

The Good Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Well, my kids told me a rather lame joke, a bit of a bad joke the other day. Here it is. I think if you've got kids, you might have heard this one. But anyway, knock, knock. Interrupting sheep.

I told you it was bad. Someone from the nine clock said, oh, that was bad. Wasn't me. I didn't go there. But today we're thinking about shepherds and sheep. That's the link.

That's it. That's all I had time for. So the image, of course, of a shepherd in the Old Testament from our first reading is that for a leader of God's people. And the image of a sheep represented God's people themselves, not because God's people are brainless, like most sheep, but because they follow a leader, as Michelle was saying in the kids talk.

And the leader was meant to be like a shepherd who cared for them. But what makes a leader worth listening to and following? This is a rather relevant question for us, given our approaching elections.

I mean, I'm not sure on the next slide which of these two would make the best shepherd for Australia. Of course, there are other leaders that people listen to, like this guy on the next slide, religious leaders like the Pope.

[1 : 10] Millions listen to him and follow him. Or on the next slide, the Dalai Lama. Millions listen to him as well as a leader. And even this next person, Oprah Winfrey.

In fact, last year, you might remember her speech at the Golden Globes went viral and people were saying she should become the next US president. People listen to various leaders and their voices. And sometimes it's our own voice as well. Although for one guy at my Bible study group, when I asked him who they listened to, he said, my wife. I won't ask Margaret Chesson if that's true. But the issue today is which leader's voice is worth listening to above all others, worth following above all others. And Jesus begins the passage today by contrasting the true shepherd from the false.

So at point one in your outlines and verse one to five in your Bibles. Have a look there with me. 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.

[2 : 20] The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gate or literally doorkeeper opens the door for him and the sheep listens 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, to understand the illustration Jesus gives, we need to understand an ancient Israelite household. Most Israelites had some animals that lived in a courtyard of their house.

So on the next slide is a picture. It's as big as I could make it. A picture of an Israelite home. That's two story. But it's only about seven meters by seven meters. So a little cube, little box, not big.

But down the bottom, there was a little courtyard where a few animals would stay. And there was a door going out to the outside. And so what would happen in a village is a number of families would get together and hire someone to be the shepherd, sometimes even a teenager from one of the families.

[3 : 23] And this shepherd would go from house to house, knock on the door, and the doorkeeper or the owner would open the door, let the shepherd in and collect their two to three sheep.

And so this village shepherd would then go house to house, form a flock, and then take them all out to the fields to graze, to eat grass. And in a small village, the village shepherd would sometimes know each sheep by name.

And the sheep would recognize him as the one who leads them to food. We see this with dogs today. You know, you grab the lead and give it a shake, and the dog gets all excited because they know they're going for a walk.

Unless your dog doesn't like walking. But it's the same here. And so in this illustration, we have false shepherds or thieves. We have the sheep who don't listen to the thieves and strangers. And then we have this true shepherd whom the sheep do listen to. But why is Jesus telling this story? What is he illustrating? Well, the characters from chapter 9, actually.

[4 : 26] You see, this passage continues the conversation from chapter 9. And we know this because in verse 21, if you just look down there at the bottom right-hand side of your page, we see a reference to the healing of the blind man from chapter 9.

Do you see that? And so if we go back to verse 1, when Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, they're the same ones from the end of chapter 9. He's continuing the conversation, you see, with others listening in.

And what happened in chapter 9? Well, Jesus said, I'm the light of the world, and light helps us see. So Jesus helps people see who he is, and then life eternal with God.

But if you remember, Jesus then proved it by opening this blind man's eyes to prove that he can help people see. But the Pharisees were not happy about this because Jesus did that on the Sabbath.

Do you remember? And so Jesus broke one of their extra Sabbath rules. Not God's Sabbath rules, their extra rules. And so they could not accept that Jesus was from God.

[5 : 30] Instead, they bullied the blind man who'd been healed, trying to get another explanation from him for Jesus. I mean, just look back at chapter 9, verse 24.

I'm going to read a chunk to remind us because it was two weeks ago. 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 9, 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, Jesus, is a sinner. The man replied, whether he's a sinner or not, I do not 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? He answered, I have told you already in the first half of the chapter, and you did not listen.

Why do you want me to hear it? 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. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.

[6 : 33] The man answered, now that is remarkable. You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't 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. And 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. And Jesus heard that they'd thrown him out. He went and found him and 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.

Now, who acts like the robbers who don't care about the people, the sheep? It's the Pharisees, isn't it? They don't care about this man. They just want him to say that Jesus is a sinner.

[7 : 33] And who acts like the sheep who doesn't listen to these robbers? The blind man, doesn't he? He doesn't listen to the Pharisees. In fact, he has a go at them. But who does the blind man listen to at the end?

Well, Jesus. And that makes Jesus the true shepherd. Do you see the connection? Jesus is saying that he is the true shepherd, the one Moses prayed for in Numbers 27 on the next slide, who might go in through the right way and lead them out, that Israel might not be like sheep without a shepherd.

