

Seven Sayings of Jesus: I Am...The Gate for the Sheep

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, May 21st. It is a long weekend. Your presence here is encouraging to your pastor. Over the years, as a congregant and as a pastor, I've recognized long weekends are often low attendance times.

So this is lovely to see all of your smiling faces this morning. My name is Kent Dixon. It is my joy to be the pastor here. And welcome to each of you this morning. As I say each week, whether you're joining in person or we have people who listen online in the days ahead or on our sermon phone-in service.

So welcome to everyone, however you're tuning in, in person or otherwise. If you were here last Sunday for our Mother's Day service and you received a beautiful cake rose, those were courtesy of our own Sue Waterman.

She even hand-painted each of those roses herself, which is a true labor of love by hand. So thank you for that wonderful blessing. Now, sometimes being in hot water is a good thing.

However, when your tank fails, you're in the wrong kind of hot water. However, thank you to Bryson and Larry for their help in bringing in a new hot water tank and replacing it yesterday.

[1 : 26] So taking Mr. Leakey out and bringing in Mr. Shiny new. So thank you for that. And thank you as well to Len for the work that he's been doing around the church property. We have squirrels.

We're not sure if they're atheist or they might be open to attending. But we have squirrels on the property and we're trying to manage that challenge as well because they're nuts, squirrels. Sorry.

So this morning we're continuing in our sermon series called Seven Sayings of Jesus I Am. And we began this series with a bit of an introduction. So for people who have not been here, I'll just give you the shorter, shorter version.

So we've considered the idea of identity. We considered that our identity can be anchored to some extent in our roles, our relationships, our skills, our hobbies, even our vocation.

And in this series, we're going to be considering Jesus' identity. What he said about himself and then how we can better understand our own identity in light of that context and that truth that we get from the Bible.

[2 : 35] So Jesus said a great deal about himself. I think we can all recognize that. He talked about his identity and his mission throughout the New Testament. And prophets also said a great deal about the coming Messiah who, guess who, turned out to be Jesus.

In the Old Testament, Jesus coming as the Messiah was prophesied. But in this series, we're going to explore some of the ways Jesus identified himself specifically in the Gospel of John.

And we're considering these as the I Am statements. That's how they're known. The third I Am statement we're going to consider together. And if you missed the previous two, they are on the website.

So you can check them out. This one is found in John 7 where Jesus declares, I am the gate for the sheep. Now, if you hear gate and say, well, that's not what my Bible says, it's okay.

Some translations also say door instead of gate. I am the door for the sheep. I am the gate for the sheep. And the reason for that is the Greek word used in Scripture can mean gate or door.

[3 : 46] There's some interchangeability there. But you'll see how this concept is helpful. We're going to look at this this morning, especially as it relates to sheep. So in John 10, verses 1 to 30, don't worry, we're not going through all of that this morning.

But Jesus presents an extended discussion on sheep and shepherds. And it's in verses 1 to 10 that Jesus speaks of a flock of sheep being protected in a pen or an enclosure.

And he warns his listeners against rustlers or thieves who might get in and steal sheep. And then he identifies himself as being like a shepherd who serves as a gate or a door stopping thieves from entering and sheep from escaping too.

We can note that. And he says, I am the gate or the door for the sheep pen. I'm the gate to the sheep pen. So John 10, verses 1 to 30, is the overall passage that we're going to be exploring together this week and next week.

Because we've got a two-parter, essentially. Because Jesus says the I am statement is, I am the gate for the sheep, which is the one we're going to be exploring today.

[5 : 05] And so in John 10, verses 11 to 30, now you don't need to run there because I'm just, this is a teaser for next week. In John 10, 11 to 30, Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd.

I am the good shepherd. And he talks about and qualifies the role of the good shepherd. And so it's that passage, that section of this chunk of John, that we're going to look at next week.

So this morning, our focus passage is John 10, 1 to 10. So you can turn there. I heard some pages leafing, as a pastor of mine used to say.

