you?
4. Think of someone who has been a bellwether to you? How has this person been used to affect your life?

¹Matthew 5:13-14

²Luke 22:25-27

³Matthew 5:20-22; 27-28

⁴Matthew 25:40

⁵Matthew 5:11

⁶Mark 8:34-36

⁷Matthew 6:25-33

⁸John 14:1

⁹Isaiah 53:6