

I. Set Up

A. Today, as we continue with the series, I AM, we arrive at the passage in John 10, where Jesus describes himself as a gate. Mike will be taking that up in a few minutes, right now..

II. Intro

A. Sometimes the Bible is funny. We don't always catch it. It often flies past us. But it's there. For example, in John 10 – the chapter we are turning to today - Jesus spoke at length about how the sheep follow the shepherd because “they know his voice.”

1. And it's true. On my first visit to Israel, Yohanna Katanacho, who attended Christ Church while he and his family were in Chicago for him to do his PhD in the Old Testament. He has since become the Dean of a seminary in Nazareth, and she has become the Director of the Arab-Israeli Bible Society. He said he wanted to take me to Nazareth Village where they had set up a working model of how life used to be 2,000 years ago.

a) I must confess, my first thought was, “Oh no. This is going to be bad, crass, plastic, very commercial. It's going to be about souvenir shops and there is probably a water slide and who knows what else.

b) Not at all. It was amazing. It is set up as a working village from 2,000 years ago. And there are people who live there full time, dressing as they dressed, eating what they ate, in most ways living as if they were alive during the time of Christ.

c) The grounds have a garden – which they tend to as it would have been tended to. And there is a shepherd caring for sheep and goats. And there are olive trees and they make olive oil, and it has a vineyard and they make wine and it is set up as if you were stepping into first century Palestinian life. Which has the effect of making a number of biblical stories and allusions come to life. And in a handful of big and small ways you end up thinking, “Oh, now I get it.”

2. Well, while we were walking around – it takes a couple hours to see everything and talk with the people - we started to engage with the shepherd. And he was explaining the life of a first century shepherd. Except, he wasn't the real shepherd. The real shepherd was at the dentist. But then the real shepherd showed up. And as soon as he called out to the sheep, all twenty of them instantly took off running across the field to him. It was fascinating. They knew his voice.

B. All of this relates to our passage today – which is in John 10.

C. Right before it - in John 9 - Jesus is busy healing a blind man, which ticks off the Pharisees – who have no such ability. And they are criticizing Jesus because he has helped the man on the Sabbath. And Jesus ends up talking about spiritual blindness. About people who are clueless.

D. And then John 10 starts with our passage for today:

1. 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 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

2. Then – verse 6 – here is the funny part. Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

E. So, immediately after he's talked about the ability of sheep to recognize the voice of the master – the one in charge - we read that the Pharisees, "did not understand what Jesus was saying to them."

F. That's funny. You can almost hear the drums. Bada Bing. "I'm here all week."

G. Now, there is more to see here. For starters, we should note that the sheep (not the Pharisees, but the sheep) followed and obeyed even though they didn't always understand. The sheep knew his voice and stayed close.

H. We could stop right here and focus on obedience - on trusting God even when we do not understand what he is doing.

1. The first disciples were not bad on this point. 1) They did not understand what it meant to be his disciple; 2) They did not understand how to engage the world; 3) It is clear that they could not pass a basic comprehensive test. But 4) they did follow. They knew his voice and as much as they mess up, they run back to their master. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd.

2. And while we were here, we could not that the opposite can also be true. It is possible to comprehend what Jesus is saying and still not put your confidence in him. As Mark Twain admitted, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." Comprehension is good, and in time Jesus' disciples did come to see him and his teaching more clearly. But it was by walking with Christ that they came to trust him. They knew his voice and they followed. Understanding came later. There is a lot here.

I. But this is a series on the I AM statements and so I want to focus on Christ's claim to be the gate.

III. Let me back up:

A. We've been looking at the I AM statements in John's Gospel. There are seven of them - a series of shocking claims that Jesus makes about himself. I am the Bread of Life, Light of the World, Good Shepherd, last week, I am the Resurrection and the Life.

B. These are part of his ongoing revelation of himself. Which is a big part of what Jesus taught about.

C. There are actually two big points to note here. First, there is what Jesus said. His teaching fell into several big buckets. Jesus taught: 1) That God comes first; 2) Others are second; 3) the way up is down; 4) we are going to live forever; 5) everything everywhere belongs to God – so we want to be good stewards of his stuff. But he taught mostly about himself.

D. So, there is what he said. There is also how He said it. How he taught it. It turns out: 1) He asked a lot of questions; and 2) He told a lot of stories.

