

The Good Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Well, my children told me a rather bad joke the other day. Here it is. Knock, knock. Interrupting sheep. Bah! I told you it was bad.

At least I didn't say, yeah, bad. Yeah, no, that's... I was thinking it was a lamb. No, we'll stop. But today we're thinking about shepherds and sheep.

That's the link. That's all I've got. But the image of a shepherd, as we heard in our first reading, and as we sung in Psalm 23, is the image for leaders of Israel.

And the image of sheep was to represent the people of God. Not because the people of God were brainless, like most sheep, but because they followed a leader.

And the leader was meant to be like a shepherd who cared for them. But what makes a leader worth listening to? A leader worth following? For us, this is a rather relevant question, given the approaching election.

[1 : 03] I mean, which two on the next slide would make the best shepherd of Australia? Don't say. Of course, there are other leaders people listen to.

Like on the next slide, this man, the Pope, millions listen to him. Or on the next slide, the Dalai Lama. Millions of people also listen to him as a leader.

Or even, in fact, the person on the next slide. But believe it or not, millions listen to her. In fact, she gave a speech last year at the Golden Globe, so powerful that many, millions in America, wanted her to run for president.

For one guy at my Bible study, actually, when I asked who they listened to, he said, My wife. Wise man. But the issue today is which leader's voice is worth listening to?

Which leader's worth following? And Jesus begins by contrasting the true shepherd leader with the false. So at point one in your outlines and verse one to five in your Bibles.

[2 : 04] Have a look there. Very truly, I tell you, Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by a nut some other way, is a thief and a robber.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him and, or the door, 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.

Now, this is an illustration, as verse six makes clear. But for us to understand the illustration, we need to understand an ancient Israelite household. Most Israelites had some animals that lived in a courtyard in their house.

So on the next slide is a picture. It's as big as I could make it. There's an upstairs and downstairs. And down the bottom, there's a little pen with some animals. And there's a door leading out to the outside.

[3 : 12] The house itself wasn't big. It was only seven meters by seven meters. But what would happen is a number of the families in the village would hire a shepherd, sometimes even the teenager from one of the families in the village.

And this shepherd would go from house to house, knock on the door. And the word for gate in our reading is literally door. They would knock on the door and the doorkeeper or the owner of the house would open to this shepherd.

And the shepherd would collect their two or three sheep. And so this village shepherd would go around and form a flock and then take them out in the field to graze the grass. And in a small village, the village shepherd would sometimes know each sheep by name.

And the sheep would also recognize his voice as the one who gives them food. You know, when he comes, it means green grass soon. Dogs are the same, aren't they? You shake the lead and they get all excited because they know what that means.

They're going to go for a walk. And so this illustration, in this illustration, we have three groups. We have the false shepherds or thieves. We have the sheep who don't listen to the false shepherd, but do listen to the true shepherd.

[4 : 23] And then, of course, the third one is the true shepherd himself. But why is Jesus telling this story? What is he trying to illustrate? Well, the characters from chapter nine, actually.

You see, this passage continues the conversation from chapter nine. And we know this because at the bottom right-hand corner, verse 21 of your Bibles, bottom right-hand corner, verse 21, do you notice there's a reference there to the healing of the blind man?

Do you see that? And so back in verse one, when Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, they're the same ones from chapter nine. Jesus is continuing the conversation with them, with others, other people listening in.

And so we need to remember what happened in chapter nine to really make sense of what Jesus is saying here. And you might remember, it was two weeks ago, you might remember that Jesus said, I am the light of the world, didn't he? And as light helps us see, so Jesus helps people see who he is and therefore life with God.

And to prove it, he then opened the eyes of the blind man to prove that he helps people see. But if you remember, the Pharisees were not happy with this because Jesus healed on the Sabbath day and broke some of their extra rules, not God's law, their law, their extra rules.

[5 : 46] And so the Pharisees could not accept that Jesus was from God. Instead, they bully the blind man, do you remember? Interrogate him. They want another explanation from him rather than accepting the truth that Jesus is from God.

And just look at back, chapter nine, verse 24. It's been two weeks, so let me read a chunk of it for you. And as I read, see if you can work out who the robbers are, who the sheep is, and who the true shepherd is.

