

The Church Part 8: Evil Shepherds and the Good Shepherd

Ezekiel 34:1-5a, 11-16; John 10:14-16; Matthew 25:31-34, 41

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Dear congregation of Christ: In August 2020, a popular pastor and author in Texas led a prayer meeting, saying, “Your church, your pastors, have broken your heart by favoring one skin color over another – oh, Lord God, have mercy on our souls. ... How dare we? ... How that must nauseate you, O Lord.” Later, in February 2021, he wrote, “To be clear, I believe in the traditional biblical understanding of marriage, but I also believe in a God of unbounded grace and love. LGBTQ... must be respected and treated with love. They are beloved children of God because they are made in the image and likeness of God.”

Who is this popular pastor and author? Max Lucado. He is one of the countless pastors and teachers who have gone “woke.” Some of these pastors have caused dissension in their churches, leading to the destruction of their churches. Some have even left, or are on their way, leaving the Christian faith. Many of you are probably asking, “What is woke?” The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the woke as a person who is “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).”

A 2021 satirical book entitled, *The Babylon Bee Guide to Wokeness*, has this dedication: “This book is dedicated to Joseph Stalin, a woke hero and champion of the oppressed proletariat.” It gives several examples of what it means to be a “woke” person, including: (1) Realizing the problems in your life are not your fault”; (2) Worshiping the planet because humanity is evil”; (3) Rejecting organized religion and mindlessly believing the Left”; (4) “Finding the racism, sexism, and hatred in everything”; (5) “Becoming an absolutely horrible person to be around”; and last but not least example, (6) “Changing your profile picture to match the current fad.” And I will add a seventh, more recent example: Fearing that the Prince who likes “Snow Black” is “a creepy stalker.”

Max Lucado and those pastors and teachers in the church who meet the above examples are “woke.” They are what the Bible calls evil, false “shepherds” who are greedy for money, power and pleasures. They do not feed, lead, and care for their flock. Because they do not do what God’s shepherds must do, the sheep have scattered “*over all the face of the earth.*” But there is one shepherd who is the Good Shepherd, Jesus himself. He is still gathering all his sheep who were scattered over the whole earth because of the evil shepherds. And when Jesus has gathered every one of his sheep, he will return from heaven, gather every single human being who has ever walked the earth, and separate his sheep from the rest of mankind, the goats. On that day, Judgment Day, he will send the sheep and the goats to their final, eternal dwelling-places.

Therefore, our theme today is, **The Church Part 7: Evil Shepherds and the Good Shepherd**, under three headings.

Evil Shepherds Scattered the Sheep

We begin with the shepherds of Israel in the Old Testament. The LORD condemned the shepherds of Israel through the prophets, particularly Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23. Who are Israel’s shepherds? They are the leaders of Israel: prophets, priests and kings. The prophets spoke God’s word to his people.

The priests led the people in worship, while the kings led the people in their civic life. But for most of Israel's history, their leaders failed them miserably.

How did the shepherds of Israel fail to lead God's people? Ezekiel 34:1-24 condemns these shepherds by pointing out the duties and responsibilities that they failed to do. First, they did not provide the material needs of the shepherds. They did not feed them. Instead, these shepherds fattened themselves by slaughtering the fat ones and taking the wool of the sheep to clothe themselves in the winter (2-3). Second, they did not care for them when they were weak, sick, and injured. Third, Israel's leaders did not care if some of the flock strayed and were lost. And fourth, they ruled with force and harshness in order to gain as much power and money from them (4).

And what was the result of their evil and wicked leadership? When wicked kings ruled, they led the people into the evil paths of idolatry, sexual immorality, desecration of the Sabbath, corruption, and violence and oppression of the poor. God therefore condemned not only the wicked shepherds, but also the wicked sheep. The prophet Jeremiah spoke God's word against these shepherds because their idolatry *"led my people Israel astray."* They committed adultery, lies, and strengthened evildoers, so that God's holy nation had become like the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Because of these false, evil prophets, *"ungodliness has gone out into all the land"* of God's people (Jer 23:13-15).

