

Pastor or Thief?

John 10:1-15

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Our narrative begins with Jesus rescuing a man born blind from a cloud of rabbinic superstition as to who had sinned to cause his blindness, he or his parents; Jesus then gave him new eyes — a work of creation. But this work of creation extended also into his spiritual eyes. This man's mind, heart, and will was regenerated, or born of God. With that healing work of creation, the man now stood with Jesus apart from the religious system of the Pharisees. And when the Pharisees examined the miracle worked on this man, they judged Jesus to not be of God for he had healed this man on the Sabbath. Later, these religious authorities went further and declared Jesus to be a sinner, and thus unworthy of synagogue fellowship. When the man with his new physical and spiritual sight, defended Jesus, the Pharisees cast him out of the synagogue.

But it was then that Jesus sought out this outcast and revealed himself to him who responded by openly professing his belief, and he worshipped Jesus. There had been others who also professed belief in Jesus, but they did not worship him; rather, they rejected his authority and thus his teaching. One group abandoned him and no longer walked with him (John 6:66), and another group actually sought to stone Jesus (8:59). So, we have discovered that many profess belief in Jesus, but remain devoted to their own self-interest, not his, and they fail to worship him, but instead reject the authority of his teaching for their life. They professed belief in Jesus, but remained self-centered, whereas genuine conversion will result in a shift to Christ at the center one's heart, mind, and will. *In other words, what we discover in the Gospels is not merely a rank unbelief versus genuine belief, but two forms of belief — one of the flesh, and the other of the Spirit.*

This was Jesus' meaning when he told the Pharisee, Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus as "a teacher come from God," but bristled at Jesus' teaching, revealing his fleshly belief in Jesus. This is the pattern of a fleshly belief: *People profess belief in Jesus but*

reject his teaching. It is NOT a saving faith. This is why Jesus told him straight out, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3). It is also why Jesus later told a crowd of professed disciples, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (6:63).

So, we see there is fleshly religion, and there is Spirit-birthed life as evidenced by an internal rearrangement whereby the heart, mind, and will become focused upon Christ as all in all. This is where John is taking us in this Gospel. He wants us to come to “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). Indeed, this is the purpose of the apostolic witness throughout the New Testament. In Romans, Paul tells us the Christian belongs no longer to the realm of the flesh, but to the realm of the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17). He reminds the Philippians, “Look out for dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:2-3). The “dogs” and “evildoers” he speaks of here are the false teachers who slither into positions of authority in the church by professing belief in Christ, but rely upon the flesh, not the Spirit.

This, of course, is what happened within the churches in the region of Galatia as well. The Gentile converts there were genuine believers; through the hearing of the gospel, they came to faith in Jesus as evidenced by their experience with the Spirit. All was well. But then certain teachers followed after Paul and begin to teach that in addition to faith one must also comply with certain commands within the law of Moses. You begin by faith but are completed by law, that was their teaching. That is the true nature of legalism. Legalism is seldom about how one is initially saved, but how one remains saved and what it means to be among the people of God.

In Galatians, the false teaching was not about how they were initially justified, that is, by faith or works, which is the classic Protestant interpretation, but how one *remains* in favor with God and finds identity within the people of God. After Pentecost, many of the Pharisaic teaching sought to redefine Christianity; they no longer rejected Jesus as the Messiah, but sought rather to redefine the Christian’s relationship to God after conversion as being based

upon law, as opposed to reliance upon the Spirit. This is what Paul reacted to with a double-apostolic curse upon this false gospel and those who propagate it (Galatians 1:6-9). And this is why Paul declared that the Galatians had been “Bewitched” into believing this false gospel, saying, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” This is my point: Salvation rests wholly in Christ’s finished work, not in any manner our own; it begins by faith and comes to completion by faith. At *no* point in the Christian life does the believer look back to the law and the self for sanctification or assurance or to find identity within the people of God. Such a teaching is a fleshly religion, and those who teach it are heirs not of the apostles, but of the Pharisees whom Jesus prosecutes within our text as “thieves and robbers.”

So let me ask you: If you are a pastor, what is your teaching? You say, Oh, salvation by grace through faith alone, of course! But do you teach that tithing is still in force, and based upon Malachi 3:8-12 which promises blessing or curse depending on your obedience to the tithe? If so, you are a thief and a robber, and you do not stand with the good Shepherd, but alongside all the false shepherds of Israel and the Judaizers of the early church, and for this simple reason: Jesus died to free his own from the curse of the law, including that which is set forth regarding the tithe upon ancient Israel in Malachi. If you use that text to teach tithing and promise blessing or warn of a curse, then sir, you are a thief, not a shepherd.

