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The Legitimate Shepherd

John 10:1-6

Intro: This is one of the most beloved chapters in this most beloved of books. This passage has been rightly loved by Christians since they were delivered. The reason lies in the striking picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and ourselves as His well-attended and cared-for sheep. This portrait of Jesus had been a comfort and encouragement to believers from every culture and from every period in history. The main point of this imagery is that the one who follows Christ will not lack any good thing, the same idea presented in the **23rd Psalm**, “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. He restores my soul...”

Christ’s sheep will certainly be provided with all good things and will dwell in the house of the Lord forever but it’s not just in the **23rd Psalm** that this imagery is found. It’s found in many places throughout the Old and New Testaments. The **Psalmist** wrote in **100:3**, “We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.” **Isaiah 40:11** declares, “He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.” **Mark 6:34** mentions that Jesus had pity on the crowds “because they were like sheep not having a shepherd.” **Matt 10:6** says that when Jesus commissioned His disciples, He sent them out to preach to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The author of **Hebrews** refers to Jesus as the “great Shepherd” (**13:20**) and **Peter** calls Him the “chief Shepherd” the One to whom all undershepherds are responsible (**1 Peter 5:4**). It’s from this rich mine of Biblical imagery that the illustration of the Good Shepherd is taken. This picture speaks of the fundamental sympathy the Shepherd has for His sheep and of the unfailing love and vigilant attention of the Good Shepherd.

In light of the wide use of the shepherd theme throughout the Bible, you would think that the shepherd imagery in ch10 would be easy to interpret. Apparently, that’s not the case, judging by the various interpretations given to it. In one interpretation the sheepfold is the world. In another it’s the church. In a 3rd, it’s heaven. In one interpretation the sheep are all mankind, in another only the Jews. All can agree that the shepherd is Jesus. But who

is the porter? Who are the thieves? How can Jesus be both the shepherd and the door of the sheepfold at the same time?

These differing views arise from 2 basic failures: (1) to take the story in context and (2) to recognize that Jesus uses various aspects of the shepherd imagery to illustrate different truths. Of course, the greatest of these failures is to neglect to take the story in its proper context. If you have been consistently reading willy-nilly through the Bible and happened to one day parachute right into [John 10](#), you would get the gist of what Jesus is saying here but you would also have a very difficult time trying to nail down exactly who or what He is talking about. Thus, you would have a difficult time of making a good application of this passage to your own life. Here at Grace Chapel, we don't have that problem. We go verse by verse and chapter by chapter and the value of this approach is that when you get to a difficult or confusing passage of Scripture, we've already laid the foundation for the proper context of that passage.

The proper context of what Jesus says in [ch10](#) is found in the previous chapter in the story of the man born blind and his mistreatment by the religious leaders. This is obvious because of the absence of any transitional words at the beginning of [ch10](#). When John indicates a transition either geographically or in time he usually says something like after these things, after this, on the next day or as Jesus passed by. Here, the words of Jesus flow on immediately after his comments about the Pharisees at the end of [ch9](#) and thus are related to them. In fact, the phrase "Most assuredly, I say to you," which is quite common in this Gospel, never begins a discourse but always follows up some previous teaching. Its use indicates the importance of the statement that follows but also implies a connection with the preceding declaration. Clearly, Jesus had the incident of the blind man in view as He delivered this discourse.

Once we make this contextual connection, it's easy to recognize that the thieves and robbers must refer to the false shepherds of Israel (Pharisees) and that the sheepfold represents Judaism. The ones who hear Christ's voice and respond to His call are those of His own who are within Israel, of whom the man born blind is a prime example.

A proper understanding of this passage is also encouraged when we see that Jesus uses this shepherd imagery to develop different truths. The

imagery He uses in these first verses is not the same as that used later. In **ch10** there are 2 kinds of sheepfolds. The first sheepfold was that found in the countryside. It was nothing more than a circle of rocks into which the sheep could be driven. There was no door, just an opening across which the shepherd would place his body. This is the kind of sheepfold Jesus is thinking about when He says, "I am the door of the sheep" (**7**).