The evil shepherds not only led the flock into wickedness, but they also scattered them. Because the wicked leaders did not care for the needs of their sheep and were cruel to them, the sheep scattered all throughout the land. They went looking elsewhere so they do not starve or are beaten to death by their shepherds. Not only that, because the sheep were led into wicked ways by their wicked shepherds, God punished his people by scattering them throughout the lands of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and other pagan conquerors.

Who are these evil shepherds today? In Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23, God condemned Israel's kings, priests, and prophets. Israel was a theocracy, which means that every aspect of her life—moral, ceremonial, and civic—were under the rule of God himself. His appointed leaders were the kings, priests, and prophets. When Jesus came, God's kingdom and people is the church, all who believe and trust in Jesus as their Savior and King. Therefore, today's shepherds of God's sheep are the pastors, elders and deacons. This is why they are called "undershepherds"; they are not shepherds in their own right, but they serve Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep of God.

Evil shepherds today are not only those woke pastors and other leaders of churches. Many pastors fatten themselves with money to finance their mansions, yachts, jets, and luxury cars at the expense of their sheep. Because of their greed, they rule their flock with impunity. Take for example Mars Hill Church, a Seattle megachurch that used to have over 12,000 followers attending weekly. But its pastor ruled his church like a tyrant. Where is this church today? Gone. This evil pastor resigned, and the megachurch dissolved. Where is his flock today? Scattered here, there, and everywhere, some probably left the faith altogether. Take another example, that of a megachurch in Fort Lauderdale, Florida whose weekly attendance used to be more than 1,000. Because the pastor ruled like a dictator and received a \$250,000 annual salary, about 200 of its members protested the lack of financial accountability and transparency. What then did the pastor and other church leaders do? Instead of dialoguing with the protestors, they excommunicated those 200 members. Today, the weekly attendance is less than 200. These turn of events have happened even in Reformed churches.

What kind of shepherds are these? In Ezekiel 34:11-16, the LORD promised that he himself will be their shepherd who will seek out, gather, and restore his flock scattered throughout the land to his one sheepfold. He will feed them, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, and destroy the fat shepherds. This is why David says in Psalm 23:1, *“The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.”*

The Good Shepherd Gathers the Sheep

Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of God, is this Shepherd, saying in John 10, *“I am the good shepherd”* (11, 14). How is our Lord the good Shepherd, King David’s own Shepherd (Psa 23:1)?

First, Jesus is not a hired hand who has no concern for God’s flock. He was sent by his heavenly Father to *“seek and to save the lost”* sheep (Luke 19:10). He is the shepherd who left his flock of 99 sheep to seek for that one lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7). Second, Jesus knows each single sheep in his fold intimately even before the creation of the world—the day of your birth, your good works, your sins, your sufferings, all the way to the day of your death (14). Third, his search for his sheep who are not inside his fold will never end until all God’s chosen sheep are found, *“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day”* (John 6:39, also 40). He assures all his sheep that they are secure in his fold, that thieves—Satan and his false shepherds—would snatch them out of his Father’s almighty and merciful hands (John 10:28).

Fourth and last, our Lord Jesus Christ is the great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb 13:20) who provides for all their needs. Isaiah 40:11 speaks of the Christ as the Shepherd, *“He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”* David wrote in Psalm 23 how the LORD gathers, tends, carries, and leads him through *“the valley of the shadow of death.”* He makes him lie down in green pastures and still waters (John 10:9), disciplines him with his rod and staff, and prepares a feast for him. He restores his soul and leads him into righteous ways.

