

I Am the Door

John 10:1-10

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“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.² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. – John 10:1-10, ESV

The Sheep & their Shepherd

When we were in Uganda, we had a number of interesting conversations with Emmanuel, the agricultural extension officer at Reaching Africa’s Unreached. Emmanuel – or Emma, as everyone calls him – is a brilliant agriculturalist. When he studied animals at university, he had to write a paper on the difference between sheep and goats. Sheep and goats have many differences, from the diet they eat to the diseases that commonly affect them. However, one difference that’s clear when you spend time with them is that sheep are stupid and goats are stubborn. A goat can be very clever, especially when trying to get to food. But goats are harder to lead than sheep, as they are more adventurous and curious by nature. Sheep, by contrast, are much easier to lead, especially if they think you’re leading them to food. They’re not nearly as stubborn, but they are really stupid. A goat will clear the road when a car is coming, but sheep often will not.

Shepherding in the Middle East is fundamentally different from shepherding in the West. In the Western world, shepherds most commonly drive their sheep ahead of them, often using dogs to keep sheep from wandering from the intended pasture or path. In the Middle East, from ancient times until today, shepherds lead their sheep and train them to follow the sound of their voice. The shepherd goes first, walking the path and clearing away any danger ahead of his sheep. The sheep learn to watch the shepherd and follow His voice.

Shepherding was such a common feature of life in the ancient world that stories and illustrations drawn from the world of shepherding are very common in the Bible and in other ancient literature. The lessons are various, depending on the author, but today we begin looking at one of the most famous - and one of the most helpful and encouraging - teachings in the Bible dealing with the theme of shepherding. Here Jesus contrasts Himself as the Good Shepherd with the “thieves and robbers” who steal and abuse sheep. We can learn so much about Jesus’ love for His own, His relationship with those He calls to follow Him, what it means to follow Him, what dangers face the people of God in this world and how we are kept in Jesus’ care by a careful study of this wonderful chapter.

So, let's begin . . .

A. The Sheepfold

Jesus begins by talking about the sheepfold. It's helpful to our understanding of this passage to know that the sheepfold Jesus has in mind in verses 1-4 is different from the kind of sheepfold he has in mind in verses 7-9. In the ancient world, the sheep pen of the pasture was different from the sheepfold of the town. In the pasture, each shepherd would generally watch out for his own sheep and would keep them in their own pen. However, in towns, larger sheepfolds held the sheep of several different flocks. These sheepfolds were guarded by gatekeepers and surrounded by high walls, designed to keep out thieves.

1. Thieves & Robbers

So, it is these larger, in-town sheepfolds that Jesus has in mind in the opening verses. These large sheepfolds made for attractive targets for thieves and robbers, who would try to sneak in over the wall and steal sheep. These two groups of criminals were known for their sneakiness on the one hand and for their violence on the other. Thieves were experts in stealth and deception, while robbers were more violent.

Given the context of the healing of the blind man in John 9 and his subsequent expulsion from the synagogue, it's not too difficult to figure out who Jesus has in mind here when He speaks of these "thieves and robbers." The religious leaders of His day – the scribes and Pharisees – were not interested in the welfare of the sheep. They were much more focused on what they could get from the sheep, either wealth or power usually. The religious leaders of Jesus' day saw Him as a threat to their positions of power and influence, and so they were willing to expel anyone who followed Him. They cared nothing for the sheep, and Jesus said they were sneaking in over the wall. They were not truly God-authorized leaders of integrity.

Still today, the sheepfold of God's church is plagued with leaders who seek their own good more than the good of the sheep. Some promise health and wealth, when their own wealth is their primary concern. They know they can get people to give more money by promising an abundant return, and so they manipulate and scheme to deceive and get rich, just like thieves. Others are more focused on power or pleasure than on wealth, and these are like robbers who abuse the sheep, sometimes with anger and control and other times with sexual abuse or exploitation. These leaders may call themselves shepherds, but Jesus calls them what they are, thieves and robbers.

