



John 10:1-6

The Shepherd and the Thieves

NKJ John 10:1 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

2 "But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

3 "To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

4 "And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

5 "Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."

6 Jesus used this illustration, but they did not understand the things which He spoke to them.

People sometimes wonder why Jesus makes this illustration at this point in His ministry. But if you think about it for a moment, you'll immediately see the connection to what had gone before. Jesus has just gone against the "church discipline" of the synagogue leaders who cast out the blind man on his account. Technically, Christ wasn't supposed to even be talking to him, and he has also declared the Pharisees, who were the acknowledged religious leaders of the Jews to be blind guides. So people have got to be wondering what is going on. How can he say these things about the religious leaders and ignore their rules and proclamations. Well here Jesus explains, that not everyone who has the name "shepherd" really is a true shepherd, and he uses an illustration to set forth two important ways you can distinguish between a true shepherd and a false one.

Because we live in a modern-day American city, it's often difficult for you and me to understand all the parts of a biblical allegory or an illustration as verse 6 puts it, because they're inevitably set in the ancient Middle East and so while the elements of this illustration Jesus gives would have been very familiar to His original hearers, we sometimes need a refresher course in ancient middle eastern agriculture. So given that what I knew about raising sheep in 1st Century Israel could be written on a postage stamp, I felt the need to do a little research on the subject before preaching on it. What I found was very interesting.

First, if you've ever seen sheepdog trials or perhaps the movie *Babe*, then you know that here in the West, Shepherds herd their sheep using Sheepdogs. Their commands are given not to the sheep but to the dogs who drive the sheep in the direction they want them to go. The sheep go in that direction the shepherd wants them to because they are afraid of being nipped by the dog. Now in the middle east, they don't use dogs. The shepherd uses calls that the sheep themselves obey. Also the shepherd doesn't drive the sheep, he leads, and they follow.

Now because sheep are utterly defenseless and because there are predators that could eat them, at night they are kept in an enclosure. During the time of Christ, these were usually walled enclosures with a gate guarded by a watchman or undershepherd who was responsible for the sheep during the night. Now it was common that families would share the expense of the enclosure and the watchman and so you'd have several different herds with different shepherds in the same enclosure. In the morning when the shepherd arrived, the watchman would recognize his voice and open the gate but the sheep wouldn't come out until

he called them, and when he did only his own sheep, would recognize his voice and respond. Then he would lead his sheep into the fields to the best place to find good grass and safe water to drink. We have a picture of that in Psalm 23:1-2 ***“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.”*** The bond between Sheep and Shepherd is so tight that they will follow him even into barren and difficult areas as verse 4 ***“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”*** But while they’ll follow him come what may, they’ll only follow him. And if someone else calls to the sheep, they run from him. A traveler in the near-east reported that even if someone *dressed in the clothing of their shepherd*, the sheep would not answer his calls.

That is the picture of a biblical shepherd, often in the Old Testament the best leaders of God’s people, like Moses and David were trained by God for that leadership by being actual Shepherds. And that becomes the euphemism that God used for Israel’s political and religious leaders, the shepherds, while the people were the sheep. But not all of the leaders in the Old Testament were good shepherds. They had the responsibility to look after God’s flock, but they did not do it. So again and again, the Lord the Lord rebukes Israel’s leaders, for their failure to be good shepherds, to love and to lead his sheep. Nowhere is this more dramatically stated in the rebuke and the prophecy of Ezekiel 34. Please turn there if you would. We won’t be able to read all the verses, so I would encourage you to read this chapter later as a Lord’s day meditation. First the Lord sets out the terrible condition of the sheep because of the wickedness of the men who should have been shepherds.

NKJ Ezekiel 34:1 And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?"

3 "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock.

4 "The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.

5 "So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered.

The Lord therefore tells them he is against them, and he will remove them from their position. And then he says he will be the shepherd to His sheep, as we read verses 11-12, keep in mind all of the things said of Christ having compassion for the people because they were weary and scattered like sheep without a shepherd, and how he come to seek and to save.

“11 ' For thus says the Lord GOD: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.

12 "As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day.”

God goes on to say He will **find them, and feed them, and heal the sick, and lead them**, and even Judge and are you catching all the things that Christ has been doing in his ministry up to this point?

And then in verse 23 we have this great Messianic prophecy 23 ***"I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them -- My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd”***

And now the true Shepherd, the Son of David, the Son of God, Jesus Christ has come to be and to do all of those things for His people. And so here that true Shepherd is telling the flock that their leaders, the Pharisees, are not shepherds at all... So what are they?

Well Kids, if you were driving through a neighborhood at night, and you saw someone climbing into a house through a window. Would you think to yourself, oh look there is the owner of the house going home? No! You'd think I bet that's a robber! Because how does the owner of the house get in? He goes through the door, he doesn't have to sneak in through the window, because he has authority to be there! It's his house!

