

Dear Friends,

Sadly, we've likely heard as many sermons from this lesson that praised good sheep as praised the good Shepherd. Which lesson did Jesus teach? His emphasis beginning to end was about His being the reliable, faithful, and powerful "Good Shepherd." As we study the lesson, we should keep our minds focused on Him, not on His sheep.

As we ponder the state of our world over the last two years, we who believe in Him, desperately need to shift stronger focus on Him and less on the trials of the day. Sheep who understand their Shepherd's love, power, and protection don't obsess over wolves, lions, or thieves and robbers. They rely on their Shepherd and go about their lives wholly trusting Him to take care of whatever problems they encounter. Oh, if we each could keep this Biblical truth securely in our minds at all times. How easily we allow our eyes to shift away from our Shepherd onto the latest trial or problem and lose the peaceful joy of our security with our Shepherd. We have never faced a problem trial--or a problem person (Fellow sheep)--that He can't deal with wisely and rightly.

That Jesus devoted more space to explaining this lesson than any of His other parables urges us to linger with its truth and prayerfully study to absorb its teachings into the fabric of our minds and hearts. We need this reminder right now. We've allowed our minds to turn too much to our problems, and we've forgotten our Shepherd and His loving care, especially His amazing ability to erase problems and take tender care of all His sheep. Do you long for peace and joy that seems missing in your life? That seems to be the season, doesn't it? Turn away from the discouraging trials and voices of this world. Turn your faith's eye, heart, and ears to His voice and His loving power to be wholly what He said He is in this lesson, your Good Shepherd. Your life can change overnight! His peace can return and restore your soul.

Praise your Shepherd,
Joe Holder

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, Part 1

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. (John 10:1-6 KJV 1900)

This lesson is unique in many ways. First, it is the only "Parable" contained in John's gospel. Secondly, Jesus devoted more time and detail to explaining it than any of the other parables recorded in the gospels. While including a brief reference to "thieves and robbers," similar to His teaching in the other parables against the established Jewish teachers, His primary focus in this parable is on Himself as the "Good Shepherd" of His sheep. Given His attention to its meaning, we should linger with this lesson and ponder His teaching from it thoroughly.

Fishing, farming, and the care of sheep formed the primary economy in Judah in the first century. When Jesus chose the background of these vocations as the basis for His parables and other teachings, He chose the best known activities of the people. The people lived those activities daily throughout their lives.

Rather than offer personal explanations of this lesson, I hope to follow Jesus' explanations as we work our way through His teachings in this chapter.

Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. (John 10:7-9 KJV 1900)

I dearly love the precision of Bible language. Too many contemporary and very sincere Christians may condition their reading by obtuse human literature, so, when they read their Bibles, they fail to recognize or to appreciate the precision and grace the Lord infused into His Book—and preserved in it across many languages, cultures, and centuries. More sadly, many of the modern “Versions” of the Bible fail to respect or preserve that graceful precision.

I am the door of the sheep. Jesus didn't say that He controlled the door of the sheepfold. He said, ***“I am the door.”*** Typically, first century Jewish shepherds built a rock enclosure to protect their sheep through the night. The walls were high enough to keep out intruders, human or animal. Access to the sheep could only occur through the doorway or entrance. Often a devoted shepherd would literally lie down across that doorway and sleep there through the night. Not only must an intruder go through the doorway to get to the sheep, but he must also go through the shepherd himself. No doubt, much like a mother of a young child sleeps with her ears open and carefully listening for any noise from her baby through the night, the shepherd would “Sleep with one ear open” to detect noise from the sheep or from a potential intruder. The sheep who had such a shepherd lived a secure existence. Literally any intruder must “Go through” the shepherd himself before they could harm or steal the sheep.

What is the logical and, I hope, obvious point Jesus made with this explanation? When you encounter difficult times or people, do you think of the problem in terms of your Shepherd in this light? Or do you despair and think only, “Woe is me,” and despair? Given Jesus' details, how should we respond to such trials in our lives? I couldn't count the times I've faced what I perceived as impossible trials with no apparent solution. Yes, I was tempted to despair, and on a few occasions I did. On other occasions, I devoted prayer time to the problem, and then I allowed time for the Lord to deal with the problem in His way and His time. Frequently, at the most unexpected time, the problem would simply go away. Only the Lord could so fully and wonderfully resolve the problem. When we get ourselves, our egos, our emotions, all of “Us” out of the way, and trust the Lord to be the wise and caring Shepherd He teaches us He is in this lesson, He proves true to His word. Sadly, when we ignore Him and go our own way, He often sits back in the shadows and allows us to crash. How have you handled your most recent trial? Try giving it to Him instead of stumbling over it yourself. You might be amazed at the outcome.

All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers. Jesus is not one in a long line of good shepherds. He is the exclusive, one and only one legitimate Shepherd of His sheep. Yes, the sheep belong to Him. He is not a hired worker. He owns the flock. Consider Acts 5:34-40. Gamaliel, a member of the Sanhedrin counsel, reminded the counsel that many Messiah-pretenders had come and gone. Rather than aggressively persecute the apostles, he advised them to allow some time to see if God was with them or not. He prevailed for the moment, but eventually the counsel grew increasingly hostile toward Jesus' teaching by the apostles and the early church. However, he was correct. They could not prevail against God. The Book of Acts records the growing spread of the faith, despite all the opposition it faced. Jesus' words proved to be true, as always.