These Pharisees, on the other hand, these religious leaders who were supposed to be the shepherds, well, they're more like robbers who climb over the wall to steal the sheep rather than care for them.

I mean, if they really cared for the people, God's people, then when this man was healed, they would have rejoiced with him, wouldn't they? But they didn't. Instead, they interrogated him, they abused him, and then they kicked him out of the synagogue, which was to kick him out of the community.

All because they cared more about themselves than people. They cared more about their rules being upheld and their authority being respected. What's more, they even heaped these extra rules on them, destroying their souls.

[8 : 51] Jesus says this on the next slide from Matthew 23. On Matthew 23, 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. 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.

He doesn't pull any punches, does he? You see, these Pharisees are like the dodgy shepherds of our first reading. So the next slide from Ezekiel 24. The shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves.

Should not shepherds take care of the flock, says the Lord? And sadly, many leaders are the same today, caring only for themselves, including church leaders.

I mean, take this guy on the next slide, Joel Osteen. He preaches to millions, but he preaches a different gospel, one that says if you give more money to the church, then God will bless you more in return, but the Bible never says that.

[9 : 59] Now, why does he preach this? Is it for the good of the people? Well, have a look at his house on the next slide. Now, compare him with Billy Graham who also preached to millions.

Billy wasn't perfect, but he preached the true gospel of Christ and this is his house on the next slide. Nice house. But it's the same one he lived in all his married life until he got sick 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 really in it for themselves like these Pharisees. Whereas Jesus is the true shepherd and his sheep, like this blind man, will listen to his voice.

And follow him. Excuse me. Well, despite this pretty straightforward illustration for the Pharisees of the day who would have known about sheep and shepherds and should have known their Old Testaments, we read in verse 6 that they didn't get the illustration.

[11 : 05] And so in verse 7, Jesus gives them another one. Only this time he's not the village shepherd who collects sheep from the houses. This time he's a 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. Therefore Jesus said again, Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep and 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. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Now again, for us, it would help if we understood the illustration a bit better.

And to explain it, I am going to show a little video 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 is the modern Arab city of Bethlehem and there are still a lot of Christians in there.

[12 : 14] The olive tree behind my shoulder, they are 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 pan the camera around, you can see that behind me there is 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. 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.

[13:19] 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's what makes him the good shepherd. If you're with Jesus, you're safe.

Do you see what he's saying there? 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 for the sheep, he's talking about the same person.

The shepherd who also acted as the gate, the shepherd gate. And did you notice what this shepherd gate offers his sheep? Both protection and pasture. So verse 9, the sheep would enter by this shepherd gate and would be protected at night.

They would be saved, in the illustration, from attacking wolves and so on. Then in verse 9, they would go out by this shepherd gate and find pasture.

Of course, it's an illustration, and for us, it means he saves us not from attacking wolves, but from judgment for our sins that our sins deserve. And he gives us not literally green grass to feed on, but life eternal with God.

[14:30] That's what life to the full is. I mean, you can't get much fuller life than eternal life, can you? And in John's gospel, eternal life, on the next slide, in chapter 17, verse 3, is to know God and to know 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, so that we can find deep contentment even despite hardship.

And to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior who guarantees our life to come in the new creation. Just that we can have hope and meaning 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 thieves, verse 10, who only come to take from the people, to burden them with extra rules that end up destroying them. But Jesus has come to give us life to the full. A new spiritual life, eternal, that starts now where we know God as our heavenly Father. A new physical, eternal life that happens later in the new creation.

[15:50] And that in itself ought to be reason enough to listen to his voice above all others. Oughtn't it? But 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.

See verse 11 again? He says, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd 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's 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. You see what Jesus implied by being the gate, he now makes clear.

He lays down his life for the sheep. And of course, it is an illustration. He's not talking about actually dying for actual sheep. Even a sheep farmer today wouldn't do that.

[16:55] It's meant to be the other way around, isn't it? Sheep die for us. That's where lamb cutlets come from, right? But Jesus is talking about laying down his life for people at the cross, which we'll particularly remember in a couple weeks' time at Good Friday.

At the cross, Jesus took the punishment, the judgment for our sins so that we don't have to. That's how Jesus saves us from the judgment our sins deserve for life eternal with God.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, they're not even willing to lay down their lives for the people. They want the people to respect them. And they're not even willing to admit that they might be wrong about Jesus.

They're like the hidden hand who cares nothing for the people. But Jesus cares much, much more, doesn't he? So much that he laid down his life for us. I remember reading an article about a lady in the UK called Lorraine Allard.

She was diagnosed with cancer and needed to start chemo straight away to have a chance of surviving. The only problem was she was not long pregnant with her first child.

[18:02] And the chemo treatment, as many of you know, is poison, and so it would harm the child, the fetus, and possibly kill this child. And so she chose not to have the treatment.

