

Being a shepherd!
Responsible for Sheep - Responsible for people



Who is to be the shepherd?

God is a shepherd, Jesus is a shepherd, Elders and leaders are to be shepherds, each sheep is to be a shepherd see the list in Palm 23 Ezekiel 34:12 Matt 25:32 1 Peter 5:2-4 Ezekiel 34: 17-24

This represents series six of material that can be used for devotional studies, discussions, or sermon background that brings a 21st century teaching perspective that I believe helps to make relevant Jesus' original teaching.

It gives an understanding of the rural material from the perspective of the rural people of our time in Australia. There are a lot of spiritual parallels in sheep farming in the bible and today.

Ross Neville has been a commercial grain and livestock farmer in NSW for 45 years. He was a woolclasser, sheep classer and for 12 years a sheep and wool TAFE teacher. Ross has managed a variety of sheep enterprises ranging in mob sizes of 400 up 1800: He has been breeding prime lambs, first cross ewes; Operating a medium/fine wool merinos enterprise then running superfine merino wethers on his 'retirement block'. Five different properties scattered around the central west of NSW over 45 years.

Ross believes God still teaches through normal life situations and we can understand and receive new meaning from God and Jesus' through rural teaching parables today

Being a shepherd!

A shepherd:	Responsible for
Sheep -	Responsible for people

S 12 Protector, provider and mediator are just some of the tasks for a sheep owner. Being with them all the time for a sheep farmer is going a bit too far in Australian conditions but that is just what God and Jesus promised to do.

'As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so I will look after my sheep'. Ezek 34:12

S 13 Caring and feeding sheep while they are free ranging is difficult.

**Jesus said if you love me, care for my sheep and feed them to Peter
John 21: 16, 17**

S 14 What did Jesus mean when he said MY sheep. I breed my own sheep or I buy some sheep and they then become mine legally BUT How do I make them mine?

**Jesus told Peter 'if you love me, feed my lambs;
care for my sheep; feed my sheep' John 21: 15-17**

**# S 15 A shepherd will provide for all his sheep's needs.
The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. *Psalm 23***

S 16 What ever we do in our lives impacts and affects our neighbours. God did not make us to be alone or to live on an island. I learnt this one year whilst looking after my sheep.

**What I do with my sheep affects my neighbour!
BUT Who is my neighbour? Luke 10:27-37**

Life for a sheep can be tough. .Life for people can be tough
Sheep have to survive predators, disease, poisonous plants, the seasons, the rain. the heat, the cold, the floods, the effort of walking and finding their own feed, the trauma of shearing, crutching and yarding for treatment. To them life may seem unfair, harsh or brutal.

Yet as an owner manager, or today's shepherd, I have a responsibility to follow the sheep, trying to protect, shelter, guide and give them the best conditions all the days of their lives.

How much do we appreciate God's following us and offering support, help and protection? These are some of the issues and ideas I relate to in this series based on my experience about shepherding sheep and its parallel with shepherding people.

Who are the shepherds you have appreciated over your Christian walk?

Make a list.

Spend a moment in prayer and thank God for them.

I did this and I made a list of 12 very significant spiritual shepherds.

The extraordinary thing about my list was there were people from six different Christian denominations and many walks of life.

S 12 'As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so I will look after my sheep'. Ezek 34:12



Any owner manager of sheep knows there are responsibilities that go with the role. We are the shepherds.

Being a protector, provider and mediator are just some of the tasks.

Being with them all the time for a sheep farmer is going a bit too far in Australian conditions but that is just what God and Jesus promised to do.

When Jesus told Peter to feed his lambs, feed his sheep, care for his sheep
He didn't mean only Peter
He meant this for any of us as: a parent! an elder! a leader of worship! a member of a congregation! a neighbour or member of a community or culture.

Ezekiel draws out the responsibilities of a shepherd very explicitly. Ezekiel 34:1-6
Jesus reinforced these same guidelines when he was giving the example of separating the sheep from the goats Matt 25:34-36

The responsibility for care and feed is greater than this because in Ezekiel 34:17-24
God indicates 'I will judge between one sheep and another' The Fat sheep attitude to the lean, the bullies in the community.

There are many times in the bible when God indicates that the priests and leaders are to feed his people with good teaching.

Just what is good balanced teaching? Is 40:1, Jer 3:15, Ezek:34:2, Zech:11:9, Acts 20:28

Jesus is most condemnatory of the leaders and shepherds of the Jews in his period of history because of their wrong emphasis or understanding of what God wanted. Matt 23 Luke 11:37-52

Through feeding my actual sheep, I have learnt that if you get it wrong there are severe and significant outcomes.