Turn your Bible on, flip to your pages, whatever you need to do, whatever works for you. So we're going to look at this together. John 10, verses 1 to 10, and I'll read it for us.

I tell you the truth, says Jesus. The man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.

[6 : 07] The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger.

In fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. Jesus used this figure of speech because they did not understand what he was telling them.

I'm just going to pause here for a second. We hear this over and over in Jesus' ministry. He will give an illustration, and what he's trying to do is engage his listeners.

Get them to think on their own. So what we often hear in Scripture is Jesus will be teaching. He will use an example, an analogy, a metaphor, and say, here it is, folks.

- [7 : 08] And we'll read in Scripture, and they didn't get it. So this is what happens here is that Jesus uses this figure of speech. He's creating this analogy with a shepherd and sheep, but people don't get it.
- So Jesus continues. Therefore, Jesus said again, I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.
- All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. I am the door.
- Whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief only comes to steal and destroy.
- I come that they may have life and have it to the full. I love that, how Jesus says, okay, let's try it again.
- [8 : 08] And then he lays it out even more plainly. So let's consider sheep a bit this morning. So I'm a city kid. Is that a shock? I think that's a shock to everyone, right?
- I'm definitely, I'm definitely a little bit sheepish about the subject. I'll be honest. My understanding of farms and livestock is fairly limited, agricultural stuff in general.
- And so my grandfather was in charge of a lot of the grain elevators in the province. And so I have agricultural roots, but my roots in that area are not deep.
- So my understanding of livestock and agriculture is pretty much limited to field trips in elementary school, to petting zoos or regular zoos, or products that I know originate from agricultural sources, things that we eat or other things that we use or wear.
- But it's important to recognize that to truly understand this teaching of Jesus, we're going to be considering this this week and next week. We need to set aside much of what we might perceive about farming.
- [9 : 21] Certainly what we might perceive in our context about sheep. Because we are not considering this passage, these words that Jesus is giving us, from the perspective of a 21st century Canadian.
- We're not looking at this from the perspective of our understanding of sheep and sheep farming right now would be thousands of sheep, using modern methods to raise and manage them.
- We are listening to Jesus. So in Jesus' mind, a shepherd was an individual who owned between 20 and 100 sheep, roughly.
- That's what scholars suggest. So a 1st century shepherd then would have spent their days walking around with their sheep. They would have stayed with them constantly to make sure their needs were met, to make sure that they were kept safe and had food and water and shelter.
- A 1st century shepherd may have known each of their sheep by name or personality. Now I'm a shepherd of a flock in this place.
- [10 : 31] I know everybody's name. I know most of your personalities. And you know mine. And you know my personality. And so we recognize that a 1st century sheep would have been known, would have been valued mainly for its wool.
- Right? That's the reality. So let's look at some Old Testament background for a second. In Jesus' mind and the minds of his listeners, who would be listening to what we just read, they would have had many Old Testament passages in mind that spoke of Jewish rulers as good or bad shepherds.
- Excuse me. Jeremiah talks about it in several passages. Isaiah talks about shepherds in the context of rulers. Ezekiel 34, that entire chapter talks about it.

We also recognize in the Old Testament that God is referred to as the ultimate and perfect shepherd. Psalm 23, Psalm 80, Isaiah 40, verse 10.

These are all references to shepherds and sheep. So for example, how does the 23rd Psalm begin? The Lord is my... Thank you. Louder. Thank you.

[11 : 49] So Jesus' listeners would have also remembered that God promised to send the Jewish people a Messiah. A Messiah shepherd. Essentially, a second King David was what they were expecting.

Someone who would care for them in the way that God cared for them. Who would embody that. The book of Ezra, chapter 34, verse 23 says, I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

And so it's this prophesied messianic shepherd that Jesus identifies himself with. So let's consider a sheep pen for a moment.

