

The Good Shepherd (John 10:1-21)

Matthew Williams

You don't have to look far to find examples of authority figures harming those entrusted to their care. Think of Nero, Stalin, Chavez, or Kim Jong-un using public influence to serve themselves at the expense of their country. Think of church leaders who use their office to perpetuate sexual abuse, embezzlement, or false teaching. Think of parents deriding their children, husband berating their wives, or employers fleecing workers to line their own pockets. How should we respond to the failure of human leaders?

First, we remember authority is fundamentally a good thing. It's a gift from God and is given to rulers, pastors, parents, husbands, teachers, business owners, and coaches for his glory and our good. Second, we lament the ways authority has been grievously corrupted by sin. Authority itself is not a problem. It's the heart of the man or woman exercising it.

Third, we cry out to the Lord who alone is able to rescue leaders from themselves. Checks and balances are good, but only Jesus can give us a new desire and ability to use our authority for God's priorities and purposes. Functionally eliminating authority by distributing it with perfect equality fixes nothing. You and I could have the exact same amount of social power and still use every bit of it for selfish ends.

Fourth, we patiently wait for the day Jesus returns and every human authority opposed to him becomes a footstool for his feet. Even now, our Sovereign Lord is seated on the throne of the universe, reigning over the affairs of men. And finally, as we wait for all things to be made new, human leaders included, we rest in the precious promise of Jn 10. **Where human leaders fail us, Jesus does not.** Your spouse may hurt you. A family member may abuse you. Your pastor may fail you. Jesus will not.

The context of Jn 10 is a spectacular failure on the part of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus has just finished healing a man born blind. But instead of rejoicing with him and believing in Jesus as the eternal Son of God, they cast the man out of the synagogue. Why? Because he wouldn't stop honoring Jesus and boldly confronted the Pharisees for their unbelief. He was a threat to their religious authority.

It wasn't the first time Israel's leaders injured the very people God had entrusted to their care. In Ezekiel 34:3-5, the Lord indicts the idolatrous elders and priests for abusing the flock of God. "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd..."

In response, the Lord promises to do two things. He will personally hold failed leaders to account. Ezek 34:10, "Behold, I am against the shepherds..." And he will do for Israel the very things her human leaders inevitably failed to do. Ezek 34:15ff, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice...And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd...I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land..."

When a spiritual leader in the church falls, it's easy to use their hypocrisy as an excuse to abandon the church or even disavow the faith. Here's the problem with that response. If you do that, friend, it reveals your faith wasn't in Jesus to begin with. It was in another man or woman like you. Why does the Bible take pains to point out the failures of even the best human shepherds in the history of Israel, men like Moses and David? Because every one of their failures whispers, "He's not the One. Trust the Lord. Wait for the Messiah." **For where human leaders fail us, Jesus does not.** How do we know that? Two reasons.

1) JESUS IS THE DOOR THAT LEADS TO LIFE

In vv. 1-6, Jesus tells a parable about sheep and shepherds. It was a common image in 1st century Palestine, though less so for us. I still remember explaining to my boys that food doesn't actually come from Kroger! In Jesus' day, most Jewish families had a small flock of sheep. By day they grazed in the fields surrounding their village under the watchful eye of a shepherd. To protect them from thieves and wolves at night they were kept in a courtyard attached to the house or in a larger, separate enclosure shared by other families in the village.



Sheepfolds containing several flocks either had a door guarded by a gatekeeper, or if there was no door, shepherds were known to sleep in front of opening themselves. If a predator wanted to get in, they would have to get past the shepherd first. In either case, thieves or robbers trying to steal or kill the sheep didn't get into the fold through the door. They tried to climb in another way to avoid attention.

Given the background in Ezek 34, we might expect Jesus to first compare himself to the shepherd. But he doesn't, at least not at first. He begins in vv. 7-10 by comparing himself to the door. V. 7, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep." V. 9, "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture."

