

Dear Friends,

As an example of how we believers imitate sheep instead of wise followers of Jesus, in this week's Gleanings, I illustrate how frequently sincere believers who view themselves as among the most faithful refuse to practice Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 regarding how to deal with an offending brother or sister. Rationalizations abound, but obedience to Jesus' own words is rare indeed. I offer, given Jesus' very clear and specific teaching in this lesson, there is only one occasion when we may rightly not follow this teaching, only one. If someone says or does something that offends us, our first human reaction is to spark and respond in anger, or at least to quietly boil. We know that is wrong, but we sometimes do it anyway. Suppose someone says or does something that really offends you. What does Jesus teach us to do in this lesson? Tell the pastor? No. Tell our best friends in the church? No. He quite specifically teaches us to go to that person privately and explain why their conduct offended us. Hopefully they will repent, but Jesus didn't promise they would. Sometimes they won't. However, Jesus still teaches us to obey His teaching in the lesson. When may I not practice what He teaches in this lesson? If my first reaction is to boil with anger or offense, I need to get my own emotions in check before I do anything. On occasion, even after I have calmed down, I regard my brother's or sister's action to be offensive, Jesus doesn't give me a choice of "Plan A" or "Plan B." He commands this clearly described conduct. So when may I not follow this teaching? Perhaps after I cool my own anger and hurt, I pause, pray, and ponder the situation. Maybe what my brother or sister did is not really as offensive as I at first thought it to be. They are normally gracious and considerate. This is definitely not their habit. Maybe I was too ready to take offense, so I need to look in the gospel mirror and change my own conduct more than going to them and complaining about theirs. In this case, I have resolved the conflict, the offense, within my own mind, so I have actually removed the offense. However, if this is truly the case, I shall never complain to another believer about this person's action, or hold a grudge against them because of it. I'll seek to maintain a gracious and godly relationship with them the same as in the past. In this case, I removed the offense, thereby removing the need to go to that person. Otherwise, if I truly want to follow Jesus in His ways, I am under His commandment to practice what He taught in this lesson. If I refuse to obey Him, I become the erring "Sheep" more than the person who offended me. Jesus' intent in this lesson was not to require a painful procedure that won't work. It was to show us how to strengthen our relationship with that person, even making it stronger and healthier than before. So will I be a faithful, follow-my-Shepherd-"Sheep" in His flock? Or will I choose to go my own way, a way that repeatedly proves its error by eroding fellowship with my brother or sister instead of healing it and making it stronger? I have to live with the outcome. What will it be? Obey Jesus and hope for restoration? Disobey Jesus and assure chastening on me and a broken fellowship with my brother or sister?

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

## **Good Shepherd's Restoration and Righteous Leading**

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:3 KJV)*

The proverbial “Problem of evil” often surfaces in unbelievers, but it also surfaces in the minds of believers who are suffering great trials in their lives. “Why doesn’t God step in and make this right?” In light of Psalm 23, one might reason; if God is such a good Shepherd, why does He allow His sheep to fall into danger and distress. Why doesn’t He prevent all those pains and problems from ever touching their lives? When life is going well and we want to enjoy some of its good things, we readily embrace the reality of our free will to choose “A” or “B.” When immersed in pain and trials, it is easy to forget free will and wish we lived in a robotic world where God micromanaged everything.

I do not believe in “Free will” in the setting of our eternal salvation. Scripture describes the wicked person without God as being “...*dead in trespasses and sins.*” (Ephesians 2:1 KJV) Dead people have no will, free or otherwise. Only God has the power unilaterally to give spiritual, eternal life to one who is so dead. Yes, this person is physically alive, but wholly dead to God. Despite vain man’s imagination, there is no “Spark of divinity” in every human being that he may fan and use to gain his spiritual life and standing with God. No, man in his natural setting is wholly void of any favorable relationship with God. Only God can impart spiritual life and transform that person from his spiritual death into a child of the King.

