

THE TRUE SHEPHERD

John 10:1-5

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“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (Jn. 10:9).

God has often used geography to shape theology. An example is the way the landscape of Judea focused the values of shepherding upon the Jewish consciousness. The country of Judea was not well-suited to agriculture, but it was ideal for pasturing livestock so that it was inevitable that the Jewish way of life should depend on shepherds. It seems, therefore, to have been God’s intention that the imagery of the shepherd should take hold in the Jewish imagination. Sir George Adam Smith, writing of his experience in Palestine, commented:

On some high moor, across which at night the hyaenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judaea sprang to the front in his people’s history; why they gave his name to their king, and made him the symbol of providence; why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.¹

For this same reason, John chapter 10 holds a beloved place in the hearts of most believers, since it draws a heart-warming sketch of God’s loving care for his people, who are beloved to him as the “sheep of his pasture” (Ps. 79:13).

THIEVES AND ROBBERS

The words recorded in this chapter, however, were not spoken in a serene setting. Perhaps the most important thing a shepherd

¹ Cited from William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:61.

does is defend his sheep from robbers and wolves, and this is what Jesus had come to do. John 9 recounts how Jesus came across one of the lost sheep of Israel, a poor beggar at the temple gate who had been blind since birth. Jesus wonderfully restored his sight, but the hostile religious leaders immediately assailed the man. Though vulnerable and exposed, the man found that he was not alone, for the Good Shepherd was watching over his sheep.

Jesus began his teaching on true and false shepherds by delivering his famous Parable of the Good Shepherd. Drawing on imagery familiar to his hearers and employing his usual formula for introducing a most solemn teaching, Jesus began:

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. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out (Jn. 10:1-3).

Strictly speaking this story presents an allegory rather than a parable. In those days, most towns possessed a common sheep pen into which the local shepherds would bring their flocks. The pen had high walls for protection and a paid gatekeeper who manned the pen. The sheep from the various flocks would be mixed together. When the shepherd came for his sheep, he would report to the porter for admittance and then call his own sheep. Not only would he call for them in general, but he would start calling out their names – “Long-ears,” “Stubby tail,” “Tender foot” – and knowing the sound of his voice, his own sheep would come.

Drawing on this familiar scene, Jesus first made a point about the false leaders with whom Jerusalem was burdened: “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” (Jn. 10:1). With these words, Jesus denounced the Pharisees and other false shepherds.

One of the things the gate-keeper had to watch for was thieves and robbers who would try to scale the wall in order to steal sheep, especially during the dark hours of night. The word for “thief” (Greek, *kleptas*) means one who steals, and the word for “robber” (Greek, *lastas*) means an assailant who uses violence. In this manner, Jesus described the motives of Israel’s false religious leaders. Their

ministry was devoted not to the good of the people but to their own gain, for which they were willing to use spiritual violence. The excommunication of the innocent man whose eyes Jesus had restored (Jn. 9:34) shows how savage they could be. Jesus also denounced their methods: like robbers who try to sneak over the wall, the false leaders enforced an illegitimate authority over the people. J. C. Ryle explains: “The object was to show the entire unfitness of the Pharisees to be pastors and teachers of the Jews, because they had not taken up their office in the right spirit, and with a right understanding of the work they had to do.”²

All through the Gospels, Jesus’ most severe rebukes were aimed at false leaders and teachers. He considered these the greatest threats to the well-being of the people. In doing so, Jesus was taking up a strand of teaching with a long biblical lineage. Ezekiel devoted an entire chapter of his prophecy to describing Israel as the flock of God abandoned by false shepherds: “Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep” (Eze. 34:2-3).

