

“The Prayer Closet”

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

Richard and Kerry Nakamura: the Nakamuras are currently in Washington State. As God for Richard’s mother as she grieves for the death of her Buddhist husband that she will come to faith in Christ. Ask for wisdom by Richard and Kerry for wisdom regarding the education of their children.

President Obama: the Spirit will give him discernment between what is constructive and what destructive for the moral, social and economic well-being of the nation; the Lord will enable him to discern between true servants and the self-seeking; that he will come to a deep personal faith in Christ

Daily Vacation Bible School: **THIS IS THE WEEK!!!** Pray for spiritual focus and good morale among the staff, for well-prepared and spiritually empowered teachers and performers, and for **LOTS OF KIDS** from the neighborhoods with families looking for or just needing a spiritual home

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Aaron Bowen of Volunteer Fire Fighter with Butte County Fire (son of Randy and Ruth): safety on the job when responding to calls, for wisdom in helping the other fire fighters and paramedics.

Young Adult of the Week: Sandra Griffin (daughter of Larry and Patti Ott): please pray for wisdom in her planning for the Fall semester.

Please pray for the health and recovery of our church family: Carol Bernerd, Harley Chapman Sr., Nathan Giordano, Diane Kinnamont, Carol Koehler, Mike Kokoletsos, Volker Ladendorf, Roseanne Lane, Larry McFall, Dick & Jane Miller, John Montgomery, Fred & Jean Pauly, Phil Peterson, Jean Price, Cindy Rodney, John Stancik, Wally Yates
(please call the office to request updates to this list)

Today appropriately enough the title for the message (it is a little different from what is in the bulletin for I changed it as I kept working on it; I dropped off the reference to the good life), concentrates on “Shepherds and Sheep”. The passage we are looking at as we continue our study of the Gospel of John is 10:1-19.

This is a section that continues to deal with Jesus’ dealing with the Pharisees. The Pharisees and scribes were the dominant leaders of the popular religion in Israel. They were not, however, good leaders. In fact they were a disaster. As you and I think about our own leaders, the leaders of our nation, we rightly have deep concerns that many of our leaders are taking us far away from where we as a nation have been and away from those foundations and sources of strength and wisdom which have made the United States a great nation. We recognize that that status, where we stand, that inner energy, that knowledge of the righteousness of God is a fading thing, and we want to get back, we want to know how to do that.

Leaders are critically important. We are a very egalitarian society. We are a society that likes to say everybody is equal; they’re just equal in different ways. There is a tendency, therefore, for us to undervalue and not understand the critical importance of leaders. The Bible is absolutely clear about this. I thought a good place for us to start and get a proper Biblical perspective on this matter of leadership is to go to Hebrews 13:7-9a. If you look at those (verses), this is what the writer says. He says that we are to remember our leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God, and as we remember them we are to remember specifically the outcome of their way of life, and we are to imitate their faith. The Bible is very clear that the church is to exercise the maximum degree of care in determining who will be lifted up as leaders within any local congregation, because the model of their lives, and the outcome of their lives, has a huge impact on the spiritual life of the whole body of believers. This is rooted in the most profound of truths. That is this, Jesus Christ never changes [Hebrews 13:6]. We are a culture that is almost obsessed with innovation and newness and running in different directions and all kinds of stuff like that. But the church knows that the once for all given word of God has been given! It is an unchangeable source of life and truth and wisdom. Therefore you and I are called to constantly return to what has been given and to measure every innovation against the foundations already laid. That is true with your leaders. They should have about themselves the qualities of Christ. So [the writer] warns his readers. He says, “*Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.*” You may or may not know this, but Christianity today in America is absolutely stuffed full of strange and diverse teachings. It is not just that our nation politically is imperiled, the church is imperiled; she is adrift.

