

Message #39

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John

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FOLLOWING THE GOOD SHEPHERD (Part 1)

JOHN 10:1-10

I.

I grew up in a small town in northern Wisconsin of about 3000 people. It was in an area of small farms. From the perspective of the kids who were bused into our high school from the surrounding area, I was one of the city kids. I did learn a few things about farming. I had one set of cousins who had a dairy farm. Another set of cousins who lived closer to us raised sheep. They had kids the same age as me and my brothers. So we spent a fair amount of time at their farm.

My brothers and I played in the sheep pasture. I was around at least once at lambing time. I saw the sheep get sheared in the spring. I baled hay. I helped my cousins several years when they showed their sheep at the county 4H fair. I claim no expertise in raising sheep. But being a preacher and teacher of the Bible, and seeing what an important role sheep and shepherding have in the Scriptures, I am at least thankful that I have had some exposure to this realm of animal husbandry.

One of my biggest takeaways from my experience is that sheep are not very intelligent animals. They are needy creatures. That neediness factors into the story before us this morning. It adds significance to the choices that we make.

We have been working through Chapters 7-9 in the Gospel According to John. The eight day Feast of Tabernacles was the setting for the events described in these chapters. Jewish men were supposed to show up in Jerusalem for this annual festival. Often they brought along their families. In Hebrew the feast is known as Sukkot. This year's observance actually begins tomorrow. Religious Jews will build little tents, or tabernacles, in their back yards or on their patios. They will have their meals there and sometimes sleep there at night. The purpose of the feast is to remind the people about God's faithfulness to their ancestors during the forty years in which they wandered in the wilderness.

Toward the end of this week Jesus declared Himself to be the light of the world. This aggravated the negative attitude that the religious leaders already had toward Jesus. Then he healed a man born blind on the Sabbath. The Pharisees could not get past this violation of their interpretation of the Sabbath commandment to see that Jesus was actually fulfilling prophecies made in the Old Testament book of Isaiah about the future Messiah. These prophecies included promises that the future Messiah would heal the blind and the lame.

The Pharisees were the dominant group among the rabbis. The leaders among them questioned the man previously blind and his parents, searching for some reason to deny this miracle and to attack this Jesus character. The blind man would not change his story. So the Pharisees kicked him out of the synagogue. Last week we saw that Jesus revealed Himself to this man born blind. The man responded to the additional information that Jesus gave him and ended up worshipping Him.

I.

A discussion with the Pharisees came after this. The first half of #10 seems to follow up on that discussion. So in vv. 1-6 Jesus tells us that WE NEED TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT SHEPHERD. (PROJECTOR ON-- I. WE NEED TO CHOOSE THE...) In the first verse, Jesus says, **“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.”**

We have seen that Jesus uses these words “truly, truly” before He makes important proclamations. In the Apostle John’s Gospel, these words elsewhere are never used to begin a new message or discussion. What this suggests is that the message of Jesus in the first part of #10 is part of the discussion that occurred at the end of #9. The chapter divisions in the Bible are not inspired. They do not necessarily indicate a change in the action or in the setting. They were not part of the original manuscripts.

At the end of #9 Jesus was accusing the Pharisees of spiritual blindness. Jesus’ miraculous healing of the man born blind was a living demonstration of His claim to be the light of the world. The Pharisees would not recognize that evidence. They remained spiritually blind to the evidence that Jesus was the Messiah.

The Apostle John does not record the parables of Jesus like the other three gospels do. But he does in this passage use an extended figure of speech. This figure of speech involves a setting familiar to most all people who lived in the Ancient Near East. It involves sheep and shepherds.

Jesus is probably describing a sheepfold that would be found in a village. (SHEEPFOLD VILLAGE) In the seasons of the year when grass was available nearby, shepherds would keep their sheep close to home. Often shepherds in a village would share a sheepfold. Several flocks would be kept in a village sheepfold at night. Typically such an enclosure would have a wall and an actual gate. A guard might be paid to watch the sheep at night. There was always a danger that a thief or a robber would try to get in and steal sheep. A night watchman might be distracted or fall asleep or be paid off so that someone could steal one or more sheep.