In short, to teaching tithing is no different than to demand circumcision, and even a cursory reading of Paul’s letter will prove my point that such teaching diminishes the sufficiency of Christ and his finished work. How dare you impose the curse of the law upon those for whom Christ died to redeem from that curse! And the same applies to Sabbath keeping, meritorious church attendance, pastor-centered (rabbinic) authority in the church, the usurping of the spiritual gifts and ministry (as opposed to equipping the saints for the work of the ministry), celebrity teachers, love of money, and so on and so forth.

And if you are a church member, do you know if your pastor (s) is a thief or a servant of the church exercising spiritual gifts to equip you for service and bring you into maturity? Let me caution you: most Christians today have thieves and robbers acting as pastors. It is a sad fact. It is not unique to our time. Paul once sent Timothy to check upon the welfare of the new

converts in Philippi, for one reason, “For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 2:19-21). Isn’t that a sad passage? It is even sadder to realize how this is by far the most common state of things today. I’ve been around since 1974. I’ve seen and experienced many things within churches, some wonderful and joyful, but most of my experience and observation, as well as caring for souls in counseling, has been grievous and shocking. It has not been easy for me to see these things, nor is it comfortable to speak of these things, but the New Testament teaching is nonetheless clear and affirming of this principle: Evil is never more insidious than when cloaked in religious garb and vestments (Matthew 23:1-36; Acts 20:28-31; II Peter 2:1-3:7; I John 4:1-6).

One of the stark realities Jesus is teaching in John chapter 10 is the *utter malice of intent* of false shepherds. Our Lord does not leave room for interpretation otherwise. Listen to the language:

- 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**” (10:1).
- “**All** who came before me are thieves and robbers” (10:8).
- “The thief comes **only** to steal and kill and destroy” (10:10).
- The hired hand “cares **nothing** or the sheep” (10:13).

Thieves can be charming, subtle, persuasive, charismatic, and well-credentialed, but they remain thieves. Thieves by definition are covert, subtle, and operate undercover. Robbers are overt, brash, and even violent. Some are both thieves and robbers depending upon the situation. Listen to how Paul describes the character of the false teachers in Corinth: “For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs with you, or strikes you in the face” (II Corinthians 12:20). What a shocking text? That is, until you hear and see this happening in so many churches today. Then this passage is prophetic. What is even more shocking is that people bear it — they put up with it. In a pastor-centered church it may seem you must learn to tolerate it.

So, is your pastor a thief masquerading as a shepherd? How can you know? First, you must recognize that pastor is not an office, but a spiritual gift given to some members for the church in order to equip the saints for the work of the ministry and the maturation of the members (Ephesians 4:11-16). “Pastor” is not a career, nor is the church to revolve around the pastor. Some denominations go so far as to refer to a church without an ordained clergyman as “vacant.” Vacant? Really? Has the Spirit left that fellowship? Other denominations refer to the ordained clergy as the “Vicar” or stand-in for Christ himself! How absurd. What a thievery.

Now, let me close with three things that thieves and robbers take from you.

- 1) The exercise of your spiritual gift (s).
- 2) Your money.
- 3) The work and power of the Spirit within the church.

When a man (or woman) assumes the central role in the church, even if there are elders, that person, no matter how credentialed or qualified, becomes a thief and a robber. I remember visiting a Presbyterian church in which a woman introduced herself as “The minister’s wife.” That is a problem. “My husband is the minister, here.” She was tragically correct, for throughout the service, her husband welcomed the people, led the prayers, presided over the offering, preached the sermon, led more prayers, and then presided over the communion table, all while everyone sat and watched. This man was a thief. A nice thief, a good man, but a thief, for he robbed the people of their calling to care for one another through the exercise of their own spiritual gifts.

He also robbed them of tithes and offerings in order to support him financially in his career as a thief and pay for the building (temple), and other rabbinic trappings. But above all, he stood in for Christ. He was “alter Christus” the Latin for “Another Christ” as used in the Roman Catholic ordination ceremony. His perverted view of ministry robbed the people of the voice of their Shepherd, and the power and working of the Spirit among them — and they paid him to do so! By the way, that church no longer exists. The people grew weary and restless, and

angry, and left. But it was the Lord who shut it down. And that day is coming for all pastor-centered churches. Christ alone is Lord of the church. But since Constantine in 313 A. D., and the institutionalizing of the church, the clergy has usurped both the place of Christ in the church, and the ministry of the saints in caring for each other. Those days are coming to an end. A quiet reformation has begun. May we all hear the voice of the Spirit in our day, and obey his call to stop going to some spectator sport call church, and instead gather as the church, in the power of the Spirit, and in the presence of the Lord Jesus himself, our one Shepherd. **AMEN.**

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