

How to Recognize Your Shepherd John 10:1-10

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St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 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. 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, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

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.” (John 10:1-10 NIV)

In the name of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, dear friends:

Quite often, the Bible compares us human beings to sheep. Who can forget Psalm 23, where we say with David, “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing”? But it's not a complimentary comparison. Sheep are rather docile, defenseless creatures. They lack the horns of a bull or a ram; they don't have the leaping ability of a deer or gazelle to escape predators. And sheep tend to be clueless when it comes to direction and finding good pasture or water. Sheep are utterly dependent on the shepherd to take care of them.

But sheep have one thing going for them: They learn to recognize a real, dependable shepherd as opposed to fakes. In comparing us to sheep and himself as the shepherd, Jesus teaches us **How to Recognize Your Shepherd**: By his arrival, his voice, and his leadership.

How does a shepherd arrive at the sheep pen that's enclosed by a wall and only has one opening at the gate? Obviously at the gate; the “gatekeeper opens the gate for him.” But a thief or a robber tries to climb the wall and get in another way. The thief does so to go in undetected and steal the unsuspecting sheep.

Jesus is warning us about false teachers who come in, trying to steal us away from God. There are two types that I want to mention today. The first are the liberal teachers who deny that all of the Bible is truly God's Word, who doubt that miracles actually happen, and who refuse to call certain sins “sin”, such as homosexuality is just a lifestyle choice or something you're born with; abortion is reproductive health care instead of sin, living together outside of marriage is permissible these days, and so on. Those are easily identifiable. But the second group is more subtle. It's called legalism. It's the teaching that, if you truly want to be God's children and get to heaven, you need to keep God's laws. You need to follow rules and regulations in the Bible and by church tradition to be part of God's sheep. Jesus warns that such false teachers are “wolves in sheep's clothing,” and they threaten to devour the flock (Matt. 7:15).

Recognize Jesus as the true, “Good Shepherd.” He does not climb in like a thief to steal us from God; he came through the gate, accredited by the gatekeeper, God, when Jesus was baptized at age 30 and God said of him, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Jesus came, not to steal us away from God, but to save us and bring us to God. He does not condone sin, but he came to die for sin and forgive sin. Recognize Jesus as your Shepherd who saves us, not by the law, but by the gospel.

That leads to another way to recognize your shepherd: By his voice. When a stranger speaks to the sheep, “Here, sheepie, sheepie,” the sheep don’t follow because they don’t recognize the stranger’s voice; in fact, as Jesus notes, “they will run away from him.” (Sheep know “stranger danger.”) Believers in Christ learn to recognize false teaching. They can spot the fake teacher who promises, “If you just pray hard enough God will make you rich, God will give you whatever you ask for.” We respond, “No! That’s not what the Bible says! You’re a phony!”

But we recognize the voice of the true shepherd. “He calls his 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.” Jesus knows you personally, individually. He died, not just for the masses; he gave up his life for you. He loves you intimately. So when we listen to his voice, his gospel message, we’re glad because we pick up on his love. For instance, our Lord graciously invites us: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). We sheep recognize our Shepherd’s voice. When we’re weighed down by a burdened conscience, when we feel weary over the battle with sin inside us, how good to hear the Shepherd who gives us rest—the forgiveness of our sins!

It’s true of children, of course, too. They know the voice of their parents because they’ve heard them so often. For us to recognize our Shepherd’s voice, we need to keep listening to him again and again. Come often to hear the Word, and read your Bibles at home so you can distinguish the voice of your Good Shepherd from the voices of false shepherds, and avoid false teaching.

Sadly, the Pharisees and others who were listening to Jesus’ words weren’t getting it. They “did not understand what he was telling them.” So Jesus switched tactics a bit. He told them plainly how he himself was the Good Shepherd, the one we sheep recognize by his leadership.

Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you (literally, Amen, Amen), 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.” Jesus was referring to the teachers who came the past century to Judea. They fell in two groups. There were the Sadducees, the liberals who only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament as true, who denied teachings such as angels and the resurrection from the dead. And there were the same Pharisees that Jesus was talking about. They were the legalists, who insisted on outwardly keeping not only the laws of the Old Testament, but their own rules and regulations in order to be truly “right” with God. But they were not leading the sheep to life. On the contrary, Jesus pointed out: They were the thief who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” False teaching steals faith, kills the soul, and destroys our life with God.

By contrast, Jesus is “the gate.” Perhaps Jesus is switching metaphors here. I’ve read, however, that in ancient rural areas, and in parts of the world today, some sheep pens have just an opening instead of a gate. The shepherd squeezes in the opening to keep the sheep safe inside. So our Lord Jesus is the gate who keeps us safe from our enemies, led by the devil; he keeps us in faith.

He’s also the gate to lead us out to rich pastureland. Jesus promises, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Jesus leads us to find pastureland, food for our souls now with his Word and sacraments; to find refreshing waters for our souls with forgiveness. Ultimately, our Shepherd leads us to the fullest, most abundant life there is: The pastureland of heaven, where we will enjoy life with our Shepherd and in God’s kingdom for eternity. As David, the Shepherd-King put it at the end of Psalm 23: “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Don’t be fooled by smooth-talking false shepherds who promise lots of happiness now or even a “heaven on earth.” Now that you recognize the Shepherd, by his arrival, his voice, and his leadership, follow him, the Gate and the only way to heaven. Amen.