

## **Sermon by Chaplain J. Ammom “Flash” Larsen, Capt USAF**

### **From Sheep to Shepherds**

Scriptures are full of metaphors (wheat, tares, seeds and sower, lamps, virgins, talents, pounds, trees, fruit, vines...)

God uses these metaphors to teach us more about ourselves.

There is one metaphor that is particularly powerful to me and that is where God frequently compares us to sheep.

There is something about fluffy white animals that have made them great models for plush toys and a key attraction at petting zoos...

While this may be well and good for children, I find something rather unflattering about being compared to sheep. Sheep are rather unintelligent, helpless creatures; even their sound is rather annoying (like an advertisement “come eat me”). Maybe you’ve wondered about why we are compared to sheep. I know I have wondered about this myself from time to time. I’d like to share some of my conclusions and what claims this teaching has upon us and our roles in our families. When I look at myself, I’m able to see just how well being compared to a sheep describes my human nature. For instance, sheep are characterized chiefly by their willingness to follow the crowd into sometimes great danger or wandering into mischief themselves... a strong propensity for getting lost easily... unable to find adequate food alone, unable to have a thriving life much less survive without the watchful care of the shepherd...

The most concerning feature about sheep is their inability to defend oneself against the pervasive threat of predators... Satan is compared in the Bible to a wolf and a lion (among other metaphors). This, itself, is not a very hope-filled matchup: in this corner of the ring we have claws, fangs, and speed; and in this corner we have slow, fluffy, hooves. If there is any animal match up metaphor that inspires the need for grace this one does it for me. Without the shepherd the sheep don’t stand a chance. Just like we are doomed without the everlasting sacrifice of our Savior.

So, since the shepherd is so crucial to the survival of the sheep let’s talk about the shepherd... He’s devoted to protecting and caring for them for he loves them. His sheep define his life: feeding, cleaning, maintaining good shelter and safety despite constant threat of lurking danger. Under the shepherd’s watchful care the sheep thrive. John chapter 11 teaches us that it is only the shepherd that is willing to protect his sheep with his life.

The picture of grace should be abundantly clear to us: if we stick with the Good Shepherd we will thrive. We depend on Him for our very survival. He alone has the capacity to ultimately rescue and protect us.

But it doesn't stop there... When we stick with Him and we follow his ways we are suddenly no longer weak and helpless but are empowered and strengthened to adopt shepherding activities ourselves.

Of all responsibilities that God, the Good Shepherd, gives to his disciples/his under shepherds, the responsibility to care for our children is fundamental. Now, all of our situations here are different but I want each of us to heed in our own way and situation the call of the Master to care for the most vulnerable of his sheep among us, namely those in their formative years...

Most of us are parents or will be parents, some of you are even grandparents but all of us likely have at least semi-regular contact with children. Today I am speaking primarily as a father to the other fathers and mothers present but I trust my comments are relevant to all of us as children are everywhere as part of the normal cycle of things. Even, if you aren't directly involved with children right now, there's no better time than now to begin preparing for the crucial role of parenthood.

God demands our responsiveness to the needs of children for just like sheep rely on the shepherd children rely on parents.

I'm sure all of us take the feeding, sheltering, clothing and physical safety very seriously. Similarly incidents of abusive behavior in its various forms are also not the norm.

Where I see parents (including myself) fall short from time to time is in setting a righteous and holy example for our children. Taking great care to nourish them spiritually.

Our loving example and teaching at home points the way for them to be able to see and appreciate the Good Shepherd's loving hand.

You probably know that touching a life doesn't always happen (or even usually happen) during the sit-down-teaching moments. The teaching that counts the most is the teaching where we're just living our lives.

For example, a young prisoner of war years ago talks about having had understandably many pain-filled days when things didn't look very hopeful. But, he would think back on the beautiful March day when his mother took some time to fly his kite with him. The images of his mother laughing like a schoolgirl as she took her turn flying the kite were etched deeply in his memory. He learned that his mother's love could extend across years and continents to comfort him in his darkest hours.

(See Jack Canfield, *Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Hearts and Rekindle the Spirits of Mothers* (Dearfield Beach, Fla: Health Communications, Inc., 1997), 190.) Our deliberate, loving involvement and responsiveness to children helps us shepherd them in meaningful ways. Ways that lead them to the nourishing, protecting, and saving influence of the Good Shepherd.

Of course, that's the ideal, but we fail sometimes, and it can help to see examples of failure to recognize it in ourselves. A couple of years ago I had such an experience which caused me deep reflection on areas that needed correction if I'm going to shepherd my children to the Savior. I was trying to teach my son something that I thought should be a simple task even for a 5-yr-old. I spoke with him with some impatience and an unkind tone to my words. He tolerated it for a bit but then he looked over at me and asked: "Dad, why are you talking to me like you hate me?" I remember being shocked at his innocent question, shocked into dumbfounded silence. What could I possibly say in response to *that*? What could I say to rebuild trust? How could I not see that I was teaching him to hurt instead of treat with kind understanding and consideration? His question still stings me and sharply leads me to evaluate, and then reevaluate my parenting. If I'm not communicating my devotion to my son in a way he can see as loving, then anything I feel for my children simply gets lost.

Fortunately, God uses the memory of my failings to shepherd me into improving my ability to shepherd my children in loving concern. I thank God for speaking right to my heart through the innocent mouth of my little boy.

Children look to us for loving guidance, for kind direction, even for devoted correction. If those hands that should guide them to the master shepherd are negligent on the one hand or harsh on the other—these may create obstacles to their spiritual development which they may not easily overcome.

In the words of a song directed in prayer that I both appreciate and relate to:

Got to admit [God] I've got so far to go  
Make so many mistakes and I'm sure that You know  
Sometimes it seems no matter how hard I try  
With all the pressures in life I just can't get it all right  
But I'm trying so hard to learn from the best  
Being patient and kind, filled with Your tenderness  
'Cause I know that he'll learn from the things that he sees  
And the Jesus he finds will be the Jesus in me  
Right now from where he stands I may seem mighty tall  
But it's only 'cause I'm learning from the best Father of them all

Lord, I want to be just like You  
'Cause he wants to be just like me  
I want to be a holy example  
For his innocent eyes to see  
Help me be a living Bible, Lord  
That my little boy can read  
I want to be just like You  
'Cause he wants to be like me

(Phillips, Craig and Dean, "I Want to Be Just Like You)

Let us walk in the Good Shepherd's protective and empowering grace so that we can better protect and empower our families including our Air Force family. Let us learn from Christ, grow in Christ, reflect Christ.

God help us so to do I pray...Amen.