2. The Shepherd

The shepherd is the one who enters by the proper gate and is admitted by the gatekeeper because He is authorized to lead the sheep out to pasture. Jesus is obviously the shepherd here, and the door through which He enters is the Scripture. The coming of Jesus to His sheep is framed by Scripture, just as the entryway of the sheepfold frames the entrance of the rightful shepherd.

So today, the faithful under shepherds of Jesus are the ones who approach the sheep through the Scriptures, not their own opinions. Scripture is the right and lawful entryway.

3. The Gatekeeper

The gatekeeper here is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit. He is the One who prepares the hearts of the sheep, who admits the rightful shepherd. We see the door and the gatekeeper working together, just as the Word and the Spirit work together. The Spirit speaks through the Word and the Word is made effective by the Spirit. So, the shepherd enters by the door, but the door is opened by the gatekeeper.

One of the most dangerous trends in the church is the separation of word and Spirit. Some people prefer the Spirit without the word, which leads to emotionalism and subjectivism that is dangerous. If someone says “God told me . . .” ask them for chapter and verse. But also dangerous is an emphasis on the word without the Spirit, which can lead to a cold intellectualism or a merely academic approach to the Bible. This is God’s word, which God the Holy Spirit used to instruct, convict and change us.

On a practical level, one way to keep Word and Spirit together is to keep time in the Word and time in prayer united. We need to pray for God’s Spirit to teach us His word, praying for illumination and conviction when we read the Word. We also need to allow the Word to prompt and shape our prayer lives, seeking to pray according to the Word.

B. The Sheep of God

The shepherd comes through the door and is admitted by the gatekeeper for a specific purpose: to lead out His sheep.

The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers

I. Called by Name and Led by the Shepherd

In the ancient world, once the gatekeeper opened the gate to the shepherd, the shepherd would stand and call. Each shepherd had a unique voice and a unique way of calling his sheep. The sheep that belonged to that shepherd would recognize his voice and his call and would go out of the sheep pen to follow the voice of their shepherd.

Here Jesus says He comes and calls His own by name. His call is very personal, very individual, very loving. In the immediate context of John 10, the sheep pen is Judaism or the Jewish nation, and Jesus is calling His own sheep out of Judaism to follow Him. Think of the man born blind. He did not know that he was one of Jesus’ sheep, but he was. Because he was one of Jesus’ sheep, Jesus sought him, healed him, sought him again and saved him. Jesus knew him personally, well before he knew Jesus, and Jesus sought him and saved him.

We can see the same pattern with the calling of the disciples. Many people gathered around Jesus in large crowds, but He called His disciples to follow Him personally, calling them by name and leading them. Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus will tell His disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you, that you should go and bear fruit.”

How are the sheep of Jesus distinguished? How are they known? They are the ones who follow His voice, who respond to His call.

2. Will Not Follow a Stranger

More specifically, according to Jesus, His sheep will not follow a stranger: *“A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”*

Strange doctrines, strange teachers, false religions, pretend Messiahs – the world is full of these; it always has been. What keeps the sheep of Jesus from following these? The Holy Spirit who calls us through the Word keeps us in the Word. The sheep of Jesus learn to love and listen to His voice, as His Spirit speaks through His word. Those who come not speaking His word or manipulating His word sound false and strange to the ears of His sheep. They will not follow these strangers.

The audience around Jesus in John 10 show themselves to not be His sheep, as verse 6 indicates: *“This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”* Jesus continues to teach them, because perhaps some are His sheep, but they just haven’t learned to hear His voice yet. This is an important point of nuance here: Just because someone doesn’t immediately respond to the voice of Jesus doesn’t mean they are not His sheep. Sometimes, like the blind man Jesus healed, they may need repeat encounters with Jesus to learn to hear His voice. Jesus keeps teaching . . .

C. The Door for the Sheep

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

Jesus keeps teaching because they did not understand Him. That’s what the little word “so” indicates. Jesus sees that they don’t understand, so He keeps teaching. Calling out sheep apparently requires patience and persistence.