Turning then to John 10 with that clear sense of the importance of spiritual leaders particularly, for that is what is at issue [in this passage], we pick up the narrative in John’s Gospel 10:1 down through v. 19. In the narrative John himself does not indicate what the relationship is between the end of chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10. Of course when he wrote it, there were no chapter breaks and no verses; it is an editor’s guess as to what the right breaks would be. It is almost irresistible to see the two sections flowing directly into one another because they deal so completely with the same topic: the trouble which Jesus has in getting through to the Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees had proven themselves to be false shepherds. They had cruelly burdened the people. What they had done is probably amongst the worse things that a spiritual leader can do. They had taken the truth of God and turned it into a lie. So now when the people came to hear the Word of God, they heard instead an interpretation that took them away from God and left them burdened in a religion of works, a religion that left them feeling utterly unworthy because they could never live up to the demands of the rules and regulations that the Pharisees had stretched out as being the true measure of righteousness. You have to know that this has happened within the life of the church as well. There was a man named Charles Finney. Some of you may know who he [was]. Some of you may think he was a great preacher. Let me tell you flat out: he was a false teacher. How do I know that? He made this statement bluntly. He said there is nothing at all miraculous about conversions. It does not take any special work of the Holy Spirit at all. All you need to do is to employ the right methods, and if you employ the right methods people will come to know Jesus Christ, because he believed you and I are free to love the Lord our God if we choose to do so. Now let me point out that the scripture is absolutely clear: you and I are not free to love the

Lord God if we choose to do so, because we never choose to do so. We are in bondage. We are slaves to sin. We are rebels. We are terrified of God. We do not freely come to His presence, we do not seek Him out. At the end of his life Charles Finney, looking over the results of his well intended but terribly misguided work said, what has happened to the church, what have I done?

Reading these verses – we will in a moment – you would think to yourself, “This is obvious, wonderful stuff.” It is wonderful stuff, by the way. It is magnificent. It is some of the best things you can possibly read in scripture in terms of encouraging the believer. Jesus here says that He is the Good Shepherd, that He lays down His life for the sheep. He says that all others are false, they operate for personal gain. He says that the true sheep follow the true Shepherd and they know who He is. He also says some other things here. Read with me:

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.’
This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”*

A couple of comments: what does Jesus mean in verse 1 by saying that He is the door of the sheep? He is simply saying that He is the only way into the presence of the Father. This is information that you and I would be familiar with. Jesus says that no one can come to the Father except through Him. In the ancient world, and even today this is not unusual. How many of you have tried to have a personal interview with President Obama? Well, I guess this is the wrong crowd. If you give enough money you might get it! You have recognize that with powerful people you usually have to meet with a representative of that person and they clear you to make sure that you are safe and appropriate to come into their presence. They aren’t going to let just anybody walk in. Jesus is saying that that is how it is with God the Father. You don’t just walk into His presence. You have to walk in with Jesus there to introduce you. He is the one whom we call the mediator. No one, He says, can get to the Father except through Me; I am the one who brings him.

So obviously then the other side of this is that if somebody tries to come to God by another way than Jesus they are by definition false. If we limit our thoughts to the present age – this is the present age: the present age is “after-Jesus-has-risen-from-the-dead-and-given-us-the-Holy-Spirit-and-the-completed-revelation-of-God’s-truth-for-our-savation”. We live in that age. After this, then we readily understand that any preacher or teacher or spiritual guide or counselor, any of them at all who would pretend to give to us information that would help us to be reconciled with God, heal the wounds of the heart, clear away false thinking about sin, salvation or God Himself, these would be false unless they come in the name of Jesus. Notice that in that listing the intent is not to reject all secular knowledge; it is only any secular knowledge that claims to be able to bring us into the presence of God and to reconcile us to his will and purpose.

