

The Gospel of John
Session Twenty-One: The Good Shepherd
Commentary

John 10:1-21

10:1–2. Beginning the chapter with his now famous I tell you the truth statement, Jesus changed the metaphor from blindness to sheep-stealing. We cannot tell whether the content of chapter 10 followed immediately on the discussion of chapter 9 or occurred on another occasion. Certainly the Lord intended his listeners to identify people of their day reflected in the metaphors of this parable.

The sheep pen, for example, represents neither heaven nor the church, but probably first-century Judaism. Verse 1 speaks of the thief invading the sheep pen, not the sheep. The “watchman,” if we identify one specifically, may refer to John the Baptist, or perhaps even the Holy Spirit. Obviously, the shepherd is the Lord himself, and the thief and robber probably refers to the Pharisees against whom he had battled for several chapters.

Borchert describes the first-century pen of which John spoke: “The sheepfold was a place of security, not a place for intruders. Such a sheepfold would likely have been either a circular or square enclosure, probably constructed like a high stone fence or wall and perhaps topped with vines. The entrance would have been the only break in the wall, and once the sheep were safely inside at night, the watchman/guard (either a servant or a shepherd, usually an assistant) would lie down across the opening and serve both as the protector for the sheep and as a gate to the sheepfold. Unless an intruder was willing to confront the watchman, the only way into the sheepfold was to climb the wall (cf. 10:1)” (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 331).

Some interpreters place prophetic references on the various “figures of speech” as John calls them. But that is not necessary in light of the reality of the times in which Jesus spoke these words. This was a period of intense conflict in the life of our Lord. The Pharisees and their cohorts had committed themselves to exterminating this one whom they considered a “pesky prophet” from Nazareth. These first six verses emphasize security. In the ancient Middle East, one sheep pen held several flocks, so shepherd recognition was imperative. Only personal identification with a shepherd could make a sheep feel safe.

10:3. Verses 1 and 2 tell us that the shepherd knows his sheep, verse 3 that he calls them, and verses 4–6 that he leads them. Clearly the shepherd and the watchman cannot be the same since the watchman opened the door for the shepherd. But we should recognize the uniqueness of parables and not press every word for a specific meaning.

The active verbs seem important in this verse—opens, listen, calls, leads. John is quite specific about the intimacy between shepherd and sheep.

This shepherd does not just sound a call to the whole flock; he calls his sheep by name. This apostle John employed the same expression at the end of his third epistle when he told Gaius, “Friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name” (3 John 14).

The emphasis on leading the sheep reminds us of Numbers 27 and the prayer of Moses for a successor “over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd” (Num. 27:16–17).

10:4–5. Not only do these sheep listen to the shepherd’s voice, they know his voice. John seems to emphasize the point that they never leave the shepherd and never follow a stranger. Garipey reminds us:

The shepherd did not drive his sheep; he led them. Christ has gone the way before us. He has journeyed through life’s thorn-grown wilderness. He knows life’s dangers and perils. The Good Shepherd leads His sheep “beside the still waters.” Otherwise a rushing current might sweep away the flock to destruction, or mask the sound of an approaching enemy. But he does not always lead us in pastures green or by waters still. Sometimes he leads us amid the tempests and down into the deep ravines of life. But there is reassurance in the presence of the Good Shepherd (Garipey, Henry. *100 Portraits of Christ*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1987, p. 212).

But who is this stranger whom the sheep avoid? We do not want to put any dogmatic assignments on the particulars of this parable, but one thing is clear—the stranger is anyone other than the shepherd they know. Strangers abound in our day in a variety of religions and cults as well as the secular domain. Shouting for sheep to follow is common practice, but the Lord’s true sheep pay no attention because they will never follow a stranger.

10:6. As in many of Jesus’ parables, people did not understand the metaphor, at least until he explained its various components which we find later in the chapter. But one thing seems clear in this first paragraph: the sheep were dependent on their shepherd, whom they knew and trusted. Furthermore, the shepherd took full responsibility for the sheep, even though thieves and robbers constantly tried to break into the sheep pen and steal them. In this verse John uses the Greek word *paroimia* (figure of speech), his preferred substitute for *parabole*. The first never appears in the synoptic Gospels and the second never occurs in John, although he used *paroimia* again in 16:25, 29.

10:7–8. Verse 7 begins just like verse 1 in the Greek text—amen amen. Before Jesus actually identified himself as the Good Shepherd, he described his activity at the sheep gate. We know from Luke 15 that a shepherd counts his sheep and from Psalm 23 how carefully he takes care of them. First-century listeners would have been certain to link this teaching with that familiar psalm.

Jesus did not merely explain the first paragraph of the chapter but actually expanded it. New features are added such as the “hired hand” (v. 12) and the adjective “good” (v. 11). Thieves we

have seen earlier, but the “wolf” (v. 12) is a new character and the insertion of the teacher into the narrative in the first person—I am the gate.

Westcott expands the statement of verse 8: all who ever came before me were thieves and robbers: “They who ‘came’ who pretended to satisfy the national expectation inspired by the prophets, or to mould the national expectations after the Pharisaic type, who offered in any way that which was to be accepted as the end of the earlier dispensation, who made themselves ‘doors’ of approach to God (Matt. 23:14), were essentially and continued to be inspired by selfishness, whether their designs were manifested by craft or by violence, and whether they were directed to gain or to dominion” (Westcott, B. F. *The Gospel According to John*. London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1958, p. 153).

We need to be careful with the words before me, since they could mean “came up to the gate” or “came ahead of me in time.” The latter is preferred as indicated in Westcott’s comment, but we must keep the cultural context well in mind. Jesus was not criticizing Moses and the prophets and certainly not John the Baptist. But the religious leaders who listened to Jesus’ parables (notably the Pharisees) seem to be the direct target along with false messiahs who tried to entice the sheep.