Well in the illustration, sheepfold is the church, and the door is Christ. We only rightly enter into the church when we do so through faith in the Messiah Jesus Christ. That is the first way to spot a true shepherd, he has entered through the door – that is Jesus Christ, and so Christ is both the beginning, the object and the end of his ministry. As Calvin put it, ***“Christ states a resemblance between the Church and a sheepfold, in which God assembles all his people, so he compares himself to a door, because there is no other entrance into the Church but by himself. Hence it follows that they alone are good shepherds who lead men straight to Christ; and that they are truly gathered into the fold of Christ, so as to belong to his flock, who devote themselves to Christ alone.”***

The Pharisees did not believe in Christ, they had climbed in over the wall for their own purposes, not serve Jesus ultimately they would do the sheep no good at all. They may have been dressed as shepherds but they were in fact thieves and robbers.

Now the other mark that Jesus shows of a false prophet is not only how they get in, but the fact that the true sheep of God won't follow them. God's people are given the ability to discern between the truth of God and the false doctrines of men. When they hear that which is biblical they hear it gladly when they hear the falsehoods they recognize that the one speaking is not a true shepherd and so they don't follow Him. Without the gift of the Holy Spirit indwelling God's people and enabling to rightly discern between truth and falsehood we'd find ourselves constantly following whoever was popular at that moment in time and constantly *tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.*

One of the greatest assurances that Christ ever gave His people was because they were his, these false teachers, no matter how many others they might get to follow them to their destruction would not have the power to ultimately deceive them: ***Matthew 24:24 "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.***

Application - First not everyone with the name Shepherd is in fact a Shepherd, just because someone is ordained, doesn't mean they really are Christ's ministers. Just to be in the Sheepfold is not to be truly one of Christ's Sheep either. If the person didn't get in through faith in Christ, then they are nothing but thieves and robbers.

Whenever I come to this illustration, I am always reminded of a scene from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian in the narrow way, having Himself entered by the wicket gate, that is through faith in Christ, when two men come tumbling over the wall. Their names are formalist and hypocrisy who come from the town of vain-glory and who like Christian, hope to end up in heaven. They are men though who have "a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof". Two such were Formalist and Hypocrisy.

First there is Formalist, he is the man who has an outward and formal Religion, his is the religion of tradition. Often the formalist is very diligent in his religion. He goes to church, he prays with his family,

he has read the bible, his religion is usually very formal, often very liturgical, like the Pharisees he loves the traditions and inventions of men, the older the better. He is usually upright and respectable, but no matter how diligent he is he knows not Christ and has no love for Him in His heart. He certainly will not suffer for Him, and He will certainly not defend His teachings. This is the man who opposes biblical reformation in the name of tradition.

Then there is Hypocrite, he plays at religion, his religion is all outward show that deceives others and usually himself as well. Inwardly he is a worldling, and like a tomb he is full of dead mans bones. Often this is the man or woman who tries to make the mask easier to wear, but making the stage, i.e. the church as worldly as they are. You see brothers and sisters, it is hard for me to act if everyone else is real, if they are different because of regeneration and the new birth, that's tough to act, and you feel uncomfortable and uneasy, because you might get spotted. But if everyone else is an actor, it becomes easy, and if we can get it to the point where everyone who claims the name of Christ is a worldling. We can take of our masks entirely and just be ourselves. Again, they know nothing of love to Christ, of true faith, or true repentance. They haven't entered by the gate.

Neither of these men gets to heaven, and in the ministry both of these men are blind guides. So if a shepherd is not leading you to Christ, or worse is attempting to lead you away from Christ, to quote Calvin again: ***“you ought to flee from them, at the command of Christ, as we would flee from wolves or thieves; and we ought not to form or maintain intercourse with any society but that which is agreed in the pure faith of the Gospel.”***

But if you suspect or you know that you are one of those people, then here is my advice don't go on in the narrow way if you've tumbled over the wall, go back to the beginning enter in the right way through faith in the true Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. Even ministers have had to do that. Let me give you a famous example –Ebenezer Erskine.

“A confidential conversation, it has been stated, which he accidentally overheard, betwixt his brother Ralph and her, on the subject of their religious experience, is believed to have signally contributed towards the salutary change that took place in his views of the Gospel. While they were imparting their sentiments to each other, without reserve, in a bower in his garden, immediately beneath the window of his study, which then happened to be open, he eagerly listened to their interesting communications. Their ideas and feelings appeared so different from his own, that he instantly felt himself obliged to conclude, that they possessed a valuable something, to which he was a stranger ; and the impression seems to have remained till, with respect to vital Christianity, he became, not merely almost, but altogether such as they were. In full accordance with this statement, the Diary contains explicit and repeated acknowledgments of his obligations to Mrs. Erskine, as the honoured instrument, by which it pleased God to bring him to a real acquaintance with the power and comfort of religion. ...”

What is most interesting though is the effect on his conversion had on his ministry, note the change in the direction of his ministry: *In the discharge of his ministerial duties, he had always been most exemplary ... “now his diligence seemed to be doubled, and his object much more pointedly to preach Christ in his person, offices, and grace, as at once wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption to all who truly receive and rest upon him. Even in his external manners there appeared, from this time forward, a great and important improvement.”*