Friend, if you want to be numbered among the covenant people of God, if you want to enter his kingdom, enjoy his presence, and live under his rule, if you want to experience the joy of knowing God is for you and not against you, then there is one thing you must do. You must come to Jesus. Trust in Jesus. There is no other path to God apart from obedient faith in him.

The Lord's promise in v. 9 that all who come to him "will be saved" reminds us of the deadly serious nature of our situation apart from him. God is holy. We are not. No one is good enough. No one deserves God's favor. We desperately need forgiveness. We need a Savior. And if you surrender your life to Jesus' authority, trusting him to make you right with God, then v. 9 isn't a spiritual possibility. It is a promise. You will certainly be saved from the wrath of God. You can cease from your anxious striving. You can stop trying to perform for him or other people. You can live to please the Lord not to stay on his good side but because he has already lavished his love upon you in Jesus.

The picture of a sheep coming in and going out of the door to find pasture speaks to the spiritual nourishment, the covenant blessings, of relationship with Jesus. He doesn't just give us life on the final day. He gives us abundant life right here, right now. One of the most amazing things I saw in Hawaii last month is how plants literally grow out of other plants. The bamboo is this big around. The Monkey pod tree trunks are as big as a car. Flowers are everywhere. It's life on steroids. Everything's green. Everything's growing.



It's a picture of the spiritual life Jesus offers us. He replaces emptiness with gladness, meaninglessness with purpose, slavery with freedom, and loneliness with community. He offers lasting joy no suffering cannot steal, security no enemy can shake, and an identity as his adopted son or daughter no critic can take away.

You will not find abundant life in the praise of men. You will not find abundant life in financial prosperity. You will not find abundant life in sexual pleasure, "making a difference," or hours of gaming. Those gods are never satisfied. Give yourself supremely to them and they will eventually destroy you. You will only find abundant life in Jesus. V. 10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

So hear me, especially if you've grown up in the church. Jesus isn't just right or true. He is exceedingly good. Knowing him, loving him, serving him, is the path of life. He's the best treasure you could ever find. Whenever we sin, even as Christians, it is because in some way we have stopped believing abundant life is found in Jesus.

Thieves and robbers, in contrast, don't lead the sheep to life. They come, v. 10, "only to steal and kill and destroy." So who are they? In the immediate context, they are the Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, opposing Jesus and throwing his followers out of the synagogue, just like the corrupt rulers and false prophets in Ezekiel. They are the messianic pretenders who "came before" Jesus (v. 8) and led the people astray through false teaching. They are any man or woman today who occupies a position of spiritual authority in the church but does not have a life-giving relationship with Jesus.

Friend, the way you enter the sheepfold determines the true nature of your relationship to God and his people. The Pharisees were convinced they were good with God. They prided themselves on being spiritual shepherds of his people. But their refusal to believe in Jesus, to enter the fold through the door, didn't just give the lie to their own relationship with God. It exposed them as a deadly threat to the sheep.

If you are in a position of spiritual leadership of any kind in our church family, please listen to me. You must pay very careful attention to the condition of your own relationship with Jesus. That is your first priority. If you stop following him, if you stop treasuring him, if he ceases to be the joy of your heart, you might remain "in the fold" in the eyes of everyone around you, but you are no longer a shepherd. You are a thief and a robber because the example and spiritual influence of your

life, whether overtly or covertly, will invariably lead the people of God away from him.

And if you continue in willful hypocrisy, sheep will be destroyed. Sheep will be scattered. You will cease to be a source of spiritual life. You will become a source of spiritual death. Tend well to the condition of your own soul. The difference between shepherds and thieves isn't whether they are in the fold. It's whether they continue entering through the door. Watch your life closely.

Now even the best spiritual leaders in the church are not perfect. When they stumble, that doesn't automatically make them a thief and robber. The question comes down to whether we cling to Jesus in our successes and our failures. Some will not. When that happens, when pastors, parents, rulers, employers, and others hurt you accordingly, remember this. Jesus will never fail you. He is always the door that leads to life.

