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John 10:1-21
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The Good Shepherd

This morning, we will be looking at Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd. While we may not know it as a parable as such, most commentators agree that it has features of most parables.

Parables were stories that Jesus told about every day life that pointed to the evidence of the Kingdom of God all around them.

In today's parable, he used the image of a shepherd and its sheep. Sheep know the shepherd's voice and they listen and follow them. Where as a stranger, they will not. But is this true? Let's check out this video to see for ourselves.

Notice how the first three false shepherds yield absolutely no response from the sheep. But last true shepherd, who the sheep know and trust, illicit an immediate response. That's what Jesus was talking about here.

Please join me as we read from John 10:1-21 and see for ourselves.

10 "What I'm about to tell you Pharisees is true. What if someone does not enter the sheep pen through the gate but climbs in another way? That person is a thief and a robber. **2** The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. **3** The gatekeeper opens the gate for him. The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4** When he has brought out all his own sheep, he goes on ahead of them. His sheep follow him because they know his voice. **5** But they will never follow a stranger. In fact, they will run away from him. They don't recognize a stranger's voice." **6** Jesus told this story. But the Pharisees didn't understand what he was telling them.

7 So Jesus said again, "What I'm about to tell you is true. I am like a gate for the sheep. **8** All who have come before me are thieves and robbers. But the sheep have not listened to them. **9** I'm like a gate. Anyone who enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out. And they will find plenty of food. **10** A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so they may have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way.

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. **12** The hired man is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when the hired man sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. **13** The man runs away because he is a hired man. He does not care about the sheep.

14 "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and my sheep know me. **15** They know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I give

my life for the sheep. **16** I have other sheep that do not belong to this sheep pen. I must bring them in too. They also will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd. **17** The reason my Father loves me is that I give up my life. But I will take it back again. **18** No one takes it from me. I give it up myself. I have the authority to give it up. And I have the authority to take it back again. I received this command from my Father.”

19 The Jews who heard these words could not agree with one another.

20 Many of them said, “He is controlled by a demon. He has gone crazy! Why should we listen to him?”

21 But others said, “A person controlled by a demon does not say things like this. Can a demon open the eyes of someone who is blind?”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

As with all parable teaching, there are several things I’d like to do this morning. First we’ll describe the parable proper or where and why it is located in John the way it is. Then, we’ll look at the characters within the parable. We’ll consider what the parable means? And finally, we’ll explore what is God trying to say to us through it?

The Parable of the Good Shepherd is only located in the Gospel of John. As I’ve mentioned before, John’s gospel is unique in that he seems less concerned with chronological accuracy and more with driving home theological points. And so this parable or story is specifically arranged to do just that.

It is framed by the unbelief of the Jews which we talked about last week, followed a story of Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath which made the religious leaders and teachers of law even more angry and set against him. Then Jesus told this Parable of the Good Shepherd as opposed to Bad ones. The religious leaders becoming even more angry and even more disbelieving as ever. Can you see how it forms a sandwich with many layers that were aimed to drive home theological points?

The parable itself seems to be contained within verses 1-5, while verses 6-18 seem to be Jesus’ explanation of the parable. And then verse 19-21 are the hearer’s response to the parable and its teaching.

So let’s look at who the characters are within the parable and Jesus’ teachings. We have the sheep. The robbers and thieves. Strangers. The watchman or gate keeper. The hired hand. Wolves. The Good Shepherd. And the Father.

We’ll begin with the obvious. The sheep. Throughout scripture, God’s people are referred to as sheep or those Jews of Abrahamic descent.

Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.”¹

Psalm 100, “Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.”²

Isaiah 40, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arm and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”³

Micah 7, “Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance.”⁴

And finally the hallmark of Lenten verses from Isaiah 53, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”⁵

So the hearers would have thought immediately, “Oh Jesus is talking about us! We are God’s people. The sheep of his pasture.”

Here are some behavioral characteristics of sheep. Sheep are highly social animals, forming strong bonds with other sheep, and find it stressful to be isolated from their flock.

They display a strong instinct to follow others in the flock. Sheep are generally gentle and timid animals. Sheep are surprisingly intelligent, capable of problem-solving and recognizing individuals. They are emotionally complex, capable of experiencing a range of emotions, including fear, anger, and happiness. They form strong friendships and stick up for their friends in fights. They can grieve at the loss of their friends. Sheep are known to self-medicate when they are ill, by eating specific plants that can cure them. They can distinguish between different expressions in humans and detect changes in the faces of anxious sheep. Mothers form strong bonds with their lambs.

Sure sounds like people. So I think we can safely assume to whom Jesus was referring.

In biblical times the sheep pen was often an enclosure with a rocky fence perhaps topped with thorns to keep predators and thieves out. It could be either attached to the side of a dwelling or out in the open field. Its walls kept the sheep from wandering away and had only one entrance. The shepherd often acted as gate to keep the sheep safely within, sleeping at the entrance. The sheep would have to

¹ Psalm 23:1-2

² Psalm 100:3

³ Isaiah 40:11

⁴ Micah 7:14

⁵ Isaiah 53:6

“go through” him to get out of the pen, hence Jesus’ notion of being the gate or door.

Robbers and thieves. These are those who don’t approach the sheep in the same way a shepherd might. A robber or thief would not use the main gate, but would climb into the sheep pen by some other means. Perhaps they would jump the fence which would spook the sheep and cause a panic. Sheep are prey animals meaning that they can be easily frightened, stressed, or injured by inappropriate handling.

Robbers and thieves do not have the sheep’s best interest in mind. Jesus said, they come to steel, kill, or destroy the sheep. They are strangers.

