



## “Thieves & Robbers all of us”

I don't know how many times I've read through the bible over the years, but God never ceases to amaze me with how He can “still” speak to me from the Scriptures. It just proves that the Word, Who is the life breathed into the Scripture, is still very alive, very powerful and very exposing.

I saw something that made me both laugh and nearly cry, simultaneously. It hit me right between the eyes but felt sooo good as it did. Some of you will say, as you consider the challenge in this article, “My gosh, this is so negative, or he seems so angry...why must he write something so harsh and sooo negative?” But, let me remind you, what I write here is not written with a particular person in mind, but rather an institutional system, and is really nothing more than a descriptive analysis of what Jesus said...your Lord, the One we are all supposed to listen to, love hearing, no matter how hard what He says turns out to be. I'm trying to do nothing more than explore what He spoke. If it sounds negative please ask Jesus about that, because what Jesus said was extremely negative, yet it was something ALL need to hear, because what He said He tells us applies to ALL.

I pray what I saw will bless you too, but if you resist being offended by the living Word then you will miss the wonderful impact of these verses. If you love being offended by Him, because you know it is the doorway out of your narrow and self contained box, then you will love what I'm about to share.

Either way, if you aren't at least a little offended by this article then I will wonder if you have really heard these verses and made honest application to yourself, because I assure you...these verses apply to you. They apply to all of us, and they are perhaps the saddest commentary on our inner inclinations, and they speak to us such an important truth that it behooves us to ask Him for His interpretation and personal application.

Here we go...

Listen to these words. I have emboldened the verses that hit me right between the eyes. I put them in green, symbolic of their potential for new life.

**Joh 10:1** 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.

**Joh 10:2** But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

**Joh 10:3** To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

**Joh 10:4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

**Joh 10:5** A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."

**Joh 10:6** This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

**Joh 10:7** So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

**Joh 10:8** ***All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.***

**Joh 10:9** I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

**Joh 10:10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

**Joh 10:11** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Did you get the first six and a half verses? Jesus spoke to them, but they didn't get it either. They started to be offended by what He was saying, but it fell short of fully nailing them, so He decided to take another run at it. The second time, verses 7-11, it got through.

Jesus is telling us it is the normal nature of sheep to run away from false shepherds/strangers. Now admittedly, I'm going to move into an application that I think fits this passage. You may disagree, and that is certainly your prerogative, but my life experience definitely supports this application, so I'll leave it up to you and the Holy Spirit to decide if it applies to you. Unfortunately most sheep, at least initially, over Church history, have proven their stupidity, and have failed to run as they should. They have tended to follow thieves and robbers. You'd think they'd get tired of being ripped off, but not so. In fact much of the writings of modern Churchianity espouse the particular writer's personal religious philosophy of "justified thievery," and tell themselves and others it's how things are supposed to be.

Let me say, from the outside, I don't have all Traditional Church pastors in mind, as I write this. I know many brothers who, while I'm concerned about their approach to many aspects of Jesus' Church, are nevertheless wonderful brothers, and worthy of honor and respect.

This matter of thievery is a two edged sword. One edge robs the Church of the shared life of Christ, as Jesus envisioned it, and the other edge robs Jesus of the Church He paid so great a price to own and lead. It's hard to know which of these two elements is the most serious, when we consider the Church is His body and He is its head. Of this I am certain, the matter of robbing the Church of Jesus and Jesus of His Church is no small matter. This is the story of history, and if anything should grieve us this should grieve us. All one has to do is read the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, to know how God feels about false shepherds who claim to have God's best interests at heart, as well as those of the sheep, but are really deceived and are serving themselves.

And what is it that most rips Christians off, and has down throughout history? Just look at what Jesus is saying...it is other's claiming to be shepherds/Senior Pastors, coming along and attempting to lead Jesus' sheep to themselves, telling the sheep they will represent their best interests, telling them they are Jesus' surrogate shepherds, that Jesus wants them to follow their leadership, that it is their role to lead and control the sheep on His behalf. The implication is clear...Jesus can't possibly lead you Himself. He "needs" us shepherds to lead and control you, and to shift your focus from Him to ourselves, so we can lead you to Him. Pretty inverted logic, but it has sold over the centuries, and the Church has bought it far too often.

We know sheep have always followed false shepherds, and not just "false" shepherds, but shepherds who unwittingly distracted the flock from Jesus, and have done so down throughout Church history, so whatever Jesus is saying in verse 5 is not what it appears on the outward. This is clear by what He goes on to say. He is telling them that thieves

and robbers have always existed (they are the “strangers” He refers to) and have always led His sheep astray from Him. So what is He saying? He is saying they will ultimately wise up, recognize how strange these shepherds approaches are, compared to Jesus’, and will do so by His Spirit, and when they do they will exclaim “Hey, I’ve been following false shepherds/strangers, and I want the real Shepherd!” How will they know that? Because Jesus will begin to show them they have been following men and not Himself. They have followed the religious traditions and doctrines of men, and suddenly their spirit has been made aware of it, and they now long for only Him. They now have a total disdain for the false shepherding that leads them away from a singular focus on Him. They can now smell even the hint of human flesh trying to lead them down a detouring pathway away from their true love - Jesus.