What is Jesus intending to picture by this figure of speech? The sheepfold appears to represent the Jews, the nation of Israel. In Matthew #15 v. 24 (MATTHEW 15:24) Jesus said to a Gentile woman, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** The issue at hand in our passage appears to be: Who is the legitimate shepherd for these people of Israel? Who has the right to lead them?

But there is also the matter of the door of this sheepfold. In v. 2 of our passage we read, **“But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.”** We are not specifically told what this door is intended to represent. But it is clear that it is the legitimate entrance to the place where the sheep are kept. There are some who try to get in to these sheep by climbing over the wall. They are not legitimate shepherds. They are thieves and robbers. (PROJECTOR OFF)

My interpretation is that the door represents the proper requirements for the legitimate shepherd to meet in order to have access to this sheepfold. The legitimate shepherd must meet the qualifications described in the Hebrew Bible concerning the coming Messiah. He must fulfill Biblical prophecies made about Him. He has to be born in Bethlehem. He must be a descendant of David. He must be preceded by a forerunner. He must heal the lame and the blind, as described in the Book of Isaiah. He must be the suffering servant who bears the iniquities of His people.

Who are the thieves and the robbers mentioned in v. 1? The reference could be to false messiahs. But given the immediate context, I suspect that Jesus is primarily referring to the Pharisees and other religious leaders who are in power in Jerusalem and who are opposing Jesus. They are claiming to be the shepherds of the people of Israel. But their real motivation is to gain money, power, and fame for themselves.

Verse 3: **“To him [the genuine shepherd of the sheep] the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”** Community sheepfolds in small villages typically had an actual door. (PROJECTOR ON--- SHEEPFOLD DOOR) A night watchman would watch that

door. He knew who was a legitimate shepherd and who was not. He would only allow admission into the sheepfold for a legitimate shepherd of the sheep.

Was Jesus intending to have his audience make an association between the gatekeeper and a real person? Perhaps. What happened in #1 of this book when John the Baptist saw Jesus? (JOHN 1:29) According to #1 v. 29, **“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”** John the Baptist was the forerunner who announced the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, as predicted at the end of the Old Testament book of Malachi. He baptized Jesus and pronounced that the kingdom of God was at hand. I suspect that Jesus regarded John the Baptist as the gatekeeper in His little story. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus notes in v. 3 that the sheep hear the voice of their shepherd. They recognize their shepherd. Good shepherds also know each of their sheep. My wife and I have a friend by the name of Tim Laniak. Suzy went to high school with him. He was in a discipleship group that I led at one point. Tim is a seminary professor today. One year he did a sabbatical where he went to live with Bedouin shepherds in Jordan. The suspicion is that life for many shepherds in the Middle East has not changed all that much in a couple of thousand years.

Tim interviewed one shepherd who had 2000 sheep, a flock larger than most shepherds have. He began in 1984 with just one sheep. This shepherd said that he knew each of his sheep and had names for each one of them. They were like family to him. At one point he said, **“I must personally supervise the care of the sheep or I shouldn’t be a shepherd.”** Jesus implies that He is the legitimate shepherd who calls each of his sheep by name and leads them out.

In the morning at a community sheepfold in a village, the shepherds would typically show up. The gatekeeper would open the door. The shepherds would call their sheep. The sheep would then gather around their shepherd. For they knew his voice. He would then lead his flock out to pasture.

If the fold is intended to represent Judaism, and Jesus is the legitimate shepherd, then Jesus is calling out His sheep to join Him in His flock. The man who was formerly blind is one of those sheep. The Pharisees have kicked him out of their flock, but Jesus has invited him into his flock. The man formerly blind has heard Jesus’ voice and responded to it.

Jesus is likewise calling people today to be part of His flock. He knows His sheep by name. Those who are part of the elect, the chosen, will respond to His voice and join His flock.

According to v. 4, **“When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”** In Scotland and Australia and the US, the general practice is to drive sheep. This is not usually done in the Middle East, even today. (SHEEP LINED UP) Sheep will follow their shepherd.