However, within the realm of the life we possess, free will is a reality. God chose to create Adam and Eve with free will. They had the ability to live in the Garden and to enjoy it, or they had the ability to eat the forbidden fruit and face the consequences. Satan deceived Eve into thinking she and Adam could eat the fruit but avoid the consequences. God chose to give them free will, the ability to choose to obey or to sin, but He also warned them that sin had unavoidable consequences.

The simple word “If” appears over 1500 times in our Bible, and most of those appearances serve to remind us that we may choose “A” or “B,” but we cannot avoid the consequences of our choices. Free will is not a Biblical teaching relative to one’s eternal salvation, but it is a basic truth of the life we live “Under the sun.”

Thus, the world in which we live is not a cosmic puppet show in which the cosmic puppeteer pulls the strings and causes every minute action. He may on occasion intervene, but He always does so for our protection and benefit, always the “Good Shepherd.” A shepherd does not so micromanage his flock that no sheep ever chooses to wander away from the flock, to become curious about dangerous landscape where it might fall and be sorely wounded. A shepherd doesn’t micromanage the annoying insects to prevent them from biting and annoying the sheep. But a good shepherd watches over his flock and, upon noticing a sheep in distress—or a sheep that is missing from the flock—he ministers to the sheep’s needs. ***If God so micromanaged every event in our lives, we’d be in heaven! Not yet reside on earth.***

Study David’s life. He wrote the words of Psalm 23. Yet David was also hounded by a jealous king who pursued him as if he were a criminal, intent on killing David. He suffered turmoil within his family, even an attempted rebellion led by one of his own sons. He faced formidable adversaries regularly. But none of this prevented David from writing, “*He restore my soul.*” Consider another Psalms that contributes to this question.

*Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.* (Psalm 51:8 KJV)

These words are part of David's prayer for the Lord's forgiveness when Nathan confronted him for his sin with Bathsheba. When a sheep formed the bad habit of repeatedly wandering away from the flock, a good shepherd never left the sheep to be killed by wild beasts. He repeatedly would find the sheep and bring it back. David references a shepherd's wise recourse in this verse. At a point after many such rescues, shepherds would actually break a sheep's leg, bind the sheep on his shoulders, splint the broken leg, and return the sheep to the fold. For several weeks, that rebellious sheep depended on the shepherd for everything, water, green grass, all its needs. By the time the broken bone healed and the sheep could return to active life with the flock, the sheep hopefully would have lost its habit of wandering and would be content to remain in the safe care of the shepherd with the other sheep in the fold.

Whatever we may think of David, we must acknowledge that David wrote true words of his own bad habits in this verse. If you wanted to teach lessons of godly exemplary people from the Old Testament, David would not be first on your list of such people. Not only does David fully confess his sin in the Bathsheba affair, but his use of the broken bone symbol reveals that David realized his long-standing habit of straying into sin. If we choose to ignore, or deny the obvious reality of free will in our daily life, we might question; why didn't God just prevent David from all those sinful wanderings?

We do not live in the idyllic world that God created. We live in that world after the catastrophic event of Adam's sin in the Garden. Not only did Adam's sin have a tragic impact on all subsequent humanity, but it also impacted the whole natural world. Many of life's painful experiences—perhaps all of them—result from this brokenness that rules the world in which we live. We long for heaven and glory to escape this broken, twisted world. Until we realize that day, we must live in—and with—the brokenness that prevails in the world in which we live. And, in that world, "Sheep" will fall prey to wild beasts, suffer disease, injury, or even death at the hands of this broken evil world, needing oh so much the restoring grace of our Shepherd.

