

The Green Pastures of Shalom

John 10:1-13

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Much has been made about this good shepherd narrative. Yes, this chapter of John's Gospel has inspired untold numbers of books, sermons, religious art, and songs, but few have noted that here Jesus is also in the role of prosecutor and judge. For those who belong to him, Jesus is indeed, the good Shepherd: advocate, protector, and giver of life; for those who oppose him and his sheep, he intervenes as righteous prosecutor and judge. Satan's false shepherds abuse Christ's sheep for their own interests, therefore Christ's sheep must flee the voice of these strangers, and instead heed the voice of their good shepherd, following him out to the green pastures of shalom.

Shepherds of Some Other Way

Let me remind you of our context. Jesus had healed a man born blind. And when that man was taken before the Pharisees, these religious authorities ultimately denied Jesus as the source of the miracle, declaring him instead to be "a sinner" for healing on the Sabbath. But the man, having gained both physical and spiritual sight defended Jesus as the source of his healing, and he declared amazement at the Pharisee's lack of spiritual insight. The result was the Pharisees verbally abused the man and cast him out of the synagogue. These men treated this man with utter malice. They were spiritual abusers of the first-order.

Therefore, Jesus sought out the outcast man and revealed himself as the Son of Man, in whom the man professed belief. Then, with the same authority with which he had healed the man, Jesus turned to the Pharisees, standing between the man and the religious authorities as it were, and declared, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (John 9:39).¹ To which the Pharisees responded, "What, are we blind too?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (9:40-41). Chapter 10 continues this conversation, and the chapter break here ought to be ignored so that it reads: "If you were blind, you would not be

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guilty of sin; but now you that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.” And as follows . . . (John 9:41-10:6).

Now note that Jesus does not excuse the Pharisees in the least. These men are heirs of all the wicked shepherds who have ever ruled over God’s people (see Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23), and Jesus grants them no quarter whatsoever. Oh, what a lesson for us, today, in our tolerance of heresy and corruption throughout Christianity! We need clarity and right devotion, and Jesus models that for us here. These Pharisees are false shepherds; Jesus calls them “thieves and robbers” who have entered the sheep pen by “some other way” (John 10:1). And what was that “other way?” They gained access to the sheep by “some other way” other than by Jesus, so they did not share his shepherd’s heart, but had some other agenda for the sheep. Let’s look closer at the meaning here.

We discover in verse 7 that Jesus is the gate (door) to the sheep: “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.” The meaning here is this: *The only legitimate access to the sheep is by Jesus* — a true shepherd must understand first, that the sheep belong to Jesus and not himself, and second, must therefore share Jesus’ concern for the well-being and peace (Shalom) of the sheep. Those who do not submit to these two points are “thieves and robbers,” and are therefore under divine indictment. Note Jesus did not say “some,” but “all.” All the previous shepherds of Israel did not understand that the sheep belonged to God and therefore must share God’s heart for the welfare of the sheep. So as the good shepherd, Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise that he himself would one day care for the sheep (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23; Jeremiah 23:1-6).

Therefore, any shepherd that does not submit to the fact that the sheep belong to God, and must therefore share his heart for the well-being and peace (Shalom) of the sheep, is not a legitimate shepherd — and the Pharisees did not so submit, but accessed the pen by some other way, meaning they accessed the sheep for their own interests. They cared nothing for the sheep. To put it plainly: the Pharisees were not legitimate shepherds of Israel. And so also, no pastor, elder, or Christian leader today who does not access the sheep by Jesus are not legitimate shepherds, but thieves and robbers. For, again, to enter by Jesus means they understand the sheep belong to Jesus, not themselves, and must therefore share Jesus’ concern and commitment to the well-being (Shalom) of the sheep. And given this standard, the sad fact is, there are very few

legitimate pastors, elders, evangelists, and leaders in the churches, today. For most Christian leaders today have only their own interests in mind, and they use the sheep as a means to fulfill those selfish interests. Let me illustrate.

Paul speaks to this in his letter to the Philippians. There Paul tells his readers he was sending Timothy to them, for, said Paul, “I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 2:19-21). Were their elders and leaders in Philippi? Yes, Paul’s letter is addressed to “God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” (1:1). But apparently these men did not share in Christ’s interests, but had their own selfish agenda for the sheep. Therefore, Paul had to send Timothy, the only one the apostle could trust to care for them with the interests of Jesus Christ.