How does Christ restore your soul and lead you into holy lives? He *“lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:11, 15, 17; 15:13). At the cross, he willingly offered his broken body and his precious blood as a sacrifice for all the sins of all his people (Matt 1:21). There is no greater love in the history of the whole world than Jesus laying down his life for his friends (John 15:13). Again, Isaiah 53 prophesies that the Suffering Messiah, the Servant of God, took up *“our griefs”* and *“our sorrows”* (4), was *“pierced for our transgressions”* (5), and *“bore the sin of many”* (12). We are all like sheep who have gone astray, but *“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (6). On the cross, he was *“like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent”* (7). Jesus the great Shepherd of the sheep became our Passover Lamb and the Sacrificial Sheep.

When Jesus saw the big crowds following him, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. They were harassed and scattered by the evil shepherds of Ezekiel 34. On the night that Jesus was arrested, his disciples ran away and scattered like sheep without a shepherd (Matt 26:31; Zech 13:7). But after he was raised from the dead, he commanded Peter and the other disciples, *“Tend my sheep... feed my sheep”* (John 21:16, 17). This is the appointed duty of Christ’s undershepherds until he returns on Judgement Day to finally gather all his chosen sheep into his one sheepfold.

The Sheep Separated from the Goats

On that Judgment Day, our Lord will sit on his glorious, heavenly throne. He will gather before him every single human being who has ever lived on earth, separating them into two groups: the righteous

sheep and the wicked goats. The sheep are righteous because they have believed and trusted in the Great Shepherd who saved them from God's wrath on their sins. The goats are wicked because they rejected him. Jesus spoke of two other parables about this separation. In the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds (Matt 13:24-30), he will harvest both the wheat and the weeds together before separating them. He taught the same thing in the Parable of the Net (Matt 13:47-50), where the fisherman harvested both good and bad fish, but separated them after the harvest.

And what is the outcome of this great separation on Judgment Day? We read in Daniel 12:2, "*some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt*"; and in John 5:28, 29, "*those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*" This is exactly what Jesus teaches in Matthew 25. To the sheep, he will say, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*" (34). And to the goats, "*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*" (41). The cursed will go into "eternal punishment," and the righteous into "eternal life" (46).

Who are the righteous? The righteous are those who have faith in Christ as Savior, just as "*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*" (Rom 4). They have been set free from slavery to sin and have become slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:18). The righteousness of the sheep is shown by their love for their fellow sheep, brothers and sisters in Christ, the church. They fed them with food and drink, welcomed them as their own family, clothed them, and comforted them when they were in prison. The sheep of the Good Shepherd loves their fellow sheep.

And who are the cursed? They are those who hated Christians also hated him. When these goats persecuted, harassed and martyred Christ's brothers and sisters in their time of need, they demonstrated their hatred for him. Yesterday in Pakistan, Muslims burned ten Christian churches because they say Christians "blaspheme" Allah. And this persecution happens daily in those places where the great majority of people hate Christ. But our nation is not exempt from this persecution and hatred of Christians. We witness this persecution and hatred daily with our wicked politicians, celebrities, teachers, and even those who call themselves "pastors."

Beloved Christian friends: We must ask the two greatest questions in life. The first one is this, "Am I a sheep or a goat? Do I demonstrate that I belong to the Good Shepherd by my righteous and holy life, by my love for my brothers and sisters in the church? Or, am I a goat pretending to be a sheep by my sinful life and by my lack of love and concern for the church and its needs?"

The second great question is this, "Are my pastor and the other leaders of my church good undershepherds who tend and love their flock by their sound teaching, counsel, and care for their physical needs? Or are they evil undershepherds who show no concern and love for their sheep who are straying from the Good Shepherd, who are harsh in their leadership, whose first love is shameful gain at the expense of the sheep?"

Therefore, we must be watchful and discerning about our own standing before God, whether we are sheep or goats; and our own shepherds, whether they are evil or faithful to Christ the Great and Good Shepherd of the sheep. And when our days are done, we will find ourselves feasting at our Good Shepherd's table and dwelling in the house of the LORD forever.