

Today a good shepherd would be measured by other standards. A good shepherd would be the one whose business was a success, who started small but expanded his operation across several counties and states; he would be a competitor. He would create a pleasant work environment and avoid lawsuits. He would have a sizeable staff and pay his employees well, but he would earn a whole lot more than any of them did. A good shepherd would keep regular hours, but also make time for his family, and he would reward himself with good vacations. And if something went wrong, some natural disaster afflicted the flock, or business went south, and his dream was coming to an end, he would declare bankruptcy in a way that protected his personal assets so that he could escape ruin even if the business could not. That would be a good shepherd.

Well, that's a stereotype, I admit it. Not every manager fits that mold. But it shows an extreme example of how far we can get from the model of the shepherd that Jesus presents in John's gospel: "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . This is why the Father loves me," Jesus says, "because I lay down my life." Jesus is different from other leaders. "A hired man," he says, "who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away. . . . This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep."

Some people are like the good shepherd; they love their jobs. They love their schoolmates. They love the members of their family. They even love complete strangers and go the extra mile for anyone in need, just as the Good Shepherd cared for sheep who were not of his fold. If these people had to lay down their lives to protect someone else, they'd probably do it; God forbid that situation should ever come to pass. Other people aren't in the same space. They don't like going to work; their coworkers are not pleasant; they don't believe in the product or the purpose of the company. They're glad to have a job, glad to have a paycheck, but their hearts are not in the work. And if something went wrong or they had another opportunity, they'd be out of there, just like the hired man who flees when the wolf attacks the sheep.

Parenthetically, it's good to have the kind of job where you'd be willing to give extra time to the company because you believe in it; you know what you do is important to the people you serve. Still, everybody deserves fair pay for the work they do, and no one should be asked to do something more without a just remuneration.

Once you find a purpose in your life, the pieces fall into place. You give of yourself beyond what you get in pay because you get something else in return – satisfaction, appreciation, the chance to use your best skills, the happiness that you are contributing to someone else's life or to society at large. This is what Jesus did. He is our good shepherd. He laid down his life expecting nothing more from us but our love and service. All of life goes better when we live not just for the bottom line, but for the sake of the people we serve.