2) JESUS IS THE SHEPHERD WHO LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE

Having compared himself to the door in vv. 7-10, Jesus switches metaphors in v. 11-18 and compares himself to the shepherd. V. 11, "I am the good shepherd." There's a tension in Ezek 34 that isn't resolved until Jesus arrives. How can Yahweh personally be our shepherd and set up a man in the line of David to be our shepherd? If the shepherd appointed by God the Father is God the Son, born as a man to do for us what no human savior ever could, yourself included. So what makes Jesus such a good shepherd? There are at least five answers in Jn 10.

First, Jesus cares for us. In v. 12, he points out the difference in the way a hired hand and a shepherd respond when they see a wolf coming. Unlike the shepherd, the hired hand (v. 12) "does not own the sheep." Saving his own skin is priority #1, so he "leaves the sheep and flees." "He flees," v. 13, "because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep." In contrast, Jesus, as the shepherd, cares deeply for his sheep.

Christian, the Savior is not emotionally neutral toward you. He cares for you because you are his. In both v. 12 and v. 4, Jesus describes the sheep as "his own." You're not a rental car. You are his prized possession. His care for you is not a duty imposed from without. He's not in it for the money. It's the overflow of his heart. It is his privilege and joy to watch over you.

And when spiritual dangers and temptations, fierce wolves, assail you from every side, Jesus isn't going anywhere. Our most bitter experiences of human betrayal often come in the hour of trial when someone we thought we could lean on proves unfaithful. Even if your spouse packs their bags and runs off, Jesus will not leave you, Christian. You're his. You will always be his. He will protect you. He will defend you. He will uphold you with his mighty right hand.

Second, Jesus knows us. V. 14, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own..." As the Father is intimately familiar with the Son, so too the Son is intimately familiar with you. He knows every detail of your body, your personality, your life experiences, your joys, your sorrows, your fears and longings for the future, your spiritual strengths and weaknesses. Nothing about you is hidden from him. In one sense, that's true of every man and woman who has ever lived. But it is especially true of his chosen people, the particular object of his foreknowledge and saving mercy from eternity past.

And if we are saved, as part of his chosen people, we occupy far more than a category in his heart and mind. We are not part of the mass of the redeemed. He doesn't look out on his people like a politician addressing a crowd of millions on the national mall. V. 3, "He calls his own sheep by name." He is personally acquainted with you just like a shepherd in Palestine assigns unique names to each one of his sheep.

And because he knows us, we know him. V. 14, "I know my own and my own know me." How does that happen? How do we come to know Jesus even though we have yet to see Jesus with our physical eyes? We know him through the sound of his voice, by the words he speaks and the way he speaks them. V. 3, "The sheep hear his voice." V. 4, "The sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."

Kids, have you ever been in a crowd of people talking, laughing, yelling, and suddenly realized, "My mom is calling me." How did you know that, with so much noise around you? You knew that, your brain recognized she was calling you, because you know the sound of her voice. A stranger could call your name and it wouldn't register the way it does when your mom calls your name.

In a similar way, we come to know Jesus as he speaks to us through the pages of his Word. Notice how the voice of God and the written Word of God are paralleled in Ex 15:26, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer."

The words of the Bible are not idle words on a page. They are the voice of the Great Shepherd, encouraging, warning, instructing, and comforting us as his people. It's how we come to know Jesus. He implants the truth of his Word in our hearts through the work of the Spirit! And according to v. 15, the combination of his knowledge of us and our knowledge of him enables us to experience an intimacy of relationship with the Son akin to his own intimacy of relationship with the Father. The abundant life Jesus grants us is nothing less than the life of the triune God himself.

Third, Jesus leads us. V. 4, "When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." To follow Jesus is to be called to do hard things. Loving unselfishly is hard. Putting sin to death is hard. But remember this, especially when doing what Jesus has told you to do in his Word feels absolutely overwhelming. You're not alone.