We live in a time when it is unfashionable for Christians to criticize anyone. It is especially unpopular when a preacher exposes false teaching: he is certain to be maligned as a negative and divisive person. But it is a shepherd’s duty to defend his flock against wolves. According to the Bible, Christians are like sheep: they are prone to wander into dangerous regions. They are vulnerable to “thieves and robbers” who would steal in over the wall. Therefore, not everything that a faithful shepherd declares will be “Yes,” but there will also be “No.” Ryle comments: “Nothing seems so offensive to Christ as a false teacher of religion, a false prophet, or a false shepherd. Nothing ought to be so much dreaded in the Church, and if needful, to be so plainly rebuked, opposed, and exposed.”³

² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:201.

³ Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, 2:203.

TRUE SHEEP, FALSE SHEPHERDS

The Parable of the Good Shepherd not only instructs us about true versus false leaders, but it also provides two key marks of God's true sheep. The first mark is that true sheep flee from thieves and robbers.

Sheep have only one defense against wolves, thieves and robbers: they can always flee. Jesus said, "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (Jn. 10:5). The sheep knew the voice of their own shepherd, and they would only come when he called. Likewise, even though Christians may be confused or misled, ultimately they will recognize and avoid false teaching. This is probably the meaning of John's statement in his first epistle: "You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge" (1 Jn. 2:20). This does not mean that Christians do not need to be taught the Bible, as some have thought. Rather, it means that through the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christians have a sense of the truth, just as a compass has a sense of true north. One of the signs, therefore, of a false Christian is that he or she tends towards unsound spiritual teaching and false doctrine.

Jesus says that false shepherds are to be identified by their false motives and false methods. Like thieves, some ministers are motivated mainly for personal gain. They are filling their pockets with money, buying yachts, and building their egos through the fame of their ministry success. True Christians should realize that this is not the motive of a genuine servant of Christ. Yet millions today flock to hear the so-called prosperity gospel, whose false teachers promise material wealth and glowing health to those who support their supposedly anointed ministries, mainly through the financial gifts with which these false shepherds purchase their mansions. In contrast, God's true servants, like the Good Shepherd, are motivated for the spiritual well-being of the flock and not for personal riches or fame. Instead of tampering with God's Word, true shepherds teach the Bible and its doctrines plainly and clearly; they teach Jesus' message of the cross and not a message of worldly comfort and earthly glory.

False shepherds can also be identified by their false methods. This is what Jesus meant by saying that the thief “does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way” (Jn. 10:1). In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees misused the law to build their own power on the foundation of works-righteousness. In our day, false shepherds employ the tactics of Hollywood, with its glittering entertainment, and Madison Avenue, employing the subtle manipulations of the advertising firms, to win large followings. But a true shepherd will stick to the ways of God as taught in the Bible.

Sadly, we are living in a time when the worth of a Christian minister is mainly assessed by the numerical size of his following, rather than by the godliness of his motives and the biblical fidelity of his methods. In this way, multitudes are exposed to charlatans and frauds. In my view, the two marks of false shepherds cited here by Jesus – false motives and false methods – are the greatest threats to Christianity in America, greater threats than any external foe.

Jesus teaching about false shepherds implies a duty for his sheep: they must recognize and refuse the call of false shepherds. Few of us would trust a court case to an incompetent lawyer or our bodies to an unsound doctor. We should not act otherwise when it comes to the more vital matter of our souls. This, of course, requires the cultivation of discernment, which comes through the diligent study of God’s Word. Through the transforming effects of regular Bible study, Paul says, “You may discern what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). Yet how increasingly rare this discernment is among professing believers. The fact that so many Christians select a church based on factors such as the style and quality of the music, the wealth or size of the congregation, the personality of the minister, or the fun and excitement of the service – rather than the godliness of the shepherds and the soundness of the teaching – is perhaps the greatest cause for alarm in the church today.

THE TRUE SHEPHERD

In giving these warnings, I am not suggesting that any human leader is qualified to be entrusted with your soul. No merely human spiritual leader will ever measure up to the standards of Jesus, although his true servants will resemble him in motive and method.

There is only one true shepherd, the Lord Jesus himself. The biggest problem with the Pharisees, therefore, was their opposition to Jesus when he claimed to be the Messiah. In answer to them, Jesus presented his own claims: “But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens” (Jn. 10:2-3).