So chapter nine, verse 24. A second time, the Pharisees summoned the man who had been blind give glory to God by telling the truth. They said, we know this man is a sinner, this man, Jesus.

The man replied, whether he's a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know, I was blind, but now I see. Then they asked him, what did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?

The man answered, I've told you already earlier in the chapter and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too? Then they hurled insults at him and said, you are this fellow's disciple.

[6 : 47] We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow Jesus, we don't even know where he comes from. The man answered, now that is remarkable. You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.

We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.

Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.

To this logic, they replied, you are steeped in sin at birth. How dare you lecture us? And they threw him out of the synagogue. Jesus heard that he had been thrown out and when he found him, he said, do you believe in the son of man?

Who is he, sir? The man asked. Tell me so that I may believe in him. Jesus said, you have now seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you. Then the man said, Lord, I believe.

And he worshipped him. Who acts like the robbers? It's pretty clear. Who don't care for the sheep, but only what they can get from him? The Pharisees, isn't it?

[7 : 51] They don't care about this man. They just want him to say that Jesus is a sinner. And who acts like the sheep who doesn't listen to these robbers or Pharisees? Well, it's the blind man, isn't it?

But who does the blind man listen to? Jesus. And so that makes Jesus the true shepherd. Do you see the connection? Jesus is saying here in chapter 10 that he is the true shepherd, the one Moses prayed for in Numbers.

I like on the next slide. Who might go in through the right way and then come out and lead his people, the sheep. That Israel might not be like sheep without a shepherd.

But these Pharisees, these religious leaders who were supposed to be the shepherds of Israel, they're more like robbers who climb over the wall to steal rather than to care for the sheep. I mean, if they really cared for the people, then when this blind man was healed, would they not have rejoiced? with him. But they didn't. And so they interrogated him, abused him, and kicked him out of the synagogue, which was to kick him out of the community.

[9 : 01] It was a big deal. All because they care more about themselves and their rules than people. What's more, they heap extra laws on people which end up destroying their souls.

Jesus says of these Pharisees on the next slide in Matthew 23, actually, he says, they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces.

And he goes on and says, woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You travel over land and sea to win a single convert. And when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

Doesn't pull any punches, does he? You see, they are like the dodgy shepherds from our first reading. On the next slide from Ezekiel 34, woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves.

Should not shepherds take care of the flock? And the rest of the reading unpacked how they did not take care of God's people. And sadly, many leaders, many church leaders today are the same who care only about themselves.

[10 : 11] I take this next guy on the next slide. Joel Osteen, he preaches to millions of people, but he preaches a different message, a different gospel, which says, if you give more money to the church, God will give you more blessings in return, but the Bible never promises that anywhere.

And why does he preach this different gospel? Well, have a look at his home on the next slide. Now, compare that with Billy Graham who also preached to millions.

Billy wasn't perfect, but he preached the true message of Christ and look at his home on the next slide. It's still a nice home, but it's the same one he lived in his whole married life until he couldn't live there and then died.

Now, which church leader do you think is more of a shepherd and which more of a robber? It's pretty obvious, isn't it? You see, we need to be careful which leaders we listen to.

For some, don't speak the truth of God's word and are only in it for themselves. Like these Pharisees. It's why I tell you to open your Bibles and follow with me so that you can check that I'm getting it right.

[11 : 21] These Pharisees, though, they were false shepherds, whereas Jesus is the true shepherd. And his sheep, like this blind man, listen to his voice and follow him. Now, despite this illustration, it should have been pretty obvious to Pharisees who lived in that time, who understood an Israelite household who should have understood their Old Testaments like Ezekiel, but they didn't get the illustration in verse 6.

And so Jesus gives them another one. But this time, he is not the village shepherd who collects sheep from the homes. This time, he's the shepherd out in the fields. And as he speaks, he tells us why his voice is worth listening to above all others.

So point to verse 7. So they didn't understand. Therefore, Jesus said again, Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

[12 : 38] Now again, to understand this illustration, it's, well, rather than me explain it, we're going to have a short video so we can get it on the next slide. Behind me and back behind that tree is the city of Bethlehem, not the way it was in Jesus' day.