Sheep if they are attacked by instinct run together to form a mob. Sheep also learn who their protector is and I can walk up close to them and they don't move. The sheep also are not afraid of my border collie dogs. These dogs do not bark, do not bite, they will run around in front of the sheep following my whistle and stand in front of the sheep on the path they were following and they will stay in front of them and look them in the eye until the sheep turn away. The sheep are not afraid of them and sometimes they will challenge the dog, stamp their feet, head butt at them or run a few steps straight at them.

If a strange dog or fox comes the sheep will call out and try to run to be together with others in the protection of the mob. Hebrews reminds us of the strength of numbers. 10:24,25 'We may spur one another on....let us encourage one another....'

I place my earmark and brand on each sheep to signify to rustlers or neighbours that these sheep are mine, they are under my protection, management and ownership. If they leave my property I have to sign a form declaring where they are going to and that I have given permission for them to be taken.

**It is wonderfully reassuring to know God has left us shepherds, left us with a fellowship of believers, left us with His spirit so that we can draw to them for protection. His Spirit in us is to signify we are His. Romans 8:16
How familiar are you with the signs of the Spirit in your life?**

Psalm 23:4 'I will fear no evil because you are with me;' Luke 12:11,12

The sheep on my property while ever they are on my property know I am with them supervising protecting and overseeing all the things that happen. I quarantine other animals from them, I check the boundary fences, I place fire breaks or trails around the farm, I hold stores of grain for when the feed is not there enough for their needs. But! The sheep don't really know I do all that. Do they?

But I do it anyway, I have a legal, moral and welfare obligation to see that I am with them in this way all the time.

David would have known in his circumstance as a shepherd if he wasn't there all the time predators could ravage his sheep.

Jesus recognised this too and promised. I will be with you always. 'My counsellor will be with you for ever' John 14:16-18

Can you share a story about when that promise has been most significant for you?

S 13 Jesus said ‘ if you love me, care for my sheep and feed them’ to Peter John 21: 16, 17 Caring and feeding sheep while they are free ranging is difficult.

I can’t make my sheep come to me to be fed. If they are in a paddock of good feed they don’t even like to see me coming near them, in fact they will try and avoid me and move away as much as possible.

What can I do when they don’t come to me for feed or care?

I go to them

My sheep and their behaviour sound like a lot of people in the community and their reaction to the Christian church!



I visit the sheep regularly. I may wander or drive around. No strings, no agenda, just be with them in the paddock where they are. While I am doing this I also check the soil, the water, the grasses, the pastures, the amount of ground cover, their faeces, I look them over to see what shape they are in what is their estimated weight is, whether their wool coating is alright or if there are signs of problems with the wool on some parts of the body, I check for the injured. Injured by another animal or something foreign in the paddock caught in their wool..

If it is a nice day I might stop and have a cup of tea and enjoy the peace, serenity and view.

We cannot care for others if we don’t spend time with them.

Just being there enables you to pick up the signs of potential problems.

Share a story of how a Christian friend has just spent time with you, or just been around and available and what difference that made to your day or your life..

Isn’t this what God requires of us?

Isn’t this what God has done for us?

God came to visit us in the person of Jesus.

If I don’t see and treat or protect my sheep within three days during the fly season if conditions are right for the flies to breed, the flies find a nice damp humid environment in the wool and lay their eggs who become maggots. These maggots will burrow into the skin after moisture and feed on skin tissue which if untreated can cause blood poisoning.

If there is a summer rain I know I have a 3 week period to monitor and treat worm problems. If I don't, blood sucking worms or worms that spread on the grass can interfere with the stomach's absorption powers and cause body weakness and illness anaemia and sometimes if untreated death.

If the soil has a mineral deficiency. Some of my country is deficient in selenium and if I don't provide the mineral supplement in the form of licks or drenches the health of my sheep and their productivity declines.

There is a certain time frame within which spiritual and life problems can be most effectively dealt with.

Can you share a story about how timely caring from someone really helped?

Some sheep will always try and find a way to break out of the boundaries that we set. The boundaries are set to protect, restrict the access to areas that are known to be harmful, to prevent the individual wandering off into unmarked foreign or unknown territory. Boundaries are also used to keep some predators or competing foragers from invading the space.