A further question arises as we listen to what Jesus has to say. Does Jesus intend that His caution would apply to all false teachers, specifically those in the Old Testament? There are lots of passages that deal with false teachers and prophets in the Old Testament. You can look at Jeremiah 23:1-4, 25 and 32-38; Zechariah 11; Isaiah 56... There is extensive dealing with the issue of false teachers. You might say to yourself, “Do we really need to know?” We do need to know, because the application of the New Testament to the Old has all together to do with the unity of the scriptures, Old and New. That itself has something to say to us about the plan of salvation. Let me put the issue this way: is the God of the Old Testament the God of the New? Absolutely! You probably realize – I hope that many of you do – that there are many in our nation, many around the world, who either deny this outright – they say the God of the Old Testament was a ferocious God of punishment who couldn’t possibly be the God of mercy in the New – or what is more common is that people simply ignore the Old Testament and don’t read it at

all and that way they ignore the difficulty of reconciling what read about God in the Old Testament and the demands of His holiness and righteousness and what read about God in the New Testament of His love and His mercy. When we do that we begin to ignore all that Jesus Himself said about the fires of hell that wait for those who refuse to believe. So if we abandon the unity of the Old and the New Testament, if we think that the issues that Jesus raises regarding false teachers and true teachers does not itself apply to the Old Testament what we end up doing is shrinking our available knowledge of God, shrinking until it is finally small enough to fit inside our preconceptions. It is exceedingly important therefore that we understand that what Jesus had to say about false teachers takes us all the way back to the entirety of the Old Testament and our understanding of why things went wrong the way they did.

The imagery of verses 3-5 which we read a bit ago would have been very familiar to the people of Jesus' day. They were omnipresent in ancient Israel. But even so, if you look at verse 6 it says this figure of speech Jesus used but they did not understand what He was saying to them. So one of the questions you would want to ask yourself is why did they not understand? What would be difficult for them? When you realize that a person is having difficulty accepting information out of an area of life that is extremely common – everybody knew about sheep, everybody knew about shepherds. This was not strange to them. You and I can kind of struggle; but they knew about sheep. When people have a hard time accepting a teaching about something with which they are very familiar you might want to say to yourself, “I wonder if there is an aspect of this teaching that they are resisting, that they are saying, ‘I don’t want to hear this, I don’t want to know this’”? I believe there is. There is an aspect of the relationship between shepherds and sheep that we miss because we don’t have much to do with them. One of the commentators that I read made this observation: “Nowadays we think of the shepherd in terms of tender care and concern for the flock. . . [How many of you know the picture of Jesus carrying the sheep in His hand over His neck and we think, ‘oh, that’s me, I’m being carried by Jesus!?’ That is excellent. That’s true. Shepherds did exactly that. They loved their sheep and cared for them. But there is another dimension of the relationship between shepherds and sheep which we are not so sensitive to and this is the way Leon Morris states it: “The shepherd was an autocrat over his flock, and passages [in the Bible] are not wanting where the shepherd imagery is used to emphasize the thought of sovereignty.”

Indeed in the ancient world it was not at all unusual for kings and emperors to be referred to as the shepherd of their people. The Bible also refers to God as the shepherd. It was likely that it was this association in the minds of the Pharisees and scribes that made them hesitant and resistant. The promised messiah was, they knew, supposed to be a man of authority, a man of power, a man able to call up the forces of Israel and put them into fighting shape and send them off against whatever oppressors might be around. They were anticipating a hero. What do they get? Jesus. You and I probably think, “Yeah, what more could you want?” [But] look, he’s an itinerant preacher from a no-count town followed by twelve men of no distinction whatsoever! He would not attract anyone’s eye. Remember what Isaiah says about Him. He was a man who was despised; he was acquainted with grief. He was a man that you turn your eyes away from. He was not a hero. We are familiar, I believe, with what is referred to by Paul as the offense of the cross, that the greatest act of conquest by God in overcoming all of His enemies is accomplished by a man voluntarily letting himself be crucified. Horrible! Please understand, death on the cross was not just incredibly painful, it was utterly shameful because you were naked, and the Jews were horrified. This is your hero? Long before the cross there was also already a wild disproportion: this man is presenting Himself as the messiah?

