

19. Jesus, the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-21

The Gospel According to John

We are continuing to look at the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and ruling elders after the Lord had healed the man born blind on the Sabbath (John 9). When John wrote his Gospel, there were no chapter divisions, so we should read the following verses of Jesus' teaching in the context of the treatment by the Pharisees of the man healed of blindness. The leaders had excommunicated the man and, at the same time, scorning him and accusing him of being born in sin (John 9:34). Jesus had sharp but honest words about the false shepherds of Israel:

¹“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them (John 10:1-6).

Illegitimate Shepherds

At the Jerusalem Sheep Gate, it is likely there was an enclosure where the Shepherd waited with his sheep until he got paid for the sacrificial lambs that were used by the priests for the daily sacrifices and sin offerings. The imagery of the Sheep Gate and enclosure could have been a perfect backdrop for Jesus' words. The Lord was moved with compassion for His people, seeing them as lost sheep: “When He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). The leaders of Israel did not genuinely care for the people or reflect the heart of God as the Good Shepherd.

Using figurative language (v. 6), Messiah accused the Pharisees of being thieves, robbers, and illegitimate shepherds. He began warning them that they were not caring for the sheep at all, but that they were in it for financial reward and self-glorification. This is not unlike today where people use religion as a money-making scheme. The Pharisees and leaders wanted to look good on the outside, but the Lord saw that, on the inside, they were a picture of dead men's bones and everything unclean, full of hypocrisy and wickedness (Matthew 23:27-28). They had not legitimately become shepherds of the people by coming to the gatekeeper or doorkeeper, but they had come to the sheepfold of Israel by some other way. Jesus acknowledged that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees had positions of power; however, He warned His followers and disciples that, even though these leaders were in positions of spiritual authority, they were not to imitate everything these leaders did:

¹Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees **sit in Moses' seat**. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But **do not do what they do**, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy,

cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. **5Everything they do is done for people to see:** They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; **6they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues;** **7they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others"** (Matthew 23:1-7).

There is a legitimate authority that comes from God, but we should also be aware of illegitimate spiritual authority that is of men. The Pharisees and teachers of the law had jumped over the fence or sheepfold wall to get into the sheepfold, but their ministry and calling were not of God. The ordinary people were bound to obey them, for they sat in Moses' seat of authority, but few of the people had respect for the leaders because of their showmanship, pride, and love for the honor of men. The way that they had treated the man born blind was further evidence that they did not care for the sheep in the slightest. The Lord had spoken several years prophetically previously by a word from the prophet Ezekiel, i.e., that a time would come when false shepherds would come in and rule the flock by underhanded means:

1The word of the LORD came to me: 2"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: **Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but **you do not take care of the flock.** 4You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have **not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.** 5So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. 6My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. 7"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, 9therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10This is what the Sovereign LORD says: **I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock** so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. 11"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: **I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.** 12As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, **so will I look after my sheep"** (Ezekiel 34:1-12).**

The Legitimate Shepherd of the Sheep

Jesus spoke about His legitimate authority as the Shepherd of the flock of God coming Himself to search for His sheep (v. 12) and to call them out of the sheepfold of slavery. He had come through legitimate means; His ministry was witnessed by the voice of God at His baptism when He went to the gatekeeper of the flock, John the Baptist. God also witnessed to Jesus' being the legitimate Shepherd by an audible voice from heaven at His baptism: **"This is my Son, whom I**

love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Not only had He the witness of God and the prophet, but also His message came with miracles as well as a ring of truth, a powerful sense of authority in His words “because he taught as one who had **authority**, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:29). Even the Temple guards, sent to capture Christ by the ruling leadership of Israel, came back empty-handed, excusing themselves by saying, “No one ever spoke the way this man does” (John 7:46). When Jesus spoke, people listened. There was a sense of something different about Him. Another time, we are told by Luke that the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the leaders were trying to kill Him, “Yet they could not find any way to do it, because **all the people hung on his words**” (Luke 19:48). Jesus put it this way to the Pharisees: “the sheep listen to his voice” (v. 3), and again in verse four, “his sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

Question 1) What was it about Christ that first attracted you to Him? Can you explain what convinced you as to the truth of His message?