I have made boundaries with fences of many types: Plain wire, high tensile wire, barb wire, netting, spring coil, ringlock and electric. All of them have an intentional purpose to match the nature of the sheep, the nature of the terrain, the nature of the competing or possible marauding animals

What are some Christian boundaries you have felt helpful during your Christian pilgrimage. Do we need different boundaries?

How has the presence of boundaries helped you in your Christian walk?

It may not be deliberate and it may actually be unintentional but some stray.

I have watched some sheep graze right up to the fence and just place their face through to the other side to eat and they keep pushing their face further and further to reach the feed that is just out of reach. Sometimes the fence gives way and then they are through, out into a new world and environment. Some will deliberately push through just to get away. Especially younger sheep, they will always push the boundaries and the first thing in a new area they will do is explore the boundaries..

S 14 Jesus told Peter 'if you love me, feed my lambs; care for my sheep; feed my sheep' John 21: 15-17

**What did Jesus mean when he said MY sheep.
I breed my own sheep or I buy some sheep and they then become mine.
How do I make them mine?**



I have a registered sale certificate and or a vendor declaration saying where these sheep came from what their health was like at sale.

Does that make them mine?

Yes! but the sheep need an identifiable mark on them also.

I have a few choices:

- I can place a registered brand on their rump or midside.
- I can place an eartag with a number and property name in their ear.
- I can tattoo in the ear or place an electronic chip in the ear or neck so a scanner can identify them and keep track of their production and /or weight.

**Did Jesus just mean feed only the sheep or people who were branded as His?
What is Jesus' brand?**

The Holy Spirit. Romans 8:16 John 1:12 John 3:5,6

The church claims baptismal registration is a sign.

There is also another understanding of who Jesus sheep are: Humans were made in God's image and therefore every human being is God's Gen 1:26

The Jews were meant to be the shepherds and carers for the rest of the world.

Christians today are expected to be the lights for the rest of the world Acts 10:34-48

Caring and feeding of sheep has been narrowly interpreted as believers who come to church. Is this a correct emphasise and understanding? Romans 10:11,12

What does a more expansive understanding of 'my sheep' mean to the nature of ministry you should practice?: Your group of Christians?; Your church?

An even more expansive interpretation and possibility is possible

When I did the Holistic farming course it was an important principle that was made that production from the livestock you operate with is only one part of the picture.

Feeding sheep only for their productivity or \$ return cannot be undertaken in isolation.

Consideration for what feed to give, what management action is made with the sheep has to be always weighed against your farm goals. The farm goals are developed considering: your family; your community; your soil; your vegetation;

the native animals and creatures; your water; the amount of profit you want to make; your time and your skills.

If this attitude is taken for feeding and producing income from sheep what does it imply God would like our attitude to be when considering growing disciples.

We understand God says Jesus died for the whole of **creation**. Mark 16:15

This therefore could imply feeding, caring for non Christians, nations, creatures and the earth itself.

If our lifestyle and church activities were to reflect this attitude what are some of the most important things we should be doing?

What could we be doing differently? .



S 15 The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. *Psalm 23*

David reminds us in this psalm that God is a shepherd who will provide for all our needs. I found some circumstances on my farm where I had to provide all my sheep's needs and I see some strong parables in my experience.

I have to monitor the protection, health, nutrition, water, diet and nutrient balance of my flocks of sheep all year round under a cell or wholistic farming program. I move and check the sheep every 2-3 days and if the balance of feed, health, water, pasture, ground cover isn't correct it can alter the micron, the yield and staple strength and therefore the value of the wool on my sheep. If they are ewes, this balance is critical to the pregnancy the gestation and lactation for the ewe and lamb. It is critical to my production and \$ return per hectare for me to ensure that my sheep never want for anything.

Isn't our faith and walk with God like that? God monitors and watches over us no matter what the outside circumstances are like. He will supply all our needs! How can we believe God actually isn't anxious about all the things that happen to us? Jesus implied this in Matt 6:25-34 where he says look at the birds and flowers.

There is however a difference between needs and wants.

Discuss what you understand this difference to be. Matt 6:8,32 Luke 12:30

During the drought years when there was very little farm income, our family struggled with understanding this difference. We had to deliberate over each purchase, to see if it was a need or a want. When we understood the difference we were able to praise God for providing for our basic needs.

One year the rains didn't come in autumn and we approached winter in the cold country hills around Mudgee with a prospect of almost no or very little winter feed. My choices were difficult. If I kept the same number of sheep they would eat all the grass and pasture cover, expose the soil to possible wind and water erosion when it did rain. I could see the big gullies, soil washes and large rocks which were evidence of when this had happened in the past.