So now we’re ready for verse 8. Did you see it? ***All who came before me are thieves and robbers*** . Who is He talking about? Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets? Or just the false teachers, like the Pharisees, the false prophets of the Old Testament? All one has to do is read the verse ***“ALL”***. Now, how much analysis does that take? Not much!

So what does He mean? He means every single human being since Adam, including you and me, ALL tend to lead people away from a singular focus on the True Shepherd. We develop religious systems that distract the people from Jesus and get them off the pathway of the Lord. It is the nature of fallen man and his religion to want to shift the focus, attention, and devotion, away from Jesus and on to a person. This is stealing! This is horrific! This is the story of Church history.

Once again, admittedly I make application here, but all one has to do is enter any traditional/institutional Church where false teachers, who call themselves Senior Pastors/shepherds exist, and stand off to the side and watch the show on any given Sunday, or any House Church, where some man is manipulating a small group of people to become his followers and away from a singular focus on Jesus. The majority of what is done is a distraction from Jesus, or it is some form of religious entertainment, or it is the traditions of men, the doctrines of men, the programs and ideologies of man, emotional pandering, all passed off as if it were God. Is there no evidence of Jesus in these places? Of course there is. There is just enough to confuse the flock into believing that because Jesus is continually referenced in these gatherings that He must be the Lord of these times, when this is not the case. He isn’t Lord there. All one has to do is watch, slip into the eldership/leadership meetings, and discern the true nature of man’s plans, and it becomes evident that Jesus is far more an after thought than the true focus. Religion is front and center and Jesus is little more than a tag line in their plans.

And how does this manifest itself? In any form of religious behavior that men create that in any way distracts, even in the slightest way, the focus of believers, from Jesus, on to buildings, programs, systems, ideas, philosophies, values, and approaches that ultimately end up being more about man than about Jesus.

Jesus knows that our greatest tendency is to lead folks astray. We want to be worshipped. We want the glory. We’ll create an entire Church system that we swear is all about Jesus, and then Jesus has to come along and tell us... “It’s not about Me. It’s become about you again.” You’re all thieves and robbers still. You rubber stamp your stuff with My name!

You’d think we’d get it by now, but we don’t. In fact, if we read these verses the way they scream out to us to read them, we’d hear them tell us that we should continually be

suspicious that it is a part of our very nature to lead the flock away from a singular focus on Jesus, and place it on something or someone other than Him.

Any other approach, than the most simple singular focus on Jesus, begins to steal, kill, and destroy the life of Jesus within us. When we come together the singular purpose is to see, hear, and love Jesus, and do so in one another. It isn't to watch a show on a platform, be entertained by someone's musical skills, be impressed by some preacher, get goose bumps, feel some sort of religious emotion. It is to draw near to Jesus, Who alone is our Shepherd.

So, aren't ministers shepherds? Good question! Answer...only if they have identified themselves as thieves and robbers first, hate the very smell of their flesh, suspect that every time they gather with the saints they will tend to steal from Jesus and rob Him of their love and devotion, and they beg the flock to hold them accountable to not do this. It might sound something like the following... "Dear flock of God, I'm am incredibly prone to steal your devotion away from Jesus. I have all kinds of crazy ideas, and I desperately feel the need to be worshipped by you, and to get you to shift your gaze from Him on to me, but please, please, please, don't let me do it. Keep your eyes on Him, and if I say anything, even the very slightest of something, that shifts your gaze from Him to me, and I surely will, please as gently as possible, let me know I have, and help me help all of us to redirect our gaze to Him. He's life. I'm not. He's truth. I'm not. I'm a thief and a robber. He has come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

Such preaching would surely edify the body. It would serve to dissolve all of the religious systems and traditions of men. It would, rather than nullify the Word of God, cause the living Word to once again become the focus of our gatherings and life.

So, please, accept my apology for thieving and robbing from you and a singular focus on Jesus, at any point where I have done so. Please forgive me for developing religious ideas that took your eyes off Jesus. Please help me get on course and stay on course. I, more than anything, want to own my tendency to do this to you, and I call all believers, and especially all Church leaders, world wide, to let today become a day of confession - "I am a thief and robber!"

Perhaps if we all do this. Perhaps if when we come together we can remind ourselves of this tendency. Perhaps if we can so live in His presence that we come to the place where we literally have no more tolerance for any of this thieving and robbing going on, Jesus may actually be allowed to functionally be the Shepherd of our souls again. Church may actually have the chance of being His Church. The religious systems of man may actually begin to crumble, and the Kingdom of God emerge.

The bible tells us...And Jesus went about teaching and preaching "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand..." Could we maybe preach that some more? Could we learn that the Church and kingdom are not equivalent? Could we learn that the Church is a people, not a place, and their assembly is not so much in a place but unto Jesus? Just unto Him. Not all the other stuff. Just unto Him. Otherwise, we are destined to continue our tradition of thieving and robbing, and it really is time to put this behind us.

