

Hebrews 10:8-18; 13:20-21

The Great Shepherd
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Today's sermon is the second one of three about Jesus as the Shepherd. Last Sunday we focused on Jesus as the Good Shepherd, based on the 23rd Psalm and on John 10, where we see Jesus as a Shepherd who watches over his flock.

He takes care of them and provides food, water and safety for the sheep. He anoints their wounds with oil. He knows each one by name. He has a special, unique call or whistle and his own flock are so familiar with their shepherd that they recognize his voice and follow him, trusting in his care.

That's how Jesus is a Good Shepherd to his flock. The psalmist writes: *Know that the Lord, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.* (Psalm 100:3)

Next Sunday we will look at what Scripture says about Jesus as the Chief Shepherd, who will finally return to bring his flock home – from 1 Peter 5:4 and Revelation 7:17.

But today's focus is on Jesus as the Great Shepherd, who perfects his sheep. So, since (I presume) all of us believe we are part of the flock of Jesus Christ – we must all be perfect! Right? How many of you today will claim perfection?

You might be a perfectionist – one who has a strong desire to do everything perfect – perhaps so much so that you just don't do whatever project you're considering, because you're afraid it will not be as perfect as you think it should be.

Many of us are perfectionists, but I would venture to say that none of us are actually perfect. So, what do we mean when we say Jesus is the Great Shepherd who perfects his sheep?

Hebrews 10:14 says: *For by one sacrifice he (Jesus) has made **perfect** forever those who are being made holy.* Hebrews 12:2 talks about ... *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

You heard me read the text from Hebrew 13:20-21. The translation I read from the New Revised Standard Version says²⁰ *Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, **make you complete** in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

But the New International Version uses the words may he ²¹ ***equip you** with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

So, the Bible calls Jesus the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, the perfecter of the faith, who makes us complete in everything good, or, who equips us with everything good. And what is the purpose of this perfecting, this equipping or completing? It is so we can do the will of God; so we will be pleasing to Him.

There are other ways that Scripture translates the word perfecting. One is to be made holy; or to be made pure; to be set aside; to be shaped into the image of Christ who truly was the only perfect human who ever walked the earth.

The Bible tells us that we are a new creation when we belong to Christ. His death on the cross is the only reason that we have forgiveness of sin. There is no possible way that we could ever, on our own merit, work hard enough or be good enough to deserve the grace and forgiveness we have received through Christ's sacrifice of his own life on a cross.

There is a man among us who likes to say that so and so is nice. Right? Fred tends to think most everyone is nice. And I would agree with him that all of you are very nice.

But, as nice as you are, and as faithful to God as you are, I hate to be a downer, but you are still a sinner. And so am I. We just can't find the way to never ever sin. And God chose – out of deep love for us – his people, his flock – to provide a way for us to be reconciled to him.

And that way was through his only Son, Jesus, who willingly died on the cross, taking on the sins of the world so that God's grace would flow down just like his blood flowed. We read in Hebrews 10:10: *And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

And he goes on to talk about how priests of the Old Testament (Old Covenant) would over-see the sacrifices of lambs and goats as they were brought to the temple, their blood shed for the atonement of sin. And yet, the people were required to do this every year, time after time, and still their sins were not forgiven.

But now, he puts Jesus in that place as the final, ultimate priest – the priest of the New Covenant. The thing is, this priest is also the sacrifice. The Lamb of God shed his blood for the forgiveness of sins once and for all.

This new covenant fulfils the prophecy in Jeremiah where God promises that he will put his laws in our hearts and will write them on our minds. It is now what God does, not what the people have to do.

Because of Jesus' death, all who believe in him are made his holy people. In our baptism, we receive this amazing grace that grafts us into the family of God, that shapes us into that new creation – that formation that looks more and more like Jesus, our Great Shepherd.

The hymn we are going to sing in a minute – ***Love Divine, All Loves Excelling***, written by Charles Wesley, the brother to the founder of the Methodist Church – John Wesley – says this in the last verse:

Finish then, Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be;

let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee;

Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,

Til we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.

I love those words – finish Thy new creation. You know that saying: “God's not finished with me yet.” Well, it's true. We are a new creation in Christ. You know how I love to say those

words in the Assurance of Forgiveness: “All who are in Christ are a new creation. The old life is past and a new life has begun.”

We are made new in Christ. He is, by his Holy Spirit, working in us every day to strengthen us and shape us. Or we could say to “shape us up.” And how is He doing it?

One way is through our dedication to worship. Our being open to the Spirit. Through our songs of praise, our prayers, hearing the Scriptures read and yes, I hope, through the sermons, Christ is growing us daily.