Sheep often need their shepherd to save them from themselves, from senseless dilemmas they create for themselves. One example Keller mentioned in his book, "A Shepherd Looks at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm," is of a sheep heavily covered with wool lying down and not being able to get back on its feet. How many times believers, you and me, put ourselves into situations that we can't control or reverse. We simply can't extract ourselves from problems of our own making. Our only hope for a better day when we face those moments is for our attentive and gracious Shepherd to intervene and deliver us from ourselves. Our carnal pride would like to deny such weakness and poor judgment in ourselves, but life repeatedly witnesses against us.

*...he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.* Sheep are short-sighted beasts. If left to themselves, they will graze in the same small area of their pasture till they have literally eaten the grass to the ground and killed it, destroying future grazing opportunities. They will walk from one area to another along the same exact path till they have worn a rut that rain will erode into a gully. They will simply keep doing the same thing with no thought of the damage they do to themselves and their future needs. Ask any man who has been a pastor for any length of time. How much of his time does he devote to trying to teach the people in the church he serves to stop doing the same old things that they've been doing for years, things that never worked? If we are doing something that doesn't work, shouldn't we learn from the experience and look for a better, a workable solution? Those who refuse to learn from their mistakes doom themselves to continually repeat their same old mistakes over and over again.

Does the Lord have a better way for us to live than the paths we choose in our imagination? Pastors grimace quietly whenever they hear, “I know I should....” These are the words of a stubborn “Sheep” who well knows that its present course is wrong, but it has no intention whatever to repent and change its course to follow the Shepherd, rather than choosing its own course, thinking it can negotiate with the Shepherd to “Bless this mess.”

Wisdom dictates that a “Sheep” learns to trust and to follow its Shepherd, not tell the Shepherd where it wants to go and what it wants to do. Ah, but sheep are not the smartest animal on the farm. And, sadly, the Lord’s people more than earn their Bible comparison of themselves to sheep by their similar short-sighted, unthinking conduct.

An example. I couldn’t recall all the times I’ve urged a member who complained to me about how another member said or did something that offended them to read and to practice Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18. If we follow Jesus’ words, we won’t complain to the pastor or to our best friends in the church. We will privately (Meaning not talking to anyone else about the problem) go to that person and sincerely—and graciously—explain how their words or conduct has hurt us. “I tried it once, and it didn’t work.” Oh yes, how often we hear—or say—these words. Jesus didn’t promise that every such effort would succeed, but He still teaches us that this is His commandment for us to follow in such situations. Perhaps the other person is also a stubborn sheep who refuses to consider his fellow-sheep. Like the bully sheep in Ezekiel 34:21, they want to domineer over other sheep and “...*thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns.*” Ezekiel warns in the conclusion of this verse of the sad but certain consequence of this unruly “Sheep” conduct. They will scatter the sheep abroad.

However the other person reacts, Jesus quite clearly teaches us what we are to do when offenses disrupt our relationship with other believers. Presuming how they might react—even if you prove to be correct—does not justify ignoring and even contradicting Jesus’ teaching, does it? Who knows? What if you misjudged the offending person’s reaction? What if they listen and respond with grace and repentance of their offense? You may well have saved a future believer from this same bully conduct, and you may well remind this person that their overbearing conduct is not wise or Biblical. (James 5:19-20 KJV)

So what shall we do? Shall we fulfill Scripture’s vivid description of us as sheep? Or shall we learn wisely from our past sins and seek our Lord’s and our fellow-believers’ forgiveness and healing? Shall we grow in our faith-walk into an exemplary “Sheep” who respects and obeys our “Good Shepherd” who always leads us “...*in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake*”? Or shall we continue to chart our own course, a course that has never resulted in good or edifying relationships with other believers? Wise caution; if our conduct results in strained relationships or distancing from other believers, do we realize that we also put ourselves into a strained relationship and distancing from our “Shepherd”? (1 John 4:20 KJV)

What shall our future hold? More stubborn self-willed “Sheep” conduct? Or “Shepherd glorifying” honor to our Shepherd and His wise care and guidance? What do we choose? His “*paths of righteousness for his name’s sake*”? Or our own failed ways?