Using parabolic and figure-of-speech-language (metaphor), Messiah put before them the picture of the communal sheepfold that was a part of every village in Judea and Samaria. The imagery of a shepherd would be a "word picture" familiar to the ordinary folk. Jerusalem is situated on rocky limestone terrain mostly used for shepherding. In 1978, I lived in *Beit Hanina* for four months, several miles to the north of Jerusalem. It was quite common to see shepherds as young as thirteen with their sheep having little bells around their necks in case they wandered off. It was one such young shepherd that threw a stone at a wandering sheep down near the Dead Sea at Qumran and found the most significant archeological discovery of modern time, the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The picture in verses 1-6 is of a communal sheepfold in a village. In verse one, the words “sheep pen” is the Greek word *aulē*, which means a court or courtyard. Many people in the town would have sheep as a source of income. Most would keep their sheep for the shearing of the wool each year. At the end of each day, the sheep were held in the communal sheepfold in the village. The word translated ‘gate’ is the Greek word *thyra*, which means ‘door.’ The walls were high with thorn shrubs or brambles on the top of the wall. The sheep were kept safe in the communal sheepfold. One trusted guardian would watch the gate or door, and only he had the key.

Every morning, the different shepherds would come, open the door, and call, whistle, or even sing a particular song that each of his sheep would know. They would come out of the sheepfold at the sound of the shepherd’s voice. Only the sheep of the shepherd who called them would follow him out of the communal sheepfold to the grazing land not too far from the village. Because most of the sheep had been with the shepherd for a while, they knew him, and the shepherd knew their names. Often, it would be named "black ear" or "white chest." He knew the distinguishing features of his sheep because there was an intimate relationship that the shepherd had with his sheep.

The shepherd always went before them. They followed him implicitly. When he crossed a stream, they trusted him and followed. Wherever he led them, they could believe that he could see much better than they and that he knew of green grass ahead. The shepherd knew the terrain;

they didn't have to worry about wherever he led them. They could trust him and would be kept safe.

I Am the Gate for the Sheep

There was a lack of understanding by the Pharisees about Messiah's figurative language (v. 6), so in verses seven through fifteen, He clarified His thoughts to the disciples and the Pharisees:

⁷Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. ¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:7-15).

In an earlier verse, He said that He was the One who came to the gate and called out His sheep by name. Now, His figurative language changed to the summer months when the grass near the villages was all eaten. When it was warmer, the shepherd would take the sheep away from the town for several days leading His sheep to grassy areas farther away. It would be too far away to go home for the night so that the shepherd would find a cave nearby, or he would construct an enclosure made into a sheepfold from the many stones and boulders on the Judean plateau. Again, brambles or thorn bushes would stop any wolves from wanting to get over the walls at the sheep during the night.

The shepherd would allow only one gap where the sheep could go in or out the sheepfold. Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep (v. 7), or "I am the door," depending on the translation you use. That would be the place where the shepherd would rest and sleep for the night. He would be the door of the sheepfold. The sheep would be able to come in and go out (v. 9). Perhaps, He was referring to the fact that the sheep that had come through the Sheep Gate of Jerusalem never went out again. Once they were inside the gate, they were ready to be sacrificed. Jesus said that the sheep would go in and out. The sheep could rest peaceful and secure for the night because they could see the Shepherd in the doorway, and they knew He loved them and would protect them from any wolves.

Question 2) When we think of Jesus as "The Door," He is portrayed as a guard, protecting the sheep from "wolves or thieves." In what way has Jesus been a door of protection in your life? Is there a level of cooperation on your part?

"I am the door," is the third great *I AM* statement of Jesus. For those who say that there are many ways to God, Jesus said that He is the door to the sheepfold, i.e., the sheepfold being a picture of

eternal life and being safe and secure in Him. There is only one way, and Jesus is the only way. We have to come to Him, for there is no other way:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we **must** be saved” (Acts 4:12).