I. The Pen in the Pasture

The setting for Jesus’ shepherding analogy has shifted for this next part of His teaching. From the setting of the town sheep pen, we are now taken to the sheep pens found in the pasture. Here each shepherd keeps his own sheep in his own pen. In town, the gatekeeper is a hired man working for all of the shepherds. In the field, it was not uncommon for the shepherds to lay across the entry to the sheep pen, keeping the sheep in and the predators out by their own bodies.

2. The Shepherd is the Door

The food is found in the pasture and security is found in the pen. The shepherd Himself is the key to accessing both.

Jesus says “I am the door” twice. This is one of His seven “I AM” statements in John’s Gospel. A door grants easy access to those who belong but security against those who do not belong. It allows the right ones in and keeps the wrong ones out. It offers both access and security.

The body of Jesus Christ is our access and our security. He Himself, our Good Shepherd, is also our door. By Him we come into the fold of God, and by His we enjoy access to security and to pasture.

A.W. Pink notes seven things that are contained in this short and simple statement of Jesus in verse 9: “*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.*” –

1. *The door* - Christ is the only way to God.
2. *By me* - Christ is the imparter of power to enter.
3. *Anyone* – Christ is the Savior or Jew and Gentile alike.
4. *Enters* – Christ is appropriated by a single act of faith, like the act of entering by a door.
5. *He will be saved* – Christ is the deliverer from the penalty, power and presence of sin.
6. *He will go in and out* – Christ is the emancipator from all bondage.
7. *And find pasture* – Christ is the sustainer of His people.

3. The Thief vs. the Shepherd

Jesus then highlights the difference between His coming and the thief: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

The identity of “the thief” has been much debated. Some see a reference to the anti-Christ, specifically to the end-time world leader anti-Christ, while others see a general reference to the spirit of anti-Christ. Others have seen a reference to Satan and his influence in the world.

I think this is a reference to the singular activity of Satan, seen in many manifestations through the ages Jesus is here singularizing the power behind the “thieves and robbers” He referenced earlier. The “thieves and robbers” who come to steal and abuse are all agents of “the thief,” who comes to steal, kill and destroy.

The world and its leaders make many false promises. They promise peace, prosperity, security, abundance, etc., but they never deliver on their promises. D. A. Carson’s commentary on John puts it well: “The world still seeks its humanistic, political saviors – its Hitlers, its Stalins, Its Maos and Pol Pots – and only too late does it learn that they blatantly confiscate personal property (they come ‘only to steal’), ruthlessly trample human life underfoot (they come ‘only to . . . kill’), and contemptuously savage all that is valuable (‘only to destroy’).” Then Carson quotes Roy Clements, who says, “Jesus is right. It is not the Christian doctrine of heaven that is the myth, but the humanist dream of utopia.”

Whenever people promise a perfect life here in this fallen and cursed world, they are speaking with the forked tongue of the thief, promising with their words what they take with their actions. This is true of political leaders as well as religious leaders.

Jesus alone comes to truly give us life, that we may have life abundantly. What is abundant life? Can it be found in more money, possessions and power? No. This is the calculus of the thief. Life is not found in lifeless things. True and abundant life is found in being forgiven, being loved, being known and adopted, being given the truth which sets us free from deception, from the snare of lies and empty promises.

We go in and out and find pasture when we find true life in Christ – He becomes for us our forgiveness of sins, our peace with God, the truth of God, our way to God, our righteousness and our security, our

shield and defender from the enemy, and the nourishment and sustenance of our souls. Jesus' coming along brings us abundant life because Jesus is abundant life.

Are you His sheep? Have you heard His call?

So, are you His? Has He called you by name? Have you heard His voice in His word? Do you know the deep, full and free forgiveness of sins He purchased by His death? Do you know the free and open access to God He has secured in Himself?

If you are His, and you have entered through this door, then hear the call of Hebrews 10:19-25 –

Therefore, brothers,^[a] since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

“Let us draw near” – entering God’s presence through the door.

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” – keep believing that abundant life is found in Him alone

“Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” – He gives us to each other when He brings us into the same sheep pen together.

“Not neglecting to meet together” – We need to gather together and be committed to our gathering in as His sheep in His pen

“Encouraging one another”

“all the more as you see the Day drawing near” – Each day brings us closer to the Day!