...by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The sheepfold was designed for the protection of the sheep through the night. Daily the shepherd would lead them out to graze in the open fields. When life closes in on you, when troubles multiply in your life, where do you go for shelter and safety? To Jesus? Or to someone else? Anyone else, one anything else, according to Jesus, is a thief and a robber, usurping His Shepherd's role with His sheep. Choose another shelter, and you'll be disappointed. Choose Jesus and His shelter, and you'll find both your daily supply of blessings, as well as your safe shelter in the storms of life, in Him. As with a normal shepherd and his flock, Jesus covers both the evening shelter in the fold and daily grazing in green pastures. Both are necessary for a healthy flock. And both a reliable and safe shelter in times of danger or trial and spiritual nutrition in safe and blessed times are necessary for us, His "Sheep." He is a faithful Shepherd who supplies both needs in abundance.

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. (John 10:10 KJV 1900)

Motive is an essential factor in any leader or protector. If he is motivated merely by reward, any serious threat will send him running for his personal safety. He regards himself and what he might gain as his primary interest in what he considers nothing more than a job.

In glorious contrast, Jesus describes Himself and His interest. His sole care in His Shepherd's duties is the safe care of His sheep. He intends to protect them and ensure their "abundant life" as a result of His care for them.

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. (John 10:11-14 KJV 1900)

If necessary, and Jesus knew even then that it would be necessary, the reason for His definitive reference to giving His life for the sheep, this “Good Shepherd” would stand between His sheep and any enemy or danger, readily sacrificing His life for them.

Not only does He know all His sheep, but they know Him as well. In reading descriptions about first century shepherds, you often read about the shepherd giving each sheep a name. He could take his sheep into a busy market with many other flocks and shepherds present. But, when the time came to leave, he needed simply to begin calling His sheep by name, and they would hear and begin moving in the direction of his voice. Jesus used this common practice in the point made here. He ensures a comfortable and familiar relationship with His people. Sheep are not always the most intelligent or responsive of domesticated animals, but, in this case, there is no deficiency in the Shepherd. Often pastors or teachers who teach this lesson become sidetracked and spend more time praising the good behavior of the sheep than the Shepherd. For example, I’ve heard preachers devote whole sermons to the point that every sheep knows the Shepherd, hears His voice, and follows Him to teach that every born-again person will irresistibly hear, believe, and obey the gospel. The first error of this idea is that they make no difference between the Shepherd’s voice and the preacher’s voice. Big mistake. Secondly, in this same context, Jesus clearly taught that wolves occasionally invade the fold, catch and devour some sheep, and scatters other sheep. If Jesus didn’t consistently affirm the “Every sheep will hear and obey” idea, we should not embrace it. I have no doubt that my Shepherd and His sheep have just such a relationship as Jesus described here. I equally am persuaded that no preacher ever rose to the power or level of influence equal to Jesus.

No, the lesson is all about the Shepherd. The sheep appear in the lesson only to reinforce the rich truth of the Shepherd’s goodness.

As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. (John 10:15-16 KJV 1900)

Jesus adds a special “Turn” in His story of the Shepherd and sheep. He is the “Good Shepherd,” but we must not forget. He also maintains a special Father-Son relationship with the Father. That can only bode well for His sheep.

In addition, and as part of that special bond with the Father, Jesus’ flock contains “Sheep” from more than the Jewish fold alone. He has sheep who belong to another (Gentile) fold, and He intends to shepherd them no less than He cares for His Jewish sheep. In the end, there is only one “Good Shepherd.” Therefore, there can only be one fold. All the sheep blend together in one fold, all equally under the Good Shepherd’s special care.

The active verb in the lesson directs us to the Shepherd and His work for the sheep, not to what the sheep will do. “...**them also I must bring.**” Notice. Jesus didn’t say, “Them I’d like to bring if they are willing, and if they are sufficiently good sheep.” He refers us to His own Shepherd’s care and emphasizes, “...**them also I must bring.**” Their coming to Him and becoming part of His one fold is not optional. He obligates Himself to bring them, and He shall faithfully honor His intent and bring them. Jesus highlights

His own care for the sheep and His personal power to accomplish this goal. So should we. To wrest the lesson to praise the sheep's goodness contradicts Jesus' words and ignores His teaching in the lesson.

The Christian community historically has done a dreadful job in its obligation to remain faithful to Jesus and in maintaining unity in faith and fellowship with Him. At my latest check, if we include the admittedly many individual churches that have no fellowship or denominational identity with other Christians, the number of different denominations is a staggering 43,000. This number is based on a study conducted by The Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in 2012. Does this mean that Jesus' description of one fold and one Shepherd failed. No, not at all. Christians now may stumble and disgrace their Lord by trivial separations and schisms. However, Jesus reminds us. A day is coming when all His children, however schismatic they may have been in this life, shall be with Him, the "one Shepherd," and all together under His care in glory. Then His description shall be gloriously true and accurate. Lord, bring that day soon.

We have a glorious and a "Good" Shepherd who shall not allow His sheep to be neglected or lost in the end. Let's work hard and long to discover His one "Faith" and to live out our lives in loyal faith to Him and to His teachings, not our opinions. Give Him the praise for being our one and only "Good Shepherd."

Elder Joe Holder