This allegory makes three great claims about Jesus Christ. The first is that “he enters by the door” so that “to him the gatekeeper opens.” But what does Jesus mean by the “door” and the “gatekeeper”? In the context of John’s Gospel it is clear that Jesus is referring to the legitimacy of his claim to be the promised Messiah. The sheepfold is Israel, the door is the God-ordained way by which the Messiah comes, and the gatekeeper is the prophetic witness of the Scriptures.

The Old Testament laid out the path by which the Savior would come, the fulfillment of which would prove his right to call God’s sheep to himself. Ezekiel had prophesied this in the same chapter in which he denounced Israel’s false shepherds: “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Eze. 34:23). This was a clear reference to the Messiah, who would arise from the line of David, as Jesus did.

In everything he did, Jesus presented himself to Israel in strict accord with scriptural teaching and the Old Testament prophecies. Arthur Pink writes, “Christ answered to all that was written of the Messiah, and took the path of God’s will in presenting himself to the people.”⁴ An honest assessment of Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy will prove his claims to be the Messiah, and many have come to faith by considering them.

In referring to the gatekeeper, Jesus may especially be pointing to the ministry of John the Baptist, who brought to completion the witness of all the prophets as they pointed to Jesus. John’s mission was to introduce the true shepherd to God’s flock: “For this purpose I came baptizing with water,” he said, “that he might be revealed to Israel” (Jn. 1:31). Standing for all the Old Testament prophets, John was the gatekeeper who admitted Jesus to the sheep pen of Israel.

⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 511.

HE CALLS HIS OWN

Jesus' second claim deals with the true shepherd's call to his sheep: "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (Jn. 10:3). This is a wonderful promise to which all true believers can attest. How did you become a Christian? Because Jesus Christ called you by name. This answers the greatest need of the human soul, to be called into fellowship with God by the voice of the Savior he has sent.

Jesus calls to the entire world with a sincere and heartfelt offer of salvation. Perhaps the greatest of these calls was given by Jesus just days before, crying out to the throngs gathered for the Feast of Tabernacles: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (Jn. 7:37). Now, Jesus repeats this offer: "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved" (Jn. 10:9). Jesus invites you, if you have not believed, to examine the Bible's testimony concerning him – including the numerous fulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament and the eye-witness record of the New Testament – and having presented himself in this way at the door, he invites you to come to him and be saved.

But here Jesus refers to something more than this general call. He speaks of the particular, effectual call by which the true shepherd calls his own – those who were given to him by the Father to believe and be saved. "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (Jn. 10:3).

How wonderful it is that Jesus knows the name of each of his own before we even come to him. John 10 is one of the great chapters that emphasizes God's sovereignty in choosing his people and effectually calling his elect. Here, Jesus says that our salvation begins with his personal call to all who were already known to him by name (see also John 6:36-40).

The New Testament record is filled with examples of Jesus personally and effectually calling his own to himself. One example is Matthew, the hardened tax collector. Jesus came and said, "Follow me," and Matthew "rose and followed him" (Mt. 9:9). Another example is Zacchaeus, the mafia boss in Jericho, who Jesus called by name as he was passing through: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must

stay at your house today” (Lk. 19:5). Most dramatic was Jesus’ call of Lazarus from the grave. Standing before the tomb, Jesus cried, “Lazarus, come out” (Jn. 11:43). At the call of Jesus, John says, “the man who had died came out” (Jn. 11:44). This displayed Jesus’ power to call the spiritually dead sinner into salvation and eternal life.

Indeed, responding to Jesus’ voice is the particular mark of God’s elect. Consider Jesus’ call to Mary Magdalene on the morning of his resurrection. Mary had come with some other women to tend Jesus’ body, but they had found the grave open and the body gone. Jesus appeared to her, but she remained confused. But Jesus called her by name, “Mary” (Jn. 20:16). At his call, being the beloved sheep that she was, Mary recognized Jesus’ voice and believed.