Look brethren, what Jesus taught His disciples and what His disciples taught His flock was a very simple approach to Church. No buildings, to titles, no budgets, no Church staff, no pulpits, no stained glass, no pews, no programs, just Jesus. Everyone of the above referenced things all lead the Church away from a simple approach to Jesus. They make

approaching Jesus a religion. They put man at the center, and Jesus is marginalized.

Notice the response of the people to Jesus' message:

**Joh 10:19** There was again a division among the Jews because of these words.

**Joh 10:20** Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?"

Don't you just love that? If I were to walk up to you, get in your face, and tell you that you are a religious thief and robber, and you are guilty of stealing the affection and focus of the people of God from Jesus, would you hate me? Would you think I was crazy? If I came into your pulpit and told all your flock that God had sent me to tell you that every single Senior Pastor (Shepherd) was a thief and robber, just by virtue of letting themselves be called by that abominable title, and everyone in the pew both supported that behavior and were themselves culpable, would you think I was crazy?

Not to worry...I'm not Jesus, so I know I couldn't get away with that, and I don't think He would want me to do it, but if I did, would you be quicker to call me "awful," or "awesome?"

If you aren't at least a little bit offended by this passage then I submit to you, you have either seen this tendency in your life and have already been confessing your robberies, or you are unbelievably blind, deceived, or hard hearted.

Anything saints, absolutely anything, that takes our eyes, for even a split second off of Jesus, is the spirit of thievery at work within us, and if we don't stand up and say "NO MORE!" then we are at the very least culpable, and perhaps even a perpetrator of it. And while to some degree we all tend to do this stuff, the whole institutional/hierarchical/Church in a box form of Church thinking is guilty of this, as are those false shepherds who have supposedly "come out" of the institutional Church but have done little more than bring the whole mess into some living room and created a miniature version of the very same thieving thing in a house church.

The entire religious system of our day, at work in every single traditional Church, and house Church, is diabolically opposed to the real thing, and if we don't learn to spot it, hate it, and cleanse ourselves from it, then we can forget ever hoping for a true expression of the body of Christ in the earth, and the unbelievers will continue to have every valid reason to call us nothing more than a Madison Avenue business, a bunch of "holier-than-thou" hypocrites, ridiculous, and out of touch with reality.

Only when we allow the loving heart of Jesus to lovingly expose this tendency within us, and wean us away from self love, the love of man's ideas, and back to a singular focus on Jesus, can we hope for the real thing to emerge. What is this article about? It's all about love. It's all about loving Jesus so much that we learn to hate absolutely everything that obscures Him, marginalizes Him, replaces Him, or dishonors Him.

Listen saints...it is a very serious thing Jesus is saying here. Don't miss the point, in the midst of my cynical humor and poking fun at all the stupid stuff we do to steal from Him. This is very serious stuff. You tell me, what could be more serious than stealing from Jesus Christ? Jesus wasn't laughing when He said these things. He didn't turn to His disciples and smile and say something like - "Don't take this too seriously guys, we all tend to do these things..." He was deadly serious. The crowd was intensely angry with Him, and we too should be upset, equally upset, as He was about this issue. And, if being upset means

being upset with yourself then be that kind of upset.

Some will say to me, "Tom, why are you sooooo negative? Why do you seem so angry? Why do you harp on these kinds of issues all the time? Can't you see anything good in the modern Church? To these my answer is simple...because Jesus is the only one Who paid the price to be the Shepherd of the sheep, and He deserves their exclusive following. You think about it for a minute...don't you think it is a serious thing that Church history clearly reveals that its leadership are generally guilty of stealing the affections of the Church from Jesus and placing it on their own agendas for the flock of God, their own programs, their own rules, their own ideas, etc.? If this isn't serious, and if Church reveals this tendency, then how can we be anything but concerned? Yes, I'm very concerned about this matter and I intend to stay concerned until wherever I turn, when gathering with believers, it is evident that "all" they are interested in is touching Jesus and hearing the voice of their Shepherd.

If you don't hear Jesus being intensely concerned about this in John 10 then I wonder what you see in that chapter? If it concerned Jesus enough to speak John 10 shouldn't it concern us until the issue is resolved? Shouldn't we want to know exactly what He had in mind when speaking those things?

Jesus said "My sheep hear my voice." What could be more important? Why would we ever develop a religious system that did anything but make that as simple, as singular in focus, and as important as it should be? Jesus is telling us..."Whatever else you'all do with My Church don't do anything that hinders my sheep from hearing my voice, and do absolutely everything that would focus them in on that happening." I don't think we have, and I think that is a very serious indictment. Don't you?

God bless you as you ponder these things.

**Joh 10:31** The Jews picked up stones again to stone him.

**Joh 10:32** Jesus answered them, "**I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?**"

(If you would like Jesus' take on this same issue, in even more depth, I refer you to John 6. What are you eating this Sunday?)