The central location for Jesus' message here was a sheep pen. So the sheep pen would have been a place where the sheep slept at night. It would have been a safe haven for them.

A safe place. And so usually shepherds would bring their flocks back to the village as the sun began to set. They would be out, as I said, all day, grazing, wandering about, doing sheepish things.

[13 : 02] And then the shepherd would herd them into pens that would include, we're talking about a small amount of sheep, right? So they would include other flocks. So one flock would be herded into a pen with potentially two or three or other flocks.

So if the shepherd had taken the sheep far away to graze, he would gather them, if he wasn't able to get back to the pen, he would gather them in a cave or a gully or somewhere that was safe, that he could watch over.

Or if that wasn't available, they would often make a pen for them. They would make a pen out of bushes or logs or whatever they had available, something to create a safe space for their sheep.

The goal was to protect the sheep through the night. That's what we're talking about here. So if the sheep pen was in a village, it would usually have a strong gate or a door at the opening.

And then the shepherd would enter through this gate or door each morning to call his own sheep out of the larger flock. But then in contrast, Jesus has indicated that thieves or robbers don't do what the shepherd does.

[14 : 14] They figure out some other way to get into the pen. So if the pen was out in the countryside, no gate or door, right, in the traditional sense, the shepherd himself would sleep across the opening to this makeshift pen.

So essentially become a human door to guard and protect the sheep. So these two kinds of pens, a more formal structured one like in a village or a makeshift one out in the wilderness, would both be included in Jesus' allegory here.

So his audience would have understood he was talking about both. So my sheep hear my voice, Jesus says. The intimacy between a first century Jewish shepherd and his sheep is brought out most powerfully when Jesus says that the sheep know the shepherd's voice.

And they follow him because they know his voice. This is familiar to them. It's comfortable. If you've ever had a pet dog, you know about us that we are dog people, maybe that's the kind of relationship or connection that comes to mind because this is the kind of relationship a shepherd would have had with his sheep.

The minute, have you ever seen a sheep, they wagged their tails. The minute a sheep heard their master's voice, their tails would have likely wagged. They would have heard something familiar and been excited and recognized they were safe.

[15 : 50] And so someone else's voice would have had very little impact on them. It might have even caused them to be concerned and go the other way. And so as I said, Jesus' story suggests that there would be more than one flock in the pen.

So when the first shepherd comes to the door in the morning, he calls out his sheep. I don't know how you call sheep. But he calls his sheep and they recognize his voice and they come.

Right? They come and they file out because they recognize this is a voice they can trust. But the other sheep don't pay any attention because they don't recognize their shepherd.

This guy is not my shepherd. I'm not going. So this is definitely an allegory that Jesus is using because he is indicating that he is the shepherd.

And as followers, we are the sheep. Our Lord is telling us that our relationship with him is to be paralleled with that of a loving, caring shepherd.

[16 : 55] And then as his followers, we are to think of ourselves as being like sheep. Now, think about the societal terminology of sheep. We tend to say, oh, you're just being a sheep.

You're just blindly following. That's not what is meant here. This is about an awareness of what is safe and what is not. These sheep are not following blindly.

We are not called to blindly follow God. We are calling to follow our shepherd because we know his voice and we trust him. Isn't that an incredible thought?

That Jesus is our loving shepherd. He cares for us and he knows us. And ideally, hopefully, we have followed him because we have heard him call us.

Do you remember when Jesus called you and you answered? When we hear his voice, when we hear Jesus' voice, we should immediately respond and go to him.

[17 : 58] Let's talk thieves and robbers for a moment. In the first century, the shepherd had to be constantly on the watch for those who would steal his sheep. And as a shepherd, you certainly wouldn't want to get fleeced, right?

You wouldn't want to get ripped off. Have someone steal your sheep. And often thieves would have had to try to steal their sheep by sneaking into the pen at night. And as Jesus suggests, by some other way than the gate.