E. We are going to focus on the content of the message, but let's pause here for a moment to note:

1. That since the Enlightenment – the 17th and 18th century intellectual revolution that sets up the Scientific Revolution - we tend to explain things more directly. We use facts. We are about getting to the point. And to make the point we cite data and studies and think very linearly. This is quite different than the Middle East 2,000 years ago. Back then people told stories. Efficiency not the goal.

2. Secondly, it's worth noting that the metaphors being used back then are not the ones we would use. We get a lot about sheep and fish and agrarian life. We get stories about walking places and extended families. If Jesus were teaching today, we would not be hearing about sheep, he would be telling stories about business transactions, and the never ending shuttling of kids to events and how tired you get on Zoom meetings.

F. So, in order to understand what Jesus is saying, we need to understand life back then. The first goal in Bible study is to understand what the original readers would have understood.

IV. So, back to our John 10 passage.

A. **Very truly I tell you Pharisees.** As we saw, he is directing this barb at the self-righteous religious elite. Jesus tends to have very kind things to say to those who are broken and humble, and very harsh things to say to those who are proud and powerful.

B. 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.

1. The first thing to note is that a sheep pen was a closed off and guarded space. Our word "pen" comes from the Old English "pennien" meaning to enclose, enfold, envelop or shut in. You see all of that in our word pen-itentary.

2. There were two places where there would be sheep pens. The first is the center of town. Shepherds would take the sheep out during the day to graze. If they were close by and could bring them back home at night, they would do so and place them in a community pen. The night shift guy – the Watchman - would then take over and make sure all the sheep were safe while all the shepherds were off the clock.

3. However, if the shepherd had taken the sheep too far away to get back – if they had had to head out to find good fields to let them graze - he would have to build a pen – maybe with rocks, maybe with brush. But somehow he would need a fence that kept the sheep in and predators out.

C. 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 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

1. He is describing the community pen. In the morning. He goes and is collecting his sheep from among all of the sheep.

2. When I was in African twenty years ago. We went out and spent a night in a Maasai village.

a) A student at Trinity had spent a semester in Africa.

b) Story about lions attacking the cows. I got sideways for saying I would not defend the cows. The next day I got sideways for asking how they kept the cows straight. They know their sheep and their sheep know them.

D. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” ⁷Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

1. So now we jump to the second kind of pen. The one the shepherd builds outside of town. In that setting, the shepherd laid down across the opening so that no sheep could get out or wolves get in.

2. I have a one-minute video that brings this to life. This is what it looks like today, so these pens are more established. But this clip helps you see what it was like: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvD0Rts53TE>

E. ⁸All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

1. Jesus explains that he – and he alone – is the one people can trust and go through in order to be saved (to be safe) and not only that, but to flourish.

V. As I noted, making a point by telling stories about sheep creates some work for us, because we do not know much about them. If Jesus were teaching today his points would be developed in stories about business transactions, sporting events, celebrity culture, social media. Not sheep pens with gates.

VI. We are surrounded by gates.

A. When we fly we have to pass through a security gate and then we go to our departure gate.

B. And when you catch a train, you have to go through electronic ticket gates.

C. And if your yard is fenced in, you walk in and out through a gate.

D. So, there are a lot of gates out there.

E. And besides that, a gate is basically just a door.

VII. So there is not a huge amount of work to do here. Remember, with Bible study:

- A. The first goal is to understand what the text means – what the original readers would have understood;
- B. The next step is to understand what the overarching principle or idea is – what this means to you;
- C. And then comes the third step – the hard work – applying it. Which in this case, includes learning to recognize and trust the voice of the Shepherd.