I might add here that this principle extends into our interpersonal relationships as well. Do you recognize that your spouse, your children, your fellow Christians belong to Christ, and not to you? Do you understand that you must care for them as Jesus does? Or do you, like the Pharisees, use them for your own personal interests and agenda? If we do not seek the interests of Christ in all our interpersonal relationships, we will most certainly come under his indictment one day, as did the Pharisees.

An Utter Malice of Intent

In stark contrast to Jesus, the Pharisees operated out of utter malice of intent toward the sheep. And yet, it is at this point, that many will make excuses for the Pharisees: “The Pharisees were well-intended, but misguided,” or “We should not judge others.” But Jesus knows nothing good resides in these men (John 2:23-25). He is nearing the end of his ministry and the time has come to indict, prosecute, and execute judgment upon these men who seek to gain access to the sheep for their own interests, and present themselves as alternatives to himself. There is only *one* shepherd, and *one* flock, and the Pharisees *and their followers* represent Satan’s counterfeit to Christ and those who belong to him. So here is a central point: Every person stands either with the Pharisees (ancient and modern) or with Jesus. There can be no middle-ground. Our text also exposes the modern heirs of the Pharisees, those ministers of “some other way” than Jesus; and like Jesus, we ought not grant them access or excuse their behavior.

Listen, I know it is hard to hear in this age of tolerance and acceptance, but the Pharisees were spiritually blind, deaf, and dumb. They had no spiritual life in them. None. And therefore, they have no concern for Christ's sheep. They used the people to advance their own selfish ambition and comparative righteousness (see Luke 18: 9-14). They were strangers and hirelings who abandoned the sheep to the wolves. Does that sound familiar? It should. That utter malice of intent defines the modern heirs of the Pharisees. Jesus makes it crystal clear in verse 10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Did you hear that. The thief has only *one* purpose: To steal and kill and destroy. Oh, on the surface, they come across as sincere and nice enough. Many contemporary Pharisees are eloquent, popular, and well-credentialed men. At first glance, they appear as the ideal candidate to fill the pulpit of any church looking for a new pastor. But the effect of their ministry is to steal, and kill, and destroy.

Now, we need not parse out each of these words, for the point is to steal and kill and destroy represent together an utter malice of intent. There is not only no good they will do you, they will actively work to destroy you, but in a pious manner. Evil is never more insidious than when cloaked in religious garb. The evil men and women of the world's secular system pale in comparison to the evil men and women who claim to represent God.

Jesus Leads His Sheep Out

Jesus called his disciples out from the sheep pen of the apostate Judaism of the first century, and Jesus is calling you today to follow him out of the Judaized religion masking as Christianity, and to follow him into the green pastures of New Covenant shalom. By "Judaized" I mean the common notion that faith in Christ must be supplemented by observing the law, and this is far more common than you might imagine. Just consider mandatory tithing based upon Malachi 3:8-12, or Sabbath keeping, or an elevated clergy as the new Levitical priesthood, or infant baptism as New Testament circumcision. All these rules are foreign to the New Covenant, but taught daily within evangelical, Judaized Christianity, and you are called to come out of it.

Note verses 3-5. The "sheep listen to his voice." The primary mark of those who belong to the good Shepherd is that they know his voice and follow him. Many hear his voice, but do not follow him. We discovered this in chapter eight in which many professed to believe in Jesus, but rejected his teaching, and in the end, tried to kill him (John 8:30-59). And note closely what

the shepherd does, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” Out from where? The community sheep pen ravaged by the thieves and robbers of apostate Judaism.

In that day, it was common for several families to hold their sheep in a community pen. The gatekeeper was charged with oversight to ensure the protection of the sheep from wolves and thieves. This is why thieves had to climb up some other way to get at the sheep. Note that the good shepherd calls only “his own,” a phrase used twice by the Holy Spirit (verses 3-4) to emphasize that not all sheep belong to the good Shepherd. He calls his own to come “out.” And here is the point: *most so-called churches today are community sheep pens of Judaized Christianity, and your good shepherd is calling you to come out from such pens.* You are called to come out from among those who are not Christ’s sheep. Do you hear his voice calling you out? Will you follow him out?