Beloved, don’t you and I struggle with exactly the same thing? Don’t we sometimes wish that when it came to our presence, wherever we are, that somehow God would give us this superhuman glow? Did you ever say to yourself after you left the event, “O, I wish I had said this or I wish I had said that”? Why can’t I be brilliant at the moment? Why am I so dumb?” Please understand that when we become persuaded of that we are actually saying to God, “Why are You so slow? Why don’t You make me great? Why don’t You make me invincible in front of these

people?” We are, but the path of our greatness is through weakness; it is the readiness, the willingness to suffer for the sake of truth. This is why it is so offensive and so laughable to the world. It ought to give us pause when we begin to look at ministries which in the name of Jesus declare themselves to be “fabulous!”

So we come to verses 7-19. These are in the nature of a second try. Jesus understands that He has not made contact – verse 6 – they haven’t got the picture, they haven’t heard what they need to know. So He is going to come around to them again. Now, as we noted before, Jesus declares Himself point blank, “I am the door of the sheep.” Then He makes this sweeping condemnation, this sweeping rejection of all who have come before Him. Beginning therefore at verse 8, “...all who came before me are thieves and robbers. But the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the Good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...” the others run away. Now we hear Jesus. He makes this sweeping condemnation of all who had come before [Him]. We wonder who is included. Both Jesus and His listeners would have been keenly aware of the long record of false prophets and apostate priests and self-serving spiritual as well as social and political leaders in the history of Israel. The problem, however, you must understand – you imagine yourself being one of those Pharisees and you are listening to Jesus talk. What are you going to hear as you hear Him make these statements about the children of Abraham? We think, usually, about the false teachers. But the statement here is about the children of Abraham. What does Jesus say about them? He says they followed false teachers. From the perspective of the Jews who were sure that membership in the covenant people of God, one’s credentials as a true sheep, was that you had the correct genealogy. You could demonstrate by father, by father, by father that you were a child of Abraham. But nobody, not even the most stubborn minded of the Pharisees could possibly say that all of the children of Abraham had remained faithful to God. Indeed, lots of them had followed false teachers. So now listen again to Jesus’ words from that perspective, with that understanding. “I am the true shepherd. My sheep know me and my voice, and they will not follow false...” So there are a couple of questions that arise, don’t they? Can Jesus possibly mean to say that true sheep unerringly know the true from the false shepherds? O, can Jesus possibly mean that every person that was duped by a false prophet or priest or leader was thereby proven to be a false sheep? What did Jesus say? Jesus said the true sheep will not follow [the false shepherd]. What this is about is the assurance of salvation. How do we know we are saved? Can we be fooled? If we are fooled, are we therefore lost forever? Ah, perhaps we begin to have a little sympathy for the discomfort on the part of the Pharisees as they listen to what Jesus had to say.

The prophet Jeremiah contended with false prophets throughout his ministry but it was not only with the false prophets that he contended. Can the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day have forgotten what Jeremiah had to say? In Jeremiah 5:30-31 this is what he said, “*An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction...*”, now here is the key, “...my people love to have it so...” Who loved it: God’s people. Jeremiah 7:8-10, “*Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations?’*” What does that sound like to you? Doesn’t that sound like what some people mean by “eternal security”? Don’t we sometimes hear this: “Saved by grace, therefore free to sin”? You know beloved, it is easy to read these words with our preconceptions and never ask ourselves, “What in fact did Jesus say and how does it apply to me?”

We can be sure that Jesus was fully aware of Jeremiah’s judgment against the people as well as the prophets. Jeremiah 23 speaks at length about false prophets, but Jeremiah in that chapter begins with the prophesy regarding the righteous branch of the Lord. Jesus was that righteous branch, he knew He was that righteous Branch; there was no way He could not have known the entirety of Jeremiah 23. So what does Jeremiah chapter 23 have to say? At the end of the hand-out [“Slides and Questions”] you will find that I have a brief listing which kind of sums up

what Jeremiah 23 has to say about false prophets. I will not have time to go through that. I am asking you to read Jeremiah 23 and look and see what Jeremiah has to say. I will make a couple of comments now about the comparison that He draws between Himself and these false prophets.