But instead, save her baby. On the next slide is a picture of Lorraine and Liam, her newborn son. Two months after this photo was taken, she then died of cancer.

She gave her life to save his. Why? Well, because she loved her unborn child. And Jesus has done the same for us. The big difference, of course, is neither Lorraine nor Liam deserve to die, but we deserve judgment.

And yet, because this good shepherd loves us, he laid down his life for us. And that's, is that not worth a shepherd listening to? Does it make Jesus a shepherd worth listening to?

He just hasn't laid down his life for us, though. He's also come to lay down his life for others. Have a look at verse 16. He says, I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.

[19:06] They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. You see, Jesus has come not just to save people from Israel, but from all nations.

And there's actually some encouragement to evangelize here because it says they will listen to his voice. It's worth inviting people to Good Friday services.

It's worth praying for people. It's worth talking to people about Jesus because if that's the time God has appointed for them to believe, then they will. They will hear his voice so that there will be one flock, one shepherd, one family of God, one Lord and Savior.

It's what we heard in our first reading on the next slide from Ezekiel 34 again, how God says he will search for the lost and bring them all in so that there will be one shepherd, his servant David, that is a descendant of David, Jesus.

And he will be the one shepherd looking after them. And this laying down of his life is not something Jesus did begrudgingly, but willingly. Look at verse 17 to 18.

[20:14] He says, the reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life only 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.

This command I receive from the father. You see, yes, God sent Jesus, his son, to the cross, but Jesus willingly chose to go. Some people, even some Bible teachers, some ministers and college lecturers, even here in Melbourne, will say that they don't like this idea of Jesus taking our punishment, of God sending him to take our punishment.

They call divine child abuse. How dare God the father send his son to take our punishment. They've not read the Bible. Jesus willingly chose to go, wanted to because he loves us.

But did you notice how many times he talks about laying down his life and taking it up again? He keeps repeating it, doesn't he? For it's by his death and resurrection that he saves us from judgment for life, eternal with God.

It's by the message of his death and resurrection that he'll bring more people in to the family, into the one flock. And it's his death and resurrection for us that makes him the good shepherd, the loving leader worth listening to and following above all others.

[21:44] And so will we recognize Jesus as this leader worth listening to and following? That's the debate in the last bit of the passage. Have a look at verse 19. The Jews who heard these words were again divided.

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?

John includes, I think, these different responses to Jesus' voice, his words, and the implication is how are we going to respond? What's our response going to be to Jesus?

Will we recognize him as the good shepherd, the loving leader who gave his life for us that we may have life to the full? What other leader does that for his people?

What other leader can give that for his people? And so, do you recognize him as that leader, as your Lord and Savior? Have you come to Jesus?

[22 : 47] Have you put your trust in him? And for us who have, do we continue to listen to his voice and follow him above all others for his true sheep will?

Or do we sometimes listen to the voice of society or even church leaders who don't echo Jesus' word? words? And for us who have put our trust in Jesus, then perhaps sometimes it's not the voice of the world or social media, perhaps it's a little voice inside when we're suffering, you know, that voice that says, see, there is no God, or see, God doesn't love you, why would he let this happen to you if he loves you?

Are we tempted to listen to that voice? Which is actually the voice of Satan tempting us to doubt God? Or do we listen to the good shepherd's voice who says, my grace is sufficient for you that I'm with you always to the end of the age, whose word says that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will come in the life to come?

or when Sunday morning rolls around and the kids don't want to go to church and a voice in you is telling you a day off wouldn't hurt, surely not. Do you listen to those voices?

Or the voice of God's word about not giving up meeting together? Well done by the way, daylight saving, you still made it, well done. Of course to listen to his voice means reading his word, doesn't it?

[24 : 22] And so do we also work hard at reading the Bible, getting resources to help us, 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, following him above all others?

If we are true sheep, then we will. And if we sometimes fight it hard to do that, then secondly, remember just how good this good shepherd is. Remember that he really is a leader worth listening to, for he laid down his life for us, that we might have life to the full with the Father.

What other leader would do that? Can you imagine Scott Morrison or Bill Shorten doing that for you? Or the Pope? Or Oprah? Or me?

I mean, I love you, but I might die for some of you, no. I wouldn't die for people out there, though. I don't know them. And I certainly wouldn't die for people who didn't deserve it, but that's exactly what Jesus did, you see, for us who didn't deserve it.

We hear of his death so often we can take it for granted, can't we? But we need to continue to thank God for it and reflect on it, that we might always remember Jesus is the leader worth listening to and following above all others.

[25 : 45] So let's pray that we would. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning that Jesus is indeed the good shepherd, the one who laid down his life for us, that we might have life to the full with you.

And so we pray, Father, that you would remind us of these truths we know so well, that it might encourage us to keep listening to his voice above all others, keep working hard to meet together and to read your word that we may hear his voice.

follow him, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.