Thieves like this, Jesus says, come only to steal and kill and destroy. They're not concerned about the health or safety of the sheep, not at all.

They are out to feed themselves, literally and metaphorically. And the sheep don't freely follow this type of influence because they do not hear their master's voice.

So in the context of when Jesus was speaking, who are the thieves that he is allegorically referring to? Well, for Jesus, they would have been the self-serving leaders of the day, the Jewish leaders of the day, who are supposed to be good shepherds of God's people, Israel.

[19 : 13] But as we read throughout Scripture, they are ultimately looking out for themselves, for their own status, for their own needs, for their own desires. So what about today?

The thieves are anyone who is looking to steal or lead any of Jesus' sheep astray. So there are folks like perhaps determined and vocal atheists who discourage people from following Christ.

That doesn't make any sense, they say. There are many false teachers who suggest that we can maybe save ourselves one way or another, apart from Christ.

Have you heard that kind of message before? You can save yourself. There are advocates of religions that seem to reflect little of forgiveness of a concept like that.

Little of an idea of a loving God, if they even recognize there to be a God at all. There are leaders who may suggest that they are Christians, but they attract, ultimately attract, their congregation's attention and affection away from Christ, to themselves.

[20 : 29] Or they preach a different kind of gospel. Maybe you've heard of the prosperity gospel. Or they preach a watered-down version of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We need forgiveness. From what? From our sin. How many ways are there to receive that? One. If the gospel that you hear does not talk about your need to repent of your sin, and Jesus being the only way to receive forgiveness and eternal life, friends, that is an anemic gospel.

A gospel that is portrayed as Jesus wanting you to be happy, have everything you need or ever want, it's not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Be aware of that. So there are many thieves around today. And the things that they offer may sound appealing. But we always need to remember that there is only one good shepherd.

And we should only ever listen to his voice. Jesus' sheep enter and leave through him. So now we come to the point of Jesus' words where he says, I am the gate or door for the sheep.

[21 : 49] And it's in John 10, verses 7 and 9 that Jesus says these things. And this comment suggests that, as I said before, the shepherd would be sleeping across the entrance to the pen, which was a normal practice when the pen wasn't established in a village.

So when the shepherd laid across the entrance, no one could enter or leave without passing by him. He was literally the door to the pen.

And in this case, Jesus himself dictates the meaning of this aspect of the allegory. He says that entering the pen represents entering into salvation.

Jesus declares, I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved one way and will come and go in and out and find pasture.

Jesus then adds, as we read earlier, I've come that they may have life and have it to the full. Some translations say, have an abundant life.

[22 : 56] And this is such a powerful way, I think, of speaking of what it means to have salvation in Christ. Abundant life. Abundant life in all its fullness.

It's a life in relationship with God that is revealed in Jesus Christ, made present by the Holy Spirit. It's the quality of life that, my friends, even death cannot destroy.

Again, the power of Jesus' words should really impact us here. Because he is declaring himself to be the promised Messiah.

To be the Christ. To be the only way of salvation. He is the entrance to eternal life. He feeds us.

He protects us. He gives us life in all its fullness. And we need to recognize that these are things that only God can do.

[23 : 58] So by saying these things, declaring himself to be the gate for the sheep, and promising that he will protect and provide for us. These are the dangerous words that Jesus shares in his ministry.

He is declaring himself to be God incarnate. God in human flesh. God in human flesh. The God who saves and the God who sustains.

He was declaring truth. God in human flesh. So what this passage teaches us is that more than anything else, once we become part of the shepherd's flock, he will protect and feed us.

My brothers and sisters, are you listening for the sound of Jesus' voice? Or are you easily distracted by the voices of other potential shepherds in your life?

Return to Jesus and focus on him. Because only through Jesus can you pass through the gate. Only through Jesus can you experience true safety and security in this life.

[25 : 11] And only through Jesus can you experience the type of fullness and deep satisfaction in life that can be found in him. Amen.