If we will just open the Bible often and read with our eyes, ears and hearts open to the message, we will be more and more mature as Christians each year of our lives. But, even as we are dedicated to doing those things, it is still not through our own doing that we are being made holy, but through Jesus’ Holy Spirit working in us.

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word *sanctification* as: *the state of growing in divine grace as a result of Christian commitment after baptism or conversion.*

It could also be called a purification. The doctrine of sanctification – this growing in divine grace, this being made holy and pure – is one that was stressed by the founder of our Presbyterian Church – John Calvin, as well as many other theologians.

When I was in seminary I was very involved in the movement that is a program out of The Upper Room ministry, where I ended up working as the International Director of the youth version of that movement. The adult version is called *The Walk to Emmaus* and the youth version that I led is called *Chrysalis*.

There is a 3-day event that people go to for the first time, where they experience many wonderful and various opportunities for growing in the faith. They hear talks given by ministers and by their peers.

One of the pastor’s talks is titled “Sanctifying Grace.” You can guess by that title that it was a talk about sanctification. Right? So, during my seminary days, I went on my own 3-day experience and then worked on numerous events, giving clergy talks on grace, one being the talk on sanctification. I have to admit, I think I missed the seminary class that taught about being sanctified but I sure had it in my head because of *The Walk to Emmaus*.

When I was being examined at presbytery meeting – a meeting where the large sanctuary was full of people up in the balcony and downstairs too, I was asked a question about sanctification.

When a candidate for ordination is examined, anyone who is a presbytery member, can ask any question they want, and as many as they want, before voting on whether or not a person is ready for ordination into the pastoral ministry.

During my last two years of seminary, I served two small rural churches as a student pastor. The presbytery meeting was on Saturday and I was still working on a sermon for the next day. It had been a busy week full of exams so I felt a lot of pressure sitting there waiting for my turn to be drilled.

While I waited, as they were conducting other business, I was taking notes on a text from Romans and was looking at the hymn we were going to sing that went so well with the scripture

I would preach on. The hymn happened to be *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling* and the sermon was very much in line with the theme of sanctification.

When it was my turn to stand before the body of presbytery, I felt strong and confident in my answers to the questions they were asking. There were quite a few. Some were about youth in church; some were on preaching or pastoral care or the sacraments.

Finally, an elder from one of my little churches stood up, way up in the balcony, and said he moved to stop the questioning and to vote. But downstairs, directly under where he stood, a pastor was asking a question – one last very big, very important question – at the same time. So, the moderator allowed it. And as she asked it, there was one big corporate deep breath that sounded like a gasp:

“If you could preach a sermon on sanctification in ten sentences or less, what would you say?”

Well, I wasn't expecting that question but I sure was prepared for it! The Holy Spirit had led me right to that question with all my experience on those Walk to Emmaus talks, plus, just that very day – just before I was called to stand up, I had been working, studying, and taking notes – on sanctification. It was my shining moment. But only because of the Holy Spirit in me.

We started this sermon by looking at how the Great Shepherd equips his people for doing the will of God. Paul writes to the congregation in Ephesus about the gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit to the church.

He says, in Ephesians 4:12-13 that those gifts are:¹² *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,* ¹³ *until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*

We are being changed from glory into glory as we are equipped to serve and to grow.

And he writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that:

¹⁶ *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

Are you a believer? Paul writes in Romans 10:9 *“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raises him from the dead, you will be saved.”*

All who believe in him belong to his flock. Salvation is ours my friends – not by anything we could ever do but because of Jesus Christ; because of the cross; because God raised Christ from death to life.

We *have been* sanctified, but it is not complete yet. We *are being* sanctified – being perfected by the Great Shepherd – more and more as we continue to grow in our faith and in following the will of God.

When Christ returns for us – when we go to our final home of glory, then – and only then – will that perfection be made complete.

I want to close with reading our text from Hebrews 13 out of the Message translation:

*May God, who puts all things together,
makes all things whole,
Who made a lasting mark through the sacrifice of Jesus,
the sacrifice of blood that sealed the eternal covenant,
Who led Jesus, our Great Shepherd,
up and alive from the dead,
Now put you together, provide you
with everything you need to please him,
Make us into what gives him most pleasure,
by means of the sacrifice of Jesus, the Messiah.
All glory to Jesus forever and always!
Oh, yes, yes, yes.*

Friends in Christ, salvation and sanctification are ours because of love divine. We are being changed from glory into glory. Let us stand and sing ...

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