We deceive ourselves if we think that there is another way to approach God. If there was another way other than God’s Son taking the punishment for sin, don’t you think the Father would have taken it? Our problem is that we are all easily led astray as sheep seem to stray from the shepherd. The prophet Isaiah put it like this:

We all, **like sheep, have gone astray**, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

Satan has come as a false shepherd to kill and destroy us, but Jesus said, “**I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full**” (v. 10). This statement begs the question that, if Christ came to give us life, what did we have before He came? True life, the life of God, is only imparted to us at the point of repentance of sin and turning toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Before that point, we are lost sheep that have gone astray and dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1 and 5). The only way out of our deadness and sin was for someone to be our substitute for sin and take the penalty for our rebellion and sin upon Himself. That is what Jesus did. God laid upon Christ the iniquity (sin) of us all. Because it was God in the flesh, only His life could have the value needed to satisfy eternal justice to bring us “home.” Only God could pay the price for us all. It would be His life for our life, a unique exchange, and one that is significant to our advantage far more than we can ever comprehend.

Let’s put it another way. If we were to think regarding ants, for example, how many ants would amount to the same value of a sheep—a million, maybe ten million, what about the whole population of ants, would that equal one sheep? A sheep is a higher life form, and higher value than all ants put together. Well, let’s go further with that thought. How many sheep would be the equivalent value to a human being? In God’s view, all sheep all over the world does not equal the life of one human made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Let’s go one step further; what kind of price had to be paid to buy all human beings out of the slave market of Satan? Only the Sovereign Lord Himself could equal the value of the total of all those who would take His death as a substitute for theirs. □

We are talking about the redemption payment of the Son of God laying down His life in exchange for our mortal, imperfect life. That’s why the death of Christ paid for all your sin. No man can take away sin, but the Lord of Glory can, and He did. The Lord laid on His Son the sin of all us sheep that had gone astray. If we receive Christ by faith, we are regenerated or born-again from above by the payment price of the precious blood of Christ. We now belong to the Good Shepherd who has given His life for the sheep. Jesus said that He came to lay down His life for His sheep (v. 15).

The Good Shepherd

In verse fourteen, we find the fourth *I AM* statement paired with the phrase "good shepherd." He distinguishes between His shepherding and the false hireling shepherds of Israel that cared nothing for the sheep. William Barclay tells us about the two words in Greek translated as "good:"

Jesus describes Himself as the *good* shepherd. Now in Greek, there are two words for good. There is *Agathos*, which merely describes the moral quality of a thing; there is *Kalos*, which means that in the goodness there is a quality of winsomeness, which makes it lovely. When Jesus is described as the *Good Shepherd*, the word is *Kalos*. In him there is more than efficiency and more than fidelity; there is loveliness. Sometimes in a village or town, people speak of *the good doctor*. They are not thinking of the doctor's efficiency and skill as a physician; they are thinking of the sympathy and the kindness and the graciousness, which he brought with him and which made him the friend of all. In the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, there is loveliness as well as strength and power.¹

Jesus stated to those listening to Him that He knows His sheep and His sheep also know Him (v. 14).

Question 3) Jesus said, "I know my sheep, and my sheep know me" (v. 14). In what practical ways do we discern the voice of the Shepherd and recognize it from all the other voices?

The Lord is intimately acquainted with us and knows us inside out. Theologians have a big word for this ability of God to know everything about us; they say that God is omniscient. He knows all things at all times. There is nothing God does not know. He never had to learn it; He doesn't have to read up on the day's happenings. We can never tell God anything that God doesn't already know about you. The Lord Jesus, being God in the flesh, has the same knowledge of all things. He has perfect knowledge, perfect wisdom and complete understanding of all that goes on. Perfect knowledge is the accurate possession of the facts. Perfect wisdom is the proper application of the facts, and perfect understanding means that He fully perceives and interprets the facts. Omniscience makes God infallible; He is incapable of error or omission (Psalm 139:1-10). How beautiful to know that, even though He knows everything about us, He still loves us and cares for us. He indeed is the Good Shepherd—the lovely One!

We do not have that same ability for perfect knowledge, but we can know Him intimately as Savior and Lord. As we grow in our relationship with Christ, the more we can enjoy that nearness and closeness of knowing Him.

One Flock and One Shepherd

¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it 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. This command I received from my Father." ¹⁹The Jews who heard these words were again divided. ²⁰Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad.

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, page 62.

Why listen to him?" ²¹But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (John 10:7-21).