Of course, it's the modern Arab city of Bethlehem and there are still a lot of Christians in there. The olive tree behind my shoulder, they're very, very old, hundreds of years old. Definitely not from the time of Jesus, but from way back.

But what I wanted to show you was a lesson that Jesus told. And as I panned the camera around, you can see that behind me there's a cave. Now this cave was a cave that shepherds would have

used for a sheepfold.

There would have been a chalk-like layer of rock underneath a harder rock that they hollowed out. There in the sheepfold, they would have built a wall right across it. You can see the remnants of an old wall there. And then they would put the sheep inside at night, and they believe an opening, which you would see right about here in the picture.

Of course, the shepherds, not needing wood and not having a lot of wood back in those days that they could use for gates, they would simply camp right across the entrance to that sheepfold. Jesus said over in John chapter 10 that I am the door, I am the gate.

[13:46] At the same time, he was telling his people, I am the good shepherd. And that shows you what he was getting at. That they would put the sheep in the sheepfold. And the shepherd, he would camp right across the gate, right here.

And the sheep, no sheep could come out without going through the shepherd. No sheep could go in without going through the shepherd. I am the gate. No sheep enters the sheepfold except through me.

No sheep leaves except through me. That is what makes him the good shepherd. If you are with Jesus, you are safe. Do you get what he is saying? So in verse 7 when Jesus says, I am the gate and then in verse 11, I am the good shepherd who lays down his life across to make a gate.

He's talking about the same person. The shepherd who is also the gate. And what does this shepherd gate offer his people, the sheep? Well, protection and pasture.

Do you see verse 9? The sheep would enter by the shepherd gate and would be protected at night. They would be saved from any attacking wolves. And in verse 9, they would go out by the shepherd gate and find pasture.

[14:55] Of course, this is the illustration. For us, it means Jesus saves us not from attacking wolves but from the judgment our sins deserve. And he gives us not literally green grass, pasture, but life eternal with God.

This is what life to the full means. I mean, you can't get much fuller life than life that is eternal. Can you? In fact, in John's gospel, eternal life on the next slide from John 17 is to know God and Jesus. Not know about them but know them personally. To know God as our heavenly father who cares for us, who provides for our needs, who strengthens us through life's ups and downs such that we can find true contentment despite hardship.

And to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior who guarantees us life to come in the new creation such that we can have meaning and certain hope now in this life.

This is what Jesus the shepherd gate gives all who come to him, who trust in him. All the other so-called shepherds of Israel like these religious Pharisees, they are like the thieves, verse 10.

[16:13] who only come to take from the people and to burden them with extra rules that destroy their souls. But Jesus has come to give us life to the full, eternal life that starts now spiritually with God and will continue physically in the new creation.

And that in itself is reason enough to listen to Jesus as our leader above all others, is it not? But wait, there's more.

For it's not just what he gives us that makes him the good shepherd, it's especially what he did for us. Verse 11, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd, what does he do?

He lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, so when he sees a wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.

Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. But I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep.

[17:24] You see what Jesus implied before about being the gate who lies across the entrance, he now makes clear. He is the one who lays down his life for his sheep.

Not literal sheep, of course. I mean, we all know that even farmers today would never give their own life for a sheep. It is meant to be the other way around, isn't it? That is where lamb cutlets come from.

But Jesus is talking about laying down his life for people at the cross, which we will particularly remember in two weeks time on Good Friday. And at the cross, Jesus took the punishment for our sins so that we don't have to.

This is how Jesus saves us from punishment for our sins for life eternal with God. And this is what really makes him the good shepherd.

I mean, the Pharisees are not willing to lay down their lives for the people. They're not even willing to consider that Jesus is the Christ. They're like the hired hand who cares nothing for the people, only for themselves.

[18 : 30] But Jesus cares much, much more, doesn't he? Indeed, he loves us such that he laid down his life for us. I remember reading an article of a lady in the UK called Lorraine Allard.

She was diagnosed with cancer and needed to start chemo right away to have a chance of surviving. The only difficulty was she was pregnant at the time. She was not long pregnant, actually. And of course, the treatment, chemo, as many of you know, is poison.