10:9–10. In addition to guarding the sheep, the Good Shepherd provides for them—unlike thieves who steal and kill and destroy. Throwing aside the metaphor to reveal spiritual truth, Jesus told the sheep that he had come to give life so they might live it to the full. False shepherds intend to injure the sheep, but that is never the behavior of the true shepherd. We need to watch carefully the flow between metaphor and spiritual reality here. In verse 9 Jesus is clearly talking about people as spiritual sheep, while verse 10 falls back into the metaphor at the beginning and then talks about spiritual life. The word life in verses 10 and 11 translates the Greek word *zoe*, which we have already discussed at some length. As we move into verse 11, we see the contrast built around this spiritual eternal life. The sheep may have it only because the Good Shepherd gives his own life to make this possible.

10:11. This verse provides the key to our passage and another one of the famous “I Am” statements of this Gospel. The good shepherd does not just lie across the opening of the pen to frighten away dangerous predators; if necessary he lays down his life for the sheep. Unlike the “worthless” shepherd of Zechariah 11:17, the good shepherd makes the supreme sacrifice.

The word *kalos* (good) emphasizes genuineness, value, and truth. This verse shows us how the good shepherd differs from other shepherds. They might risk their lives for the sheep as David did in fighting off lions and bears, but they would never intentionally die for the sheep as the good shepherd will do. This passage describes substitutionary atonement for sin, the supreme sacrifice of Calvary.

As Carson observes, “The shepherd does not die for his sheep to serve as an example, throwing himself off a cliff in a grotesque and futile display while bellowing, ‘See how much I love you!’ No, the assumption is that the sheep are in mortal danger; that in their defense the shepherd

loses his life; and by his death they are saved. That, and that alone, is what makes him the good shepherd” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 386).

10:12–13. The good shepherd cares for the sheep in a way no hired hand could. We dare not equate the hired hand with the thieves and robbers described earlier. They are clearly evil; he suffers from poor motivation. Since the sheep do not belong to the hired hand, he will not risk his life to save them. He only wants his paycheck and will protect the sheep only when their enemies provide no threat to his own life and safety. Later in the New Testament Peter warned the elders of the church not to be like hired-hand shepherds who functioned with a mercenary attitude (1 Pet. 5:1–7).

10:14–15. We see in this paragraph that the shepherd relates to the sheep in trust and intimacy. What a comparison! The good shepherd knows his sheep in the same way the Father knows the Son. Not only that, but the sheep know the shepherd in the same way the Son knows the Father. Notice how often the Lord talked about laying down his life for the sheep—five times in eight verses—a phraseology unique to John’s Gospel. The third person statement of verse 11 has now become first person: I lay down my life.

Boice emphasizes the Lord’s example for our own lives: “We will never be able to give our lives as Jesus gave His life for us—He died for us as our sin-bearer—nevertheless, there are other ways in which we can give our lives for others. We can give our time in order to help them. We can sacrifice things that we would rather do or rather have in order to serve and give to others. In other words, we must put others ahead of ourselves. Our primary desire must be for their spiritual well-being and comfort” (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, pp. 110–11).

10:16. But who are these other sheep that are not of this sheep pen? Most scholars believe this refers to non-Jews, the Gentile believers who would become a part of the Lord’s people as the disciples preached the gospel in Acts. And in multiflock pens, it becomes all the more important for sheep to understand their master’s voice. These various flocks, Jesus said, will be one because they follow one shepherd. This is a beautiful picture of the unification of genders and ethnic groupings through the Savior.

Jesus not only proclaimed additional sheep outside the scope of his hearers’ thinking; he also said that he must bring them to the one flock. Through the centuries the English text has occasionally substituted the word fold for flock, thereby giving the verse a different orientation. There are many folds (pens) containing other sheep that must be reached. But when the spiritual unity of Christ’s followers comes into correct perspective, there is only one flock—one body of Christ, with many denominations and affiliations.

10:17–18. The Lord emphasized that his death on the cross would not occur because earthly powers are stronger than the power of the heavenly Father. He would lay down his life willingly and at the time the Father required it. Substitutionary atonement is the heart of the gospel (Isa.

53:6), and that certainly focuses the Lord's words here. He would join the sheep from a variety of pens and he would die for all of them.

It is difficult to imagine that either Jesus or John intended to tell us that the Father loved the Son only because the Son willingly died for the sheep. Borchert emphasizes just the reverse and reads the text, " 'Because [dia touto] the Father loves me, that is the reason [*hoti*, therefore] I lay down my life.' The model of the Father provided the model for the Son, which in turn should provide the model for the followers of Jesus (cf. 13:34; 15:12)" (Borchert, p. 336).

10:19–21. The more the Lord described himself, the more the Jews became angry and divided, resorting again to their charge of demon possession. Obviously the common people had not forgotten the healing of the blind man as verse 21 links chapter 10 with chapter 9.

Indeed, Morgan treats the chapters as almost one event, not an impossible approach:

Here was the point in the ministry of Jesus, where, by an action, he opened the door of the new economy, and assumed authority over it. That poor blind beggar was barren of spiritual apprehension, Jesus opened his eyes, and by that act in the physical, led him professionally to the recognition of Who the Man was that had done it, so that he rendered worship to Him. He received that worship, and by that act opened the door of the new economy. The man now entered the new order through the Door; and from that moment he was into the true authority, the authority of the Shepherd Himself (Morgan, G. Campbell. *The Crises of the Christ*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903, pp. 176–77).¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).