VIII. There are a few other possible reflection points here.

- A. First, we are sheep – which is not a compliment. Sheep are not very bright and they have no defenses.
 - 1. There has been a bit of push back from those who love sheep. The suggestion has been that some pastors have overstated the case about just how dumb and helpless sheep really are. Well, I have never known a pastor to overstate a point!
 - 2. OK, maybe once or twice. Perhaps sheep are not as dumb as rocks or as helpless as suggested. But, they are not cheetahs or eagles. They are slow and they lack claws or sharp teeth or the ability to camouflage themselves. Most animals have something – they can climb a tree or shoot you with quills or they have a tough shell or they are venomous or something. Sheep are slow and they taste good.
 - 3. Let the record show, our self-perceptions aside, Jesus does not say “You are all like mountain lions or Great White sharks or falcons. You are cool and fast and have quick wits and razor-sharp talons.”
 - 4. No, when Jesus describes us, he says, “You are slow and defenseless and easy to pick off. When your enemies see you, they get out the mint jelly.”
- B. Second, we need to be alert to false teachers. In this case – and many others - the religious leaders, the Pharisees, who regarded themselves as shepherds of the people, were clueless and leading people astray.
 - 1. Jesus calls them thieves and robbers. They were false teachers – which is one of the worst things you can say about someone. In the first century you were to help just about everyone. You were to love enemies. You were to go out of your way to help the outsider. But, you were not to have anything to do with a false teacher.
 - 2. While we are here we cannot miss that we not only need to be sure we are not listening to the Pharisees (the false teachers), we need to be sure we are not the false teachers. It is worth noting that:
 - a) This group thought they were right;
 - b) That this group was trying to be good;
 - c) That they were trying to use their influence to help others and to create a better society.
- C. But the key point is about Jesus. We must note two things:
 - 1. He claims to be the entrance. Our way to God. Indeed, he claims to be the only way to God.

a) We get a bit of the exclusive nature of Christ here. He doesn't identify himself as "a gate," but as "the gate." The implication is, if you are to get to God, you must deal with Jesus. He is the only way.

b) This is an enormously controversial claim, but it is hardly unique to this statement. It's all through the Bible.

c) But it is more prominently developed in next week's passage – where Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the father except through me." So we'll take that up next week.

2. So the first point is, Jesus is our shepherd. The second is, He wants us to thrive. The John 10:10 ending to this passage, though taken out of context by some, who conflate the abundant life with the American Dream – is a statement of his heart. He wants you to flourish.

IX. So what do we do? What are the implications for us?

A. I started by noting that:

1. The first goal of Bible study is to understand what the original writers intended the original readers to understand.

2. The next thing is for us to figure out the principles being communicated – the truth and place it in our context.

3. And then, the key thing is to apply is. Most Bible study fails for lack of Application.

B. Here it seems that:

1. There is a need to be alert to false teachers and false teaching.

2. We need – again – to be aware about self-righteousness. We think too highly or too often of ourselves and our opinions. We are blind to our blind spots.

a) I have been reading Brant Hanson's new book. *The Truth About Us – the Very Good News About How Very Bad We Are*, and – in a humorous way, it makes it clear that it is very, very hard to see ourselves the way others do, or the way God does.

3. I think any study of sheep needs to include the insight that we spend a lot of time wanting to be on the other side of the fence, where the grass is greener. But of course it is not.

4. It seems like we should be alert to the value of a pen. How freeing they actually are.

C. But there are two big ideas that need our focus.

1. Jesus is the Good Shepherd – the one who is true. The one willing to die for us. The one standing at the gate to protect us.

2. We need to live our lives in such a way that we know his voice.

D. Do you know the voice of God? Dallas Willard wrote this

1. You and I learn voices by experience. We are at least as smart as sheep. They learn to identify the voices of their masters by experience.

2. Scripture uses this image over and over to emphasize learning God's voice. In time, you learn the difference in the spirit, tone, and content of the thoughts that come to mind.

3. You can get pretty good at recognizing whether a thought has come to you from God. For one thing, God will never nag you or whine at you.

4. By contrast, I have found that there is always a quality of nervousness, of "tininess," about one's own thoughts.

5. If you wish to know the voice of God as it comes to you individually, simply allow yourself to trust God to lead you into that.

6. Ask God to speak to you. Then wait attentively. He will probably speak to you clearly.

7. But you have to understand and believe that this is even possible. Otherwise your faith will not rise to it, and you will not have the opportunity to learn.

8. The reason I emphasize this is because, when a friend asks about your relationship with God and the reason for your hope, you don't want to be in the position of saying, "Well, God never speaks to me, but He speaks to lots of other people."

E. I come at this a bit differently. I certainly agree with his premise of experience – we learn this over time. And also of the need for faith – to trust. I'd frame it differently.

1. I think we learn to hear God's voice

a) Reading His Word;

b) Praying – especially listening.

c) Trusting.

2. May we learn to recognize the Voice of the Good Shepherd and to follow it even when we do not always understand.

F.