Once again, Jesus brought outrage and offense with the truth He spoke. He offended the minds to reveal the hearts of the false shepherds. The words He spoke about Himself again caused a polarization among the people as they considered what Jesus was saying about Who He was. The "other" sheep that Jesus is referring to in verse sixteen is the Gentiles, the sheep that are not of the same "sheep pen" of Hebrew origin. The Gospel came to the Jewish people first, and then in Acts chapter ten, God planned to call the Gentiles into obedience to the Gospel, too. The promise came to Abraham that "all families on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). The promised seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ, will make Jew and Gentile into one flock of sheep and one Shepherd. This does not mean that He forsook the original flock. He said that there would be one flock and one shepherd. All believers will become one flock, Jew and Gentile together. He would lay His life down for His sheep that they might receive forgiveness of sins and newness of life. He would lay down His life voluntarily. We give Satan too much credit for the crucifixion. Yes, he is culpable or guilty for what he did at the cross, but it was God's plan right from the beginning of the world. □

Some time ago, I heard a story that Doctor Donald Grey Barnhouse once shared. It was about a certain man who had a beautiful estate upon which were some magnificent trees in which this man took great pride. It was his custom to walk among the trees and gaze upon their beauty. This man had an enemy who hated him sorely; this enemy was always seeking ways of annoying the master of the estate. At last, the enemy conceived a plan, which he thought would greatly wound the heart of the proprietor. He decided to go to the estate in the dark of the night and cut down one of the most beautiful trees. He laid his plans well. He took with him an ax and saw, and he began his work. All night he toiled until his muscles were sore and his hands were blistered. □

As morning dawned, he saw the proprietor riding with a companion toward the trees where he had been toiling. He redoubled his efforts, and with all that he could, he worked as diligently as he was able to do so, and the great tree began to creak and to totter. As it gained momentum in the fall, the enemy started to shout in triumph. One of the branches, however, came toward him and pinned him to the ground in agony. His hatred, however, was intense and he jeered at the proprietor who approached him. The owner of the estate called his companion to him and said to the enemy, "You thought to do me great harm, but I want to show you what you have done. This man with me is the architect of a beautiful home that I intend to build here amid these trees. To make room for the house, it was necessary to cut down one of these trees. Look at this plan. The tree upon which you have toiled all night and which is now the cause of your death is the very tree that must be cut down to make room for my house. You have worked for me without knowing it and your toil is for nothing and bitterness is your food in death."

Satan thought he was so smart when he tried to get one over on God by crucifying His Son, the Lord Jesus. His effort, though, was foreseen and foreordained of God to bring many sons to glory (Hebrews 2:10). We will sparkle like jewels to the Lord one day before our Shepherd:

The LORD, their God, will save his people on that day as a shepherd saves his flock. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown (Zechariah 9:16).

Ultimately, it is the Lord Himself who saves His people. We do have shepherds on earth, even spiritual leaders to whom God has given pastoral charge of His flock. But even so, we are to be mindful of the fact that He is, and always will be, our Shepherd. We should be able to know His voice so well that a stranger's voice we will not follow. That means that we know His Word, we know His ways, and we know the still small voice of the Holy Spirit as He leads us. There will be times when we are disappointed by man, for all men are fallible. Don't let that be an excuse for not continuing to follow the True Shepherd. We are all responsible for our choices and keeping our hearts tuned to the True and Good Shepherd of our souls. John's Gospel teaches us in a very practical sense of how to abide and how to remain in Christ. We see in his writings a recurring theme about the safety of being in the Lord's care. How fitting it is that John has become known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He had a deep understanding of the nurturing and caring nature of the Lord.

Psalm 23 is, perhaps, one of the most well-known and frequently quoted passages in all of Scripture. It clearly shows us the nature of the Good Shepherd and what we can expect as we follow Him.

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23).

You may want to take the time to read this Psalm. In verse one, it tells us: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." These are the advantages we see of following the Good Shepherd. He gives us:

1. Guidance
2. Provision and sustenance
3. Protection and Safety
4. Joy and peace of mind
5. Confidence and comfort
6. Delight in His presence □

Question for Closing Prayer: Which one of these things do you need most in your life right now and why? Pick one of these things and ask God to make Himself real to you in this way. If you are reading this study in a group situation, share this with one other person and pray for him, also.

Prayer: "Thank You, Father, that You promised to be my shepherd. Please help me to listen for Your voice instead of choosing my way. Please help me to recognize Your voice quickly when You want me to change direction. You are the One to Whom I want to look, the One I trust with the safekeeping of my soul. Amen. □

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