

Name your favorite teacher to yourself. You probably didn't have to think too long before a name popped into your mind. Mrs. Maddox. That's mine. I had her for 1st grade, then she switched the year my class came into 4th so we had her again. She was such a good teacher, fair, and really nice. I remember her fondly to this day as I'm sure you remember your favorite teacher too. Each one was such a good teacher.

What made them your favorite may not have made that teacher the best teacher ever. If you were to claim that your teacher was the best teacher others would likely disagree. They'd think you're foolish for saying yours was the best when their teacher had just as many good qualities. The idea that we could identify one teacher as the best isn't even a possibility.

The gospel, really Jesus, identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. If people examined him most would agree he was good. But the best, one of a kind, that seems foolish to think. How can we know if he was the best person that ever lived? Certainly he has to be one good person among many. But that's not the case. Jesus lets us know that he's...

Such a Good Shepherd
Knowing sheep he gives his life
Loving sheep he lives again

Many of you have filled out job applications before. You filled one out because you felt you had the qualifications necessary to complete the job. Whether it was being on time, typing, using a computer, or running a machine you were qualified. Do you think you'd have the qualifications for being a shepherd? Able to sit and watch sheep for many hours. Must be able to find and lead sheep to food and water. Has the ability to herd sheep into a gated pen at night. Basic qualifications sound pretty easy.

The qualifications of a good shepherd are those mentioned plus one more. A good shepherd will care for the sheep and their needs but will also go to extra lengths to stop bad things from happening. A great shepherd, an exceptional shepherd is one willing to give up his life for the sheep. **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."** Jesus qualifies as a good shepherd, a great shepherd. But Jesus isn't just willing to lay down his life for the sheep but really in place of the sheep. He will put his life on the line so that the sheep can live. He's invested in the sheep. They're his because he cares for them and would give his life in their place.

The hired hand will not. In fact the hired hand just watches the sheep as a job. He likes the money but isn't interested in the sheep. He doesn't care what their names are. He doesn't really watch their diets. He certainly won't care if another animal snatches a few of them. **"The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away."** He's not fighting any wolf to save some sheep. They're just sheep. They're not worth giving your life for.

Have you ever had anything you would give your life for? We might think a spouse or our children. Maybe even pets like Fluffy or Rex. We might step up to protect them, but give our own life in their place, that I'm not so sure about. In that way we're like the sheep not the shepherd. Jesus agrees. He's the shepherd and we're the sheep concerned simply about our own lives. We worry when things don't seem to be going right at all. We think life might not hold anything special for us. It might be a dead end job with no hope of advancement or challenge, it might be plodding along in school not sure of the future. Will there be jobs for to get? Will I have to do something I don't want to do? We feel like sheep grazing but not really making progress. It might even feel like we're sheep without a shepherd fending for ourselves against attacks from outside.

Remember you have a Good Shepherd. He's such a Good Shepherd because he knows the sheep and would give his life for each of you. The shepherd substituting for the sheep. The lowly sheep that sometimes don't care, sinful sheep who rebel against him, guilty sheep who try and hide. These are the sheep Jesus the Good Shepherd substituted himself for. You and me. He knows us perfectly. But not only that, he died for you. Others might be willing to die for you but not many. Christ Jesus the Good Shepherd didn't hesitate. He knows you as a sinner and knows you needed a Savior. So he came to be that Savior.

If you're a fan of the Looney Tunes or Merrie Melodies cartoon shorts then you may have seen Ralph Wolf and Sam Sheepdog. They're just a wolf and a sheepdog doing their job. The wolf tries to steal the sheep and the dog tries to protect the sheep. In one attempt Ralph launches Sam away on a rocket thinking he'll have his pick of the sheep. Little does he know the rocket got caught in the tree. Sam's still right there and Ralph's not successful. His idea was simple. Get the shepherd away because then it doesn't matter how strong or brave, the wolf wins. If the Good Shepherd gives up his life then it would seem the wolf wins. After the Good Shepherd is dead the wolf can have whatever sheep he wants.

That is unless he's such a Good Shepherd that he loves his sheep so much he lives again. **"I am the good shepherd; just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again."** No other shepherd no matter how good they are can say they gave up their life for the sheep and then grabbed that life back from death and lived again. Jesus alone can. That puts Jesus in a category by himself. Good Shepherd isn't great enough to describe him. Great Shepherd, the best Shepherd, the one of a kind Shepherd. That's Jesus.

A shepherd is all about control. They control the place where the sheep rest and eat. They control access to the sheep. They control everything about the sheep's situation. When robbers or another animal attacks, or bad weather moves in they aren't in control. It causes worry, stress, and doubt. You've felt those same things when your life is out of control. Jesus is only months from giving his life on the cross. As that time gets closer Jesus wants the disciples and us to know who's in control. Not the enemy who will betray him. Not the soldiers who will inflict pain on him. Not Pontius Pilate who will sentence him to crucifixion. **"No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again."** Only Jesus is in control.

Love compels him to keep control and face what's coming. Love for sinners allows him to accomplish the task of redeeming the world. Then love keeps him doing the work of such a Good Shepherd until the end of time. That work is leading people to know him and to receive salvation as a gift. That's why Jesus rose from the dead. He loves you and me. He gave us unquestionable proof that he lives and that he loves. The empty tomb is the witness that he laid down his own life and picked it back up again. Jesus' life and love are the secure bond keeping us for eternity.

There's still more of Jesus' sheep out there. He speaks with urgency about going after them too. **"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."** And the Good Shepherd lets you help. You have the message to bring them in because it's really the voice of the Good Shepherd in the Word. That's what you share with others to lead them into the kingdom. Sheep of the Good Shepherd know his voice inside and outside the sheep pen. They need to hear that voice just as we need to hear of such a Good Shepherd's love for us.

Certain qualities take a good teacher and make them great. Characteristics we want to copy, traits we respond to. Certain qualities in Jesus make him such a Good Shepherd and put him in a class by himself. He's got the knowledge of us as sinful human beings to know we need a Savior. So he gave up his life in our place as that Savior. He's got the love of us to not leave us without protection and care and so he came back to life. Now and forever he's caring and watching over us with everything we need to get to eternal life. He's such a Good Shepherd.