Christ’s sheep find it very hard to form fellowship with people within the community sheep pens of Judaized Christianity. There is something not right. Members of most churches are there for social connection, religious habit and tradition, and so on, but they are not there for edification and spiritual growth. They do not belong to the good shepherd. The spiritual gifts given by the exalted Christ to the church for works of service and spiritual maturation are not in operation. The people are nice enough, the service is well choreographed, but there is no life, no fellowship, no edification. And the sermons sound like the voice of stranger, and not the voice of Christ.

So, Christ’s sheep are restless, hungry, and needy. If this is you, do not assume there is something wrong with you; rather, rejoice! For you “will never follow a stranger” and most pastors today are strangers to Christ’s sheep. It is highly likely that in your dissatisfaction, restlessness, and spiritual hunger you are hearing the voice of your shepherd to come out of that community sheep pen. Not only should you therefore come out, Jesus says his sheep “run away” from the stranger because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice. For Christ’s sheep, the contemporary church is a place of strangers, thieves, and robbers from which we ought to run away.

The False Security of the Sheep Pen

Nonetheless, many of Christ’s sheep are immature and have yet to recognize his voice, for they have grown accustomed to the voice of a stranger. What is more, the community sheep

pen is familiar. They know the other sheep, and would miss them if they were led out by the voice of their shepherd. There is food and water in the sheep pen, though poisoned, and there is sense of security. And to listen to the good shepherd's call to come out represents risk, and therefore demands trust that the shepherd will lead them to green pastures, and safety from the ever-present threat of wolves. The sheep pen may be crowded and smelly, and there are diseases common to sheep, but at least it is secure, or so it seems. Therefore, it is tempting to hear the voice of one's shepherd, and choose to remain in the community sheep pen. But this temptation is not indicative of Christ's true sheep, and represents a temptation to deadly rebellion.

The writer to the Hebrews understood the danger of hardening one's heart to the voice of the divine Shepherd. Throughout Israel's history, beginning with those who came out of Egypt, many had hardened their hearts, and so the author quotes the Holy Spirit, not once, but three times, saying:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for forty years they saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation; I said, "Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest" (Hebrews 3:7-11, 15; 4:7).

The many who had left Egypt hardened their hearts and refused to trust God to protect and provide for them in the wilderness. They therefore longed for the security and provision of their former slavery in Egypt. Yes, they were slaves, and conditions were miserable, but at least they were secure, and *there was no need to trust God*. So, it also today, Israel's Shepherd, is calling his own sheep out from within the community sheep pens of apostate Christianity, and to hear his voice and obey does require trust, but the alternative is not safety and security, but to perish in the spiritual wilderness. The perceived security of the sheep pen is a false security. The rest we long for is found in hearing and obeying the voice of our shepherd and following him out, wherever he leads. It is not incidental that the author to the Hebrews ends his letter with, "Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city to that is to come" (Hebrews 13:13-14). We are to follow Jesus to that place where he suffered disgrace by the religious structure of his day, but paradoxically, it is there we also find his peace, his well-being, and the restoration of shalom. He meant it when he said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Summary

There is only one shepherd, Jesus Christ, and only one true flock, Christ's own sheep. And Jesus calls his own sheep to follow him out of Judaized Christianity and into the green pastures of shalom. Throughout redemptive history, all of those who came before Jesus were thieves and robbers, and the Pharisees are heirs to that wicked legacy. But the sheep have not listened to them; in fact, they have run away from them for they do not hear the voice of the stranger. We, like Jesus, must not grant these leaders any quarter for they have nothing but utter malice of intent regarding Christ's sheep. Many of Christ's sheep today are in community sheep pens, crowded in among the many who are not Christ's sheep, and therefore find it impossible to form meaningful fellowship. The stranger in the pulpit does not represent their shepherd; rather his intent is that of the Pharisees, to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. Thieves, robbers, strangers, and hirelings. And Christ is calling his sheep out from within such sheep pens; they are to hear and obey his voice to come out and follow him, along with the other of Christ's sheep, and into the green pastures of Shalom. **AMEN.**

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