Kent Hughes points out that shepherds tend to use nicknames for their sheep, and wonders if Jesus does the same for us: “It is quite possible he affectionately calls us ‘Grumpy’ or ‘Fearful’ or ‘Faithless,’ just as we might talk to our sheep if we were shepherds.”⁵ Whatever name Jesus may have for us, what matters is that he takes us as his own and that we belong to him. The Good Shepherd loves his sheep, and the Bible teaches that he purchased their salvation with his own blood on the cross, freeing us from the penalty of our sins. Have you heard Jesus’ voice calling out to you? It is through the gospel that Jesus calls his flock today, and if you hear his voice and recognize the Savior of your soul you will answer by coming to him in faith.

We earlier noted that true sheep will not follow false shepherds. Here is a second mark of Christ’s true sheep: having refused to follow false shepherds, they recognize the true shepherd’s voice and answer when he calls. This is true in our conversion – we respond to the Shepherd’s call by calling out in faith – and it is true all through a Christian’s life. Through regular fellowship with the Shepherd through his Word, a believer’s sensitivity to his voice grows just as his discernment increases. Personal communion with Jesus himself, in the Word and through prayer, thus becomes the spring of refreshment and godly motivation for a true sheep of Christ.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 266.

THE SHEPHERD LEADING

Jesus made three claims about himself through this allegory. The first was that he was the true shepherd who is admitted by the gatekeeper of the Old Testament prophecies. The second is that as the true shepherd, he is recognized by the true sheep. Lastly, the third claim is that the true shepherd leads his own sheep out of the pen to follow him: “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all of his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him” (Jn. 19:3-4).

In the case of the hearers of this parable, the sheepfold was Israel, where God’s people were gathered to await the Messiah. Later in this chapter, Jesus will speak of others who are found in different pens throughout the world: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (Jn. 10:16). The point is that whether we have come to Jesus out of Judaism or out of any other religion and category, by following him we leave our former identity to enter into his flock; no one who follows him remains what he or she was before coming to Jesus. No longer do we think of ourselves by class, race, tribe, or nation but by our relationship to Jesus. And since the day he spoke these words, Jesus has been leading his sheep out of every kind of sheepfold: out of nominal and false religion, out of materialism and sensualism, out of idolatry and secular humanism, out of ignorance and vain philosophy. Jesus leads us out from our worldly sheepfolds into the church, his own beloved flock, and into the green pastures of his salvation.

Most importantly, Jesus says that he leads his flock and they follow. Our Savior does not drive us ruthlessly, but he walks before us and calls us to come with him. Isaiah foretold: “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40:11).

One of any shepherd’s most important tasks is to go before the flock, driving predators away, preparing green pastures, and removing poisonous plants. This is how Jesus goes before us. Where, after all, was he headed when he spoke this parable? Jesus was heading to the cross, where the Good Shepherd laid his life down for the sheep and

drove away the threatened penalty of God's law on our sins. Jesus went before us in our battle with temptation, casting down the power of Satan's kingdom and giving us the Bible so as to lead us in paths of righteousness (Ps. 23:3). Jesus went before us even into the valley of death, there to consecrate and conquer the grave, so that the green pastures of heaven await all belong to him.

This, then, is the third mark of the true sheep of Christ: they follow him. Are you following Jesus? Or are you just making a show of religion? Do you devote yourself to studying God's Word, or are you too busy with the pursuits of the world? Is your lifestyle modeled on the life Jesus walked before us? Does your attitude towards time, money, people, and the priorities of life increasingly resemble the attitude that Jesus showed us? If you are a true sheep and you are not following Jesus, then expect to feel the sting of his loving staff as he leads you back into the right way. The way that we know we belong to the Lord is to follow him as sheep harkening to the shepherd's voice.

Jesus calls all his sheep to follow him. Wise sheep are those who always have their eyes on him, and knowing the love of their shepherd their chief desire is to be as close to him as possible, to hear as often as possible the joyful sound of his calling voice, and to follow in the path wherever he leads.