

WHY IS THE SHEPHERD GOOD?

In the Gospel of Saint Luke, the evangelist tells a story of a rich young man of the aristocratic class who approaches Jesus with a question. “Good Master, what must I do to inherit everlasting life?” Jesus responds right away with something curious. “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.” We hear that little snippet of Scripture with twenty-first century ears. “Isn’t Jesus God?” we ask. “Yes,” we answer. “Then wasn’t the rich young man correct in addressing him as good?” we ask next. Ah right there is the rub.

It is not that Jesus isn’t good. Jesus is good. Thoroughly. It’s that the rich young man was using the word good almost as a throw away word, as a kind of polite address. The word ‘good’ in that young man’s address was no personal affirmation of Jesus’ actual goodness. It was to butter Jesus up with flattery. Good sir. My good man. It is very stylized but not at all sincere. Why do I go into this? Because Jesus has come to be known to us as The Good Shepherd. He could have been known as the Caring Shepherd. Or, the Faithful Shepherd. Or, the Reliable Shepherd. Or, the Guardian Shepherd. Instead Jesus is referred to as the Good Shepherd. And Jesus is very correct when he says that goodness belongs to God alone. The Good is one of what we call the Four Transcendentals. The Four Basic Attributes of God.

God is Good. God is True. God is One. God is Beautiful.

Goodness is also recognized as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is something that God does not keep to himself. Rather, God pours out his goodness. God shares his goodness. God acts out in his goodness. This goodness is a sign of God’s care, God’s protection, God’s forgiveness, God’s patience, God’s mercy. All these things speak to us of the fundamental characteristic of God. God is good. That is one of my favorite expressions. I use it a lot. I say it a lot. “God is good.” And I also say, “Thank you Jesus.” Instead of taking God’s name in vain when we are upset why don’t we go a whole different route? Why not speak out boldly when we notice something good that is evidently a result of the working of God’s grace. And say it. “God is good!” Instead of crying out some road rage foul language when someone cuts you out why not be thankful instead and affirm out loud. “Thank You Jesus. God is so good to save us like that.”

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Still. Even now. There were different kinds of shepherds back in his day. Some were not so good. Some were just hired hands looking for work. Some cared but some did not care. They just put in the time. Do you think the sheep could tell the difference? Can your pets tell the difference? With you? Can they tell who really cares, who will always be there for them, who will feed them and find them a safe place to sleep. Do you think animals cannot tell goodness in a person? What kind of shepherd are you? Are you basically good? Or self-centered? Disconnected? Not often interested.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He watches out for us. Here’s something. In the next life you will see all the times that God intervened on your behalf all throughout your life. You will grasp in an instant how good God is and how good God has been to you. Jesus is God’s Word in our flesh so that we could experience God up close and personal. Experience what the very inner goodness of God was like. Here’s the thing. God’s goodness does not stay put. It is on the move. It seeks another in whom to live, another whose heart needs transformation. That is what the Good Shepherd does.

There is a beautiful song written a few years back on the occasion of the woman's adopting her fourth child. It is called the Goodness of God. Here are the lyrics.

I love You, Lord For Your mercy never fails me
All my days, I've been held in Your hands
From the moment that I wake up Until I lay my head
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God.

.And all my life You have been faithful
And all my life You have been so, so good
With every breath that I am able
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God
I love Your voice, You have led me through the fire
In the darkest night, You are close like no other.

I've known You as a Father, I've known You as a Friend
And I have lived in the goodness of God (yeah)
And all my life You have been faithful (oh).
And all my life You have been so, so good.

With every breath that I am able
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God (yeah)
'Cause Your goodness is running after, It's running after me
Your goodness is running after, It's running after me.

With my life laid down I'm surrendered now
I give You everything 'Cause Your goodness is running after
It's running after me (oh-oh), 'Cause Your goodness is running after
It's running after me.

And all my life You have been faithful
And all my life You have been so, so good
With every breath that I am able
Oh, I'm gonna sing of the goodness of God
(I'm gonna sing, I'm gonna sing)

'Cause all my life You have been faithful
And all my life You have been so, so good
With every breath that I am able
Oh, I'm gonna sing of the goodness of God
Oh, I'm gonna sing of the goodness of God

(Bethel Music. Performed by Jenn Johnson. Inspired by the adoption of her fourth child.)

My friends, on this Good Shepherd Sunday when God's goodness pursues us will we stop the running? Will we be still and know that the Lord is God? Will we allow his goodness to catch up to us but also to enter into us? Will we allow the goodness that is running after us finally to catch us and find a welcoming heart? Come in Good Lord. I have been waiting—for a long, long time.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.