In verses 9-13 of John 10 Jesus draws between himself and the false shepherds these contrasts: those who use Him as the door are saved, He says, and they find pasture, but all the others come in to kill and to destroy and to steal. I am different, Jesus says; I have come in order to give abundant life. Here, beloved, is where you should stop. I simply ask you to answer this question before God: do you have an abundant life. Don't answer me; answer God. Notice that it is not a conditional statement. Jesus says, “*I give My sheep abundant life.*” Consequently if you and I are His sheep...

These are strong words, but what are we to make of them in a practical sense? At least at this point Jesus appears to be saying firstly that you know a false shepherd by the effect of their ministry. Has their ministry led to spiritual life flourishing in the Body? That is what Jesus means about abundance. Or has it instead led to struggling and even miserable sheep with leaders who flourish in worldly terms? I am not meaning to unfairly pick on the Catholic Church, but if you drop back to Medieval Catholicism, this is exactly the picture you have. You have an extremely wealthy hierarchy flourishing in worldly terms and you had a population that was profoundly ignorant of the gospel, knew nothing of the mercy and grace of God, and struggled in life. This is clear evidence! And today, do we find situation where we find pastors and their staffs that have big buildings and facilities and what is the state of their flock? What about those televangelists who fleece [the sheep], and yet our ears are often tickled by their false promises that if we just pray right God will bless us with every material thing we want? In the meantime, how often have we mentioned amongst ourselves the profound ignorance in almost all American churches regarding the contents of the Bible, the doctrines of the faith, an inability to witness for Jesus Christ? If I read the words of Jesus and apply them to my situation, I say the United States is filled with false teachers. The second measure in these verses 11-13, is an evaluation of the personnel themselves. Quite simply when you look at the specific spiritual leaders, are they sacrificial in their service or is feathering or lining their own nest amongst their first priorities? One of the most outstanding and noteworthy things about Billy Graham is that he ensured that he never benefited from his ministry beyond a very modest level of salary. His interest was without question the furtherance of the gospel and the extension of the kingdom through the preaching of God's Word and the conversion of souls. He lived a sacrificial life of continual service to see that that happened. How many can you name amongst the “great” spiritual leaders of our day who have walked down that same road?

It is exceedingly important that we know what the spiritual condition of our leaders is. We need to know whether or not they are men who follow after Jesus, or are they men who follow after the false shepherds who have created such sorrow in the heart of God?

Please pray with me: Father in heaven, teach us how to hear what Jesus has to say to us. Teach us, our Father, to know what abundance means. Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Jesus said blessed are the meek, for [they shall inherit] the earth. Jesus said blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Jesus said blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. He said blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God. Jesus said are blessed are you who suffer for righteousness sake. Jesus said are you when you suffer all manner of persecutions and insults for My name's sake. O Father, teach us to follow after Jesus wherever He leads. We ask this giving thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Why is it necessary to approach God the Father always and only through Jesus as the door?
2. How many different preachers, teachers and other kinds of spiritual instructors or guides do you generally listen to? What recommends them or how do you evaluate them?
3. Do you find any difficulty in reconciling the presentation of God in the Old Testament with the presentation of God in the New? How do you handle this?
4. Which do you find more difficult to accept/believe, that all the true sheep do hear and recognize the voice of Jesus as the true shepherd, or that all those who do not hear Jesus and are lured away by false teachers are thereby demonstrated to be false sheep?
5. What does the state of the churches in America tell us about the spiritual condition of those who are the preachers and teachers and spiritual leaders of the churches? How might this situation be changed?
6. If Jesus’s death was sufficient for the salvation of all humanity, do you see it as a failure on God’s part that many of humanity are not saved? Why or why not?
7. Left up to us on our own, what portion or proportion of humanity will respond positively to God’s invitation in the gospel through Christ? (see Romans 3:9-23 and Ephesians 2:1-3)
8. In what ways have you experienced the life-giving and recreating power of God in your life?
9. To recognize that we are saved by grace through faith is to realize it is all given as a gift; we earn none of it. How does this truth affect your life and your understanding of God?