The other kind of sheepfold was more substantial. It was normally found in towns and villages and consisted of a secure enclosure with a regular gate. The various shepherds of that town would drive their flocks into this enclosure when they returned to the village at night and place the sheep in the care of a porter. In the morning each shepherd would come to the fold and call out his sheep that literally knew his voice and would respond to his call. Then he would lead his own sheep out to pasture. This is the kind of sheepfold Jesus is referring to in these first verses.

What's the sheepfold then? Its certainly not heaven; thieves and robbers can't climb into heaven. It's not the church; the shepherd doesn't lead His flock out of that as he does here. The sheepfold is Judaism, as we've already been led to see from the context of **ch9**; and the point is that Jesus presented Himself to Judaism in order to call out from that body those whom God had given Him. Later He says that He will soon call out sheep from other folds that there might be one great flock, the church, and one shepherd (**16**). If the doorkeeper must be identified then it is God, or at least God's Holy Spirit, who opens the door to Christ and releases the sheep to His call.

Having laid down this contextual groundwork, let's move through the first part of this discourse and make application.

9:41-10:5- In one verse, Jesus is talking about blindness and sin and in the next He's talking about sheepfolds and robbers. It would be easy to disassociate the two from each other but we must remember that He is speaking to the same crowd of Pharisees who sarcastically asked Him in **vs40**, "Are we blind also?" Tho the illustration has changed, the point remains the same. This verse should be read in the light of OT passages that castigate shepherds who have failed in their God-appointed duties (**Jer 23:1-2; 25:32-38; Zech 11; Isa 56:9-12; Ez 34**). **Ps 80:1** says God is the Shepherd of Israel and this is a clue into the measure of responsibility that

falls on all those appointed as His undershepherds. Those who are entrusted with this duty must be faithful and it's not just unfortunate when they are not—it's a terrible crime! Israel's shepherds failed in their responsibilities many times and so, God prophesied thru Ezekiel that a shepherd after His own heart would eventually appear (34:23). This is the Shepherd depicted in ch10.

The religious leaders in ch9 had shown themselves to be so unhelpful and cruel to the man who was healed, his parents and the common people in general that Jesus felt it necessary to point out the contrast between His heart and ministry as a leader of God's people and the heart and work of the religious leaders of His day. Jesus came to bring life and light to all men but these religious leaders were only interested in what benefitted them. They were completely unconcerned with the plight of the common people or their spiritual needs. Pharisees and Sadducees had their religious traditions and positions of power that brought them great wealth and they vigorously opposed anything that would upset their apple cart – even the truth, especially the truth!

Jesus is saying that not everyone among the sheep is a true shepherd, some are thieves and robbers. One mark of their being a thief or robber is how they gained entry among the sheep! The idea is that there is a door: a proper way to gain entry. Not everyone who stands among the sheep comes that way. These religious leaders gained their place among God's people through personal and political connections, through formal education, through ambition, manipulation and good old-fashioned corruption. Things haven't changed much since the days of Christ. Most mainline denominations simply consider the pastorate as just another profession, something anyone could do with the right education and temperament. Others look at it as a position to gain wealth and do so quite unashamedly. Still, others get into it because they think it's the best way to help people or because someone thinks they'd be good at it (momma called and poppa sent).

None of these are good reasons but there's a proper way to enter ministry. A true shepherd comes in the legitimate and designed way: through love for the Lord, His people and the lost; through a divine call to ministry, a true caring for the lost soul, the hurt and the immature believer and a willingness to engage your life in sacrificial service.

Of course, this discourse isn't about the religious leaders, it's about Jesus. What does this story teach us about Him?

1) Jesus knows His sheep. It's a wonderful thing to be known by Jesus! This truth is implied in vs3 and stated clearly in vs14. The sheep are known to Christ because they've been given to Him by the Father (29) and it's for these sheep that the shepherd lays down His life (15b). God has given certain individuals to Christ. Jesus knows who they are and He dies for them so that the way to heaven might be provided for them and that they might be safe. Wow!