As we saw in the video at the start, sheep don’t recognize a stranger’s voice and so will not follow them or obey their commands. Sheep are trained from birth to listen to one person’s voice. The voice of the one who cares for and feeds them. The voice of one who can be trusted.

The Robbers and thieves that Jesus was alluding to were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They were leading God’s people astray into false doctrines and harmful ideals of God, putting oppressive yokes upon the people that they could barely stand under.

The watchmen or gatekeeper. The Greek word that Jesus used to describe this person was “thuroros.” It can mean either watchman, gatekeeper, or warden. I was somewhat intrigued by who this was. In biblical times, several shepherds might use the same sheep pen. So the pen gatekeeper would keep watch over the shepherd as they led their sheep into and out of the pen. This meant that the gatekeeper would have needed to know each shepherd personally from the robbers and thieves so they could sound the alarm if the sheep were under attack. I wonder if the gatekeeper or watchman, warden is the Holy Spirit as it helps us discern the voice of the shepherd, from the others.

The hired hand. This is one who’s job it is to take care of the sheep but who may not be as personally invested in the welfare of the sheep as the owner might be. When danger or threat comes, the hired hand cares more about themselves than they do the sheep. And so Jesus said they would run. I wonder if Jesus was thinking about Peter who denied knowing Jesus not just once but three times.

The wolves could be any danger that could attack the flock or God’s people. Wolves normally attack their prey from behind, and scatter the flock so that sheep are isolated. Because if it can get a sheep isolated from the herd, then it is easier to overtake the sheep. Jesus said, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”⁶ 1 Peter describes the devil like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. John describes them in

⁶ Matthew 7:15

Revelation as beasts and dragons, who deceive, threaten, physically harm God's people.

The Shepherd on the contrary enters the sheep pen in way that the sheep understand. Not threateningly. As I mentioned earlier, the shepherd often slept at the pen entrance and served as the gate itself. The shepherd is known by the gatekeeper, watchman, or warden. The sheep know the shepherd's voice and they listen to him. The shepherd know his sheep, calls them by name and leads them out. The shepherd goes ahead of the sheep and his sheep follow.

A good shepherd willingly lays down their life for his sheep, not out of guilt or compulsion. No one forces him do so. It is an act of love and self sacrifice.

Jesus says, "He is the Good Shepherd" who has come to give the sheep life and life to the full or abundantly.

And last but not least, we see the Father in the parable. Jesus describes the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep as he does his relationship with God the Father. As the Good Shepherd loves his sheep, the Father loves Jesus, his Son. The Father doesn't force the Son to give up his life for us. The Son willingly lays it down, in the same way the Good Shepherd lays down at the gate to protect the sheep from all harm...both from outside forces and from within.

So what does this parable mean?

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He was like us in every way, except he was without sin.⁷ He knows all those who believed in him, believe in him and will believe in him. He knows our names, every hair on our head. He knows our history, our present, and our futures. He knows our strengths and our weaknesses. Our victories and our defeats. Our temptations and our trials. And even though he knows all of this and sees into the depths of our hearts, he still loves us.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd who tenderly cares for all believers. He provides our daily bread. He goes ahead of us and prepares a place for us so that where he is we can be also.⁸ He gives us a family among other believers that can be stronger than our blood relatives. He adopts us into God's family as children, co-heirs of the Gospel. He guards and protects us from all evil. "He bears patiently with us and our many weaknesses and infirmities and does not cast us off because we are wayward, erring, sick, footsore, or lame."⁹ If we should stray and lose our way, he will look for us until we are found and safely brought back home. And through the gift of his Holy Spirit, he molds and shapes us more into his image throughout life.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd who lays down His life for his sheep. Though he was without sin, he paid the penalty on the cross for our sin. With his life.

⁷ Hebrews 4:15

⁸ John 14:2

⁹ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on The Gospel of John* (Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2019), 176.

Willingly. Belief in this unmerited gift, is the only way through which we can be saved from our sin and brought back into relationship with God the Father, as children. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”¹⁰

Not only is He our Good Shepherd, but he tells us that he is the Shepherd of sheep that are not yet in His flock and that He is working diligently to bring them in too. This reveals Jesus’ heart for all of humanity, breaking down barriers and uniting diverse peoples under His loving care.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 who “guides us in paths of righteousness, leads us through the valley of the shadow of death, prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies, anoints our heads with oil, loves us all the days of our lives, and prepares a place for us to dwell in the Father’s house with him and Holy Spirit, forever.”¹¹

What is God trying to say to us today through it?

If Jesus is our Good Shepherd, let us turn to Jesus. Trust in Him. Follow Him. Listen for His voice. Spend time in His Word. Really feast upon it. Meditate upon it. Make it part of you. Only His voice will lead us to the abundant life that our hearts crave. Then we can discern His voice from false prophets and gospels who will try to lead us to believe that American Nationalism will save us, or particular political parties or leaders, or bigger militaries, or bigger bank accounts, or new diet fads or exercise routines, or certain medical procedures, or new relationships, or ...fill in the blank. Only Jesus saves us.

If Jesus is our Good Shepherd, let us remain in His flock. Let us not be tempted to leave the fold and wander in places that could hurt us.

If Jesus is our Good Shepherd, let us reflect His love to others. As recipients of Jesus’ sacrificial love, we are called to extend that same love to others, drawing them into the fold.

So if we haven’t given our lives to Jesus as of yet. Maybe now is the time to act. Then we can be confident that we will dwell in the safety of His fold forever. Amen.

¹⁰ John 15:13

¹¹ Psalm 23:3-6