The loss of ground cover on the soil also meant that when it did rain most of the rain would run off and not penetrate into the soil. Ground cover or dry grass stumps allowed water to run down the plant stalk and into the root trails of that plant. The roots of the plants, even though they were dead, would hold the soil together. Moisture penetration would mean a very rapid recovery of grass germination when rain fell. Ground cover would protect the seed bank of grass seeds in the top layer of soil and also allow rapid germination of grasses when it rained.

If I kept all my sheep they would remove all the grasses that the native animals, birds, insects, soil microbes, wallabies, kangaroos and echidnas would need to survive this

hungry winter. I had to consider my family, the sheep, the soil, the water, the grasses and the wildlife.

One particular year I chose to use a sacrifice paddock.

What is a sacrifice paddock?

It is a small paddock that confines the sheep. This small paddock would reduce the energy loss for the sheep because they wouldn't be walking the hills looking for feed. I would then provide all their water and nutrients with mineral blocks and grain feed them every second or third day. The paddock would become a dust bowl or a quagmire when wet. It would take a long time to recover but it would build up with nutrients from the concentration of sheep faeces. The small paddock would be sacrificed to allow the remainder of the farm to recover quickly.

Even though the sheep were the most important thing for me, being my sole income earner, I could not make my decision totally on their consideration only.

Humankind, as we understand, are God's most important creation and consideration. We were made in his image. Genesis 1:26,27

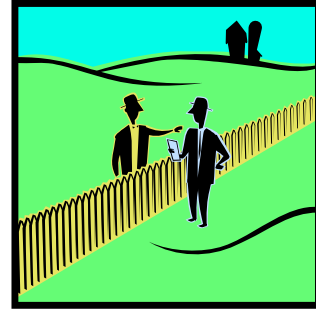
He sacrificed himself for us. Eph 2:4-8

But God has more than just man to consider. God also cared for the earth, animals, plants and the environment. In Genesis 2:15 we are told that he put man in the garden to work and take care of it. We now understand that this means maintain the ecosystem the environment and biodiversity. This is an important lesson about our priorities.

Can you tell stories of how looking after something with total disregard to everything else can have disastrous consequences.



S 16 What I do with my sheep affects my neighbour!



Who is my neighbour? Luke 10:27-37

Whatever we do in our lives impacts and affects our neighbours. God did not make us to be alone or to live on an island. I learnt this one year whilst looking after my sheep.

After an autumn with insufficient rain we approached winter with a prospect of poor winter feed supplies. Having used our hay and grain reserves over summer we had to buy feed or send sheep away on agistment. My choices were difficult.

I chose to sell my stock. This meant our family would have no income for that whole year. The price for the livestock sale would have to be invested to purchase replacement stock later when I did have feed. Stock prices and availability are always more difficult after a drought and prices are usually higher than the sale price because of increased demand. I would also lose twenty years of breeding and selection. I had to really think about this decision because it was not my decision alone.

A decision to sell would affect my family; my neighbour and my community.

- *If I don't have any stock I will not be as diligent in checking my boundary fences, feral animals, pests. This will affect my neighbour on the other side of the fence.*
- *The retailer's income relies on me buying produce to maintain the health and hygiene of my stock during the year. I would reduce their income.*
- *The stock agents rely on my sale of excess stock and lambs during the year for income.*
- *The butchers and consumers would be affected by my not being in the market as a provider. Prices in the supermarkets would increase because many growers were in the same situation. Less supply for a consistent demand.*
- *The wool brokers and wool manufacturers would miss out on my normal supply of wool for this year at least. Less supply for a world wide demand.*

This decision to sell has community and social implications. Just 'who is my neighbour' suddenly has a lot of additional meaning. Luke 10:27-37

All of the decisions we make about following a course of action are not ours alone. What we decide or do affects other people, immediate family and friends obviously, but also our community and society.

People who commit suicide do not realise the cost to others. But when you visit or know some of the friends or family left behind you see the impact.

What is the impact of suicide on society?

Your decision to tell the truth, be honest in your tax claims, give your word to do something are all critical to helping people see what the kingdom of God is like. What is the impact of you acting this way on your community, society, nation or our world? A life of love and of integrity is an important part of being a Christian because we are not alone. 1 Tim 3:2-13, James 1:19,20 2:14-19

Can you tell a story of how a decision you have personally made has affected a surprising number of people. Often this realisation doesn't happen until afterwards but God warns us repeatedly. Acts 5 :1-1, Acts 16:13-15 then 40 John 4:28-30, 39-