And so it was going to harm, if not kill, the unborn child. And so she chose not to have treatment and instead save her baby. Here they are on the next slide. Lorraine and Liam.

At two months after this photo was taken, she died of cancer. She gave her life to save his because she loved him. This is what Jesus has done for us.

The only difference, and it's a big difference, is that neither Lorraine nor Liam deserve to die. We deserve judgment for our sins. And yet, Jesus loved us and died to save us from it.

[19 : 36] And not just us, but others too. Do you see verse 16? He says, verse 16, I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen of Israel.

I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. You see, Jesus laid down his life, not just for people from Israel, but for many people from the nations.

And we heard that in our first reading on the next slide, actually, from Ezekiel, where he will go and search for the lost and bring them back so that there may be one shepherd, servant David.

Jesus was a descendant of David, remember? And there'll be one flock under his rule and he will care for them. This is what Jesus fulfills. And he did it willingly, not begrudgingly.

Verse 17, the reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life. I need to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.

[20 : 40] This command I receive from my father. You see, Jesus not only sent his son, but the son willingly went because he loves us like Lorraine Allard loved her unborn child.

But did you notice in those couple of verses how many times he again speaks of laying down his life, his death, and taking it up again, his resurrection. For it's by his resurrection that he saves us from sin and judgment for life eternal with God.

It's by his resurrection, the message of his death and resurrection, that he saves more people and brings them in to God's family, the one flock. And it's his death and resurrection for us that makes him the good shepherd.

The shepherd whose voice is worth listening to and following above all others. I mean, what other leader does that for his people? What other leader gives such life eternal to his people?

And so will we recognize Jesus as the leader worth listening to? That's the debate in verses 19 to 21. Our final point. The Jews who heard these words, who heard the voice of Jesus, were again divided.

[21 : 56] Many of them said, he is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him? But others said, these are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?

And so John includes these different responses because he really wants us to decide what our response is. Will we recognize Jesus as the good shepherd, the loving leader who gave his life that we might have life to the full?

Have you done that? Have you come to him and put your trust in him? And will you listen to him above all others? And for us who have come to Christ, then do we continue to listen to his voice and follow him above all others?

For his true sheep, his true people will. Or do we sometimes listen to the voice of society? Or even other church leaders who don't echo Jesus' words?

I mean, at the Anglican Synod late last year, the end of last year, there were some church leaders who put forward a motion that the Anglican Church here in Melbourne should do what other churches have done and follow society in accepting same-sex marriage.

[23 : 12] That was a motion put forward by church leaders. They were not listening to the voice of Jesus, but the voice of the world. For us, perhaps, though, it's the voice that tempts us to doubt God when life is hard or when our prayers seem to go unanswered.

And we can start to listen to the voice that says, see, God is not there. Or, see, he doesn't care for you, otherwise, why did he let this happen? Do we listen to that voice, which is really the voice of Satan tempting us?

Or do we continue to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd who says, my grace is sufficient for you? Or, I am with you always to the end of the age? Or, I do not consider the present sufferings worth comparing to the future glory.

So, hang in there. Whose voice do we listen to? Of course, to listen to his voice means reading his word, so do we work hard at reading his word? Getting resources to help us and making time to read it?

You see, for us who believe, then, firstly, do we continue to listen to the voice of our leader in his word? Follow him above all others. If we are true sheep, then we will. And if we find it sometimes hard to do so, then, secondly, remember just how good this Good Shepherd is.

[24 : 34] Remember that he really is a leader worth listening to because he laid down his life for us at the cross to give us life eternal with God. I mean, can you imagine Scott Morrison or Bill Shorten doing that?

The Pope, even. Oprah. Or me. I mean, I might die for some of you, but I certainly won't do so for those I don't know outside the church and particularly not those who didn't deserve it like we or didn't deserve it, but Jesus did.

We mustn't take his death for granted but continue to thank God for it, to reflect on it, that we might always remember Jesus is the leader worth listening and following above all others.

Let's pray we would. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning that Jesus is the good leader, the loving leader who laid down his life for us that we might have life eternal with you.

And so Father, we pray that you would help us to remember who he is, that we might always realize that his voice is worth listening to above all others, that we may continue to follow him.

[25 : 52] We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.