The Savior himself is going before us on the path of obedience. He will be with you. He will help you. He will guide you with his counsel, whether you are walking into your child's bedroom to resolve a messy conflict or a stage full of TV cameras to give a news briefing.

You are never a sheep without a shepherd. When you need his guidance, you will not fail to hear his voice, principally through his Word, but also through the Spirit and godly counsel who help us take the Word and help us apply it to our lives. And he will help you discern his voice from all others. It's why true believers are drawn toward sound teaching when they hear it. The Spirit within us says, "Yes! That's the Lord's voice." It's also why we don't have to be afraid of making big decisions as Christians. Jesus leads us.

Fourth, Jesus pursues us. If I'm not mistaken, most of us are Gentiles, not Jews. And that makes v. 16 really good news. "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold (referring to the Gentiles). I must bring them also, and they will listen to my



voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Aren't you grateful Jesus doesn't wait for us to come to him? He seeks us out. He pursues sheep who are lost, sheep who are straying. He takes those who are "not my people" and gathers them in as part of his chosen people.

But how is that possible when none of the gospels have any record of Jesus doing extensive ministry among the Gentiles? Jesus did it through the personal witness of his disciples in Acts and continues to do it through the word of the gospel we speak on his behalf today. So when you're tempted to discouragement in the work of evangelism the way I am, brothers and sisters, remember this.

When Jesus says, "I must bring them also," he's emphasizing both the guaranteed victory of God's work and his continued, personal role in drawing lost men and women to himself. The battle ultimately isn't ours. It's the Lord's.

And when Jesus says, "They will listen to my voice," he's telling us both how he will draw people to himself (through the power of his Word) and that the Spirit will use our feeble words to communicate his perfect word. When that happens, we get to experience the joy of being united in the church with the people of God. Here there is not a white shepherd or a black shepherd, a conservative shepherd or a liberal shepherd. There is One Shepherd, Jesus. And we are united in him no matter how much the world urges us to relate to one another based on all manner of other group identities.

Finally, Jesus lays down his life for us. He explicitly says so four different times in vv. 11-18. It's that important. He wants you to know beyond a shadow of a doubt, Christian, that this is what ultimately makes him the Good Shepherd. He offers up his own life for the sheep in a definitive act of sacrificial love.

He's not a thief who destroys the sheep. He's not a hired hand who abandons the sheep. In the face of our greatest spiritual danger, the wrath of God stored up on account of our many sins, Jesus doesn't run. He doesn't hide. He gives us life by laying down his life. No greater sacrifice has ever been demanded. No greater sacrifice has ever been paid.

The unselfishness Jesus displayed in dying on the cross in our place, for our sins, is the exact opposite of what sinful leaders do. Sinful leaders use their position and power for their own sake. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for our sake. When

you experience betrayal at the hands of men, this is where you must turn, Christian. This is where you must look. You must look to the cross and see God's love forever proved.

It was the culmination of an eternity of obedience as the Son to the will of the Father. Yet Jesus did not fulfill the Father's plan of redemption because the Father compelled him or because the Father has greater authority. No, the will of the Son is the will of the Father. The authority of the Father is the authority of the Son. And Jesus exercises his divine authority by laying down his life in sacrificial death and taking it up in victorious resurrection for the glory of the Father and the good of his people. He cares, knows, leads, pursues, and lays down his life for us. He is the good shepherd.

CONCLUSION

Hearing Jesus' words, many thought he was insane. Possessed by a demon. Others struggled to dismiss the growing sense that everything he said was gloriously true. His words are no less divisive today. And Jn 10 in particular forces us to make a choice, friend. How will you respond to Jesus? Will you come to him as the only door to relationship with God? And having come to him will you trust him as your Shepherd? No one else can do what Jesus does. Where human leaders fail, Jesus does not.

So stop trying to create life for yourself. And stop looking to other people to put the pieces back together when it doesn't work. Look to Jesus. Trust Jesus. Declare anew with the psalmist, even through tears:

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He guides me on paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." (Ps 23:1-4)