So it is that we see in John’s Gospel that Jesus has collected a flock to follow Him. We have seen that Jesus has called the Apostle John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel, the woman at the well and the man born blind. They have chosen to follow the right shepherd. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus continues in v. 5: **“A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”** The sheep that belong to the true shepherd will not follow strangers. The strangers are thieves and robbers. In this context they are the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the rabbis and priests and other religious leaders in Jerusalem. They are false shepherds.

The Old Testament prophets often railed against religious and civil leaders in Israel who led their people away from God. They used the terminology of sheep and shepherds to do that. One example is in Ezekiel #34. (PROJECTOR ON--- EZEKIEL 34:2) God is speaking and says in v. 32, **“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?”**

This was a problem in the time of Jesus. We have already seen that the religious leaders had a monopoly in the temple compound on the sale of animals for sacrifice. They were lining their own pockets because of the artificially high prices. They also controlled the exchange rate. Sacrifices had to be bought in a certain currency, and the religious leaders got a cut of the charge that was made for exchanging money into the proper currency. Jesus claims elsewhere that the rabbis were taking advantage of widows. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The general principle is that sheep will not follow false shepherds. But there are exceptions to that. Jesus elsewhere speaks about lost sheep that wander off and need to be found. Part of the role of good shepherds is to warn about false shepherds. Today many of those false shepherds can be found on TV. They are the ones who promote false doctrine and feed themselves. They encourage viewers to send

them their money. Meanwhile they live in luxury, fly around the country in private jets and maintain multiple mansions. The false shepherds also include the cults and their leaders who lead people away from the gospel described in the Bible. They add the requirement of works to the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

This section of our passage concludes with the observation of John in v. 6: **“This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”** “Them” and “they” are the Pharisees. These are the educated elite who are teachers of the Old Testament law. But they are spiritually blind. They are part of the sheepfold of Judaism, but Jesus is not their shepherd, and they do not hear His voice. They have rejected Him. More than that, they want to kill Him.

We humans can act like we know what we are doing and where we are going. But without a good shepherd, we can get into big trouble. We fall into temptation. We make unwise decisions. We are also mortal. Sometime we are going to die. We need to pick the right shepherd. We need to listen for His voice.

II.

WE also NEED TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT DOOR. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. WE NEED TO CHOOSE...) Such is the message of vv. 7-10. In v. 7 we read, **“So Jesus again said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.’”**

We have here a slightly different picture than what was presented in the first part of our passage. In vv. 1-6 Jesus is portrayed as the shepherd who seeks access to the sheepfold. Here He is portrayed as the door.

In the warmer months of the year, shepherds in Judea would take their flocks away from home in search of grass. They would keep their flocks in temporary structures in the countryside. (SHEEPFOLD ISRAEL) Sometimes, as here, the enclosure might include a cave, of which there are many in the Judean hills. Usually there was no actual door to these enclosures. There was an entrance in which the shepherd would typically sleep at night. Nothing or no one could go in or out from the sheepfold without going over the shepherd in the doorway.

The sheepfold in the first part of our passage is Judaism, the people of Israel. Here there is only one flock and one shepherd. The shepherd is Jesus, and the sheep in this flock are His followers. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus says in v. 8, **“All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.”** Others have claimed to be the door for God’s flock. Jesus says that they were thieves and robbers. He is obviously not talking about the patriarchs and the prophets and the godly men of the Old Testament. He is talking about more recent history. In the immediate context it is the Pharisees and other members of the religious establishment who are the thieves and robbers who have sought control of the sheep. They are deceivers who are seeking their own power and glory and personal enrichment.

Verse 9: **“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.”** Here is perhaps a more direct statement from Jesus. The Apostle John organizes the biographical material about Jesus around seven sign miracles. But mixed into this biography are also seven “I am” statements from Jesus. We have seen Jesus declare that He is the bread of life and the light of the world. This is the third “I am” statement: I am the door.

What does He mean? In the context He is saying that He is the entrance to His fold. He is the means of access to the true flock of God. To become part of this flock, one must go through Jesus.

There is also only one entrance to His sheepfold. Sheepfolds did not have multiple entrances. Jesus is the only means of entrance into the family of God. It is perhaps significant that there was only one entrance into the tabernacle, and later into the temple in Jerusalem. There was only one entry way into Noah’s ark, by which people could be saved from the flood. The vast majority of cities in ancient Israel had only one gate by which people could enter.