Note: all this is done on behalf of God's chosen ones, even though God knows they are sinners and don't deserve it. Jesus not only knows us; He knows us as we are, and yet He still died for us! Paul's words in Rom 5:6-8 throws light on Christ's teaching here. These verses are intended to help us to get our minds off ourselves and to rest in Christ's love. While we were sinners, Christ died for us. That's a great truth. If it were otherwise: if Jesus didn't know us or doesn't now know that we're sinners, we'd be afraid that some new revelation of sin in us might discourage Him and weaken His love. The truth is "nothing in His flock is hidden from Him: their weaknesses, failures, temptations, their sins; the good which they've neglected to do when it was within their reach, the evil which they've gone out of their way to perform. All of this is open before His eyes. He knows them . . . and yet He still loves them."

2) Jesus calls His sheep by name. This all points to a very tender and personal relationship for, being called by name, His sheep follow Him. We see this truth demonstrated all through the Gospels. (Matt 9:9) Here was a lone sheep of Jesus. The Shepherd called him; he recognized His voice and promptly forsook all and followed Him. (Luke 19:5) Here was one of His sheep, called by name. Again, the response was prompt: he made haste and came down. We saw in ch1 how Jesus found Philip and said, "Follow Me." This shows the Shepherd seeking His sheep before He called him. A more striking example of the drawing power of the Shepherd's voice as He calls His sheep will be seen in the next chapter. There we'll read about Lazarus in the grave but when Jesus calls His sheep by name – Lazarus, come forth – the sheep responds immediately. The most touching example of the sheep knowing His voice is found in ch20:11-16. She first thought

Jesus was the gardener; then, she recognized Him for who He truly was. What happened in the interval? What enabled her to identify Him? Just one word from Jesus—‘Mary’! The moment He called His sheep by name she knew His voice!

This is not something unique to the Gospels. This is the way it’s always been and it’s exactly how the call comes today. It’s how He calls you. He knows you, of course, as we’ve seen. He knows you with all your failures and sin. But He also knows what He’s going to make of you. (Rom 8:29-30) This is what He intends to do—make you like Himself, glorify you. For this end you are called. Do you hear His call? It’s a wonderful thing to be known personally by the great God and Creator of the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ. He knows us and calls us for a purpose!

3) Jesus leads His sheep out. What does He lead them out to? To His own great flock, the church, and into green pastures. What does He lead them out from? Anything that would keep them from His green pasture. We’ve already seen one example in this story. Jesus led the man who had been born blind out of Judaism. But there are other examples. Later He will speak of other sheep and other folds, and He’ll state His intention to lead those sheep out of other allegiances. These can be many things. Jesus leads some out of paganism. He leads others out of western materialism. He’s led some out of communism, atheism and secular humanism; some out of the worship of knowledge, He’s led countless multitudes out of dead orthodoxy and the religious traditions of men. These are the sheepfolds we start in, whatever they may be, and it is from these that Jesus calls us out of. Maybe He’s calling you from some other allegiance right now; some lesser allegiance that is preventing you from experiencing all the grace and blessing He has planned for your life. It may seem good and right at this moment but it is preventing you from enjoying His green pastures of acceptance, rest and provision.

6- When Jesus used this well known shepherd imagery, His audience was still in the dark – they didn’t understand. That’s understandable. They probably hadn’t boned up on all those OT passages I mentioned earlier so it all just went over their heads. But, we have no reason not to understand. Plus, if you’re hearing the Shepherd’s call right now, you should respond to Him quickly.

To hear Christ's call is not the same thing as responding to emotional pressure in an evangelistic service. It's not the same as agreeing to become a member of a church. It is not agreeing to do anything. It is hearing, hearing Christ deep within your own spirit and personality. It is arriving at the conviction that what the Bible says about your deep spiritual need and the love of Jesus in answer to that deep need is true and that you should respond to it.

Maybe you've been feeling something tugging at your heart. Maybe you're realizing that what you're hearing is true, truth you've waited your whole life to hear. This is what you have been made for – this is the answer to the meaning of life. If this is you, don't make the mistake of being slow to answer His call. Respond immediately, as Zacchaeus did and many millions of others have done, and follow Jesus. He is the Great Shepherd. Those who follow him do not want for any good thing.

Believer, are you actively pursuing the spiritual life Jesus came and died to give you? Not just life but life more abundantly? Are you seeking to have His goal for you accomplished in your life? That is the main reason you were saved. Not the only reason, but the main reason. Is it the main focus of your life? If not, then whatever is your focus is preventing you from experiencing the fullness of His green pastures. 😊