In v. 9 Jesus makes the dramatic claim that entrance by Him leads to salvation. That term is not explained in v. 9. But it at least means that there is deliverance from thieves and robbers who would do us harm. The next verse associates this salvation with life.

When I was twelve years old, I went to a summer Christian camp. The speaker there one evening asked a question that I had not heard before. He asked us young campers, “Have you ever been saved?” I did not quite know what he meant. He went on to explain that it is not enough to go to church, to try to be a good person and to believe in God. I thought that those were things that made a person a Christian. The speaker explained from the Bible that it is necessary to personally put one’s faith in Jesus in order to

go to heaven. We have to invite Jesus into our lives in order to be eternally saved. That is when I made that important decision to believe in Jesus. That is when I was saved.

In v. 9 Jesus relates being saved to going in and out to find pasture. This same terminology was used in the Book of Numbers when Moses was seeking God's direction for a replacement for himself. In #27 (PROJECTOR ON--- NUMBERS 27:15-16) vv. 15-17 we find this: **"Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, 'Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation (NUMBERS 27:17) who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.'" This is language used to describe a good shepherd. He leads the flock out to feed in the daytime. He brings them back into the protection of the fold at night. Jesus is that shepherd.**

The shepherd that God appointed to replace Moses was Joshua. "Joshua" is the Hebrew word for "salvation." Its Greek equivalent is "Jesus." Jesus is the shepherd who leads His flock in and out and provides salvation for them. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus says in v. 10 of our passage, **"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."** Here is the central theme of the Apostle John's book. Jesus has come to provide life. The purpose statement of this Gospel is found in #20 v. 31: (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 20:31) **"...but these [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."**

This theme about life is present at the beginning of the book as well as at its end. In #1 v. 4 (JOHN 1:4) the Apostle John wrote, **"In him was life, and the life was the light of men."**

Jesus stresses the quality of this life in v. 10 in our passage. He offers abundant life. But the Apostle in this Gospel quotes other statements from Jesus that stress the quantity aspect of this life. In #5 v. 24 (JOHN 5:24) Jesus says, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."** This promised quality life stretches on into eternity.

In the immediate context of #10 it is evident that the Pharisees were unhappy with the healing of the man born blind. They would have preferred that he remain in his previous state of blindness. They were

so angry at the healer that they wanted to kill Jesus. The true shepherd gave the blind man physical light and spiritual light. He came to give His sheep abundant life.

Today we live in a culture that focuses upon rights. The cultural elite would have us to kill life in the pursuit of these rights. A certain segment of the women's rights movements claims the right to kill babies in the wombs of women. It is sadly ironic to me that in much of the world, especially in India and China, it is baby girls that are killed far more often than baby boys. Today in China there is a tremendous gender imbalance because of this propensity to save the lives of baby boys in the womb and to kill baby girls. Is this really the desired result of women's rights?

In 1991 a married woman in Alabama was sexually assaulted by a man. It was a horrible crime. The woman got pregnant as a result of this. Her husband demanded that she either get an abortion or get a divorce. The pregnant woman went to a Christian adoption agency. They helped her deliver a healthy baby girl and then proceeded to have the girl adopted. The mom chose life.

Twenty two years later Molly Ann Dutton (MOLLY ANN DUTTON) was elected by the student body at Auburn University to be the homecoming queen. Speaking of that Christian organization at the time of her coronation, Molly said, **"Because that resource was made available to my mother, she decided to give birth to me... and here I am talking to you guys 22 years later."** That's why we as a church support the Women's Resource Medical Center. That is why Doris from our congregation serves as a volunteer counselor at First Choice in Las Vegas. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Many of you remember the game show "Let's Make a Deal." At the end of the show host Monty Hall would always offer the top two winners the choice of one of three doors. The contestants would get a little peek at what was behind the doors, but they could not see the whole thing. Sometimes the doors that the contestants chose would open up to reveal great prizes. Sometimes they would reveal gag gifts.

Jesus has provided good evidence about what lies behind the door that He offers. There are lots of doors that are available to us in our culture. It is important that we choose the right one. The promise is that He will be a great shepherd for us.