

JOHN 10:1-11—THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEP

INTRO: The new year is traditionally the time when people reassess their lives: Where am I? Where am I going? What changes would I like to see? Where would I like to be a year from now?

It's the time when lots of us make new year's resolutions: lose weight; eat healthier; get fit; get out of debt and save money; learn something new. Most new year's resolutions deal with these physical aspects of life, all of which are important (even if we don't keep the resolutions).

But Jesus said, **"Life is more than food and the body more than clothing"** (Luke 12:23). So what about the deeper aspect of life, the spiritual aspect of life? It seems to me this is the time when we should assess our life as a whole, spiritual as well as physical. Because it is possible to change our diet and get more in shape but miss the most important aspect of the only life we have.

The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor 5:17). All of us, whether we call ourselves Christians, or seekers, or atheists, or are not sure where we stand, owe it to ourselves to at least know the biblical picture of what this new life is all about. If you are not yet a Christian, this will help you understand what the Christian life involves. If you are a Christian, it will help you to evaluate how you are doing.

In today's passage—**John 10:1-11**—Jesus gives us a description of the nature of life in him **[READ]**.

PROP: Christ guarantees a life of fulfillment.

O/S: Some of you might think that that is a very strong statement. But we will see that Christ truly does guarantee a life of fulfillment when we see: (1) the nature of Christ; (2) the nature of Christ's people; and (3) the nature of life in Christ.

I. The Nature of Christ

This speech by Jesus is an extended analogy, almost like a parable. He lived in an agrarian society where people farmed and kept cattle, sheep, and goats. So he is talking about shepherds and sheep. Much of that is foreign to us, but my youngest daughter Julia recently lived in New Zealand for a year where they have more sheep than people. In East Africa where I go sheep and goats are very common. Notice what Jesus is saying about himself: he is both the door to the sheepfold and the shepherd of the sheep. Let's take a look at these descriptions.

Jesus is the door. Jesus talks about the "door" in vv.1 and 2, and explicitly calls himself the door in vv. 7 and 9. Biblically, a "door" is a way of life—a religion—a way that people pursue to try to find a meaningful existence. Many people think that there are many doors or ways or paths that lead to the same end, namely, to eternal life, to salvation, to union with God, call it what you will.

Jesus has an entirely different view of this. Although there *are* many different religions, philosophies, and ways of life, Jesus said they all boil down to only *two* doors or ways or paths. And the two do *not* lead to the same end, but they lead to radically different ends. In **Matthew 7**, for example, he said there is a narrow gate, a narrow way that leads to life and a broad gate, a broad way that leads to destruction. In our passage today he uses the word "door" instead of "gate," but the two terms are synonymous—they mean the same thing. And only one of them leads to life. It is "*the door*" into the sheepfold, not one of many doors. IOW, when Jesus says ***"I am the door,"*** he is saying, ***"I am the only way that leads to life."***

When he talked about the "narrow gate" and the "narrow way" in Matthew 7, many people think he means a narrow set of rules that you must keep, a "narrow way of life." That is not it at all. He was talking about himself. That's why he said in **John 14**, ***"I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."*** The gate, the way, the door is much narrower than many people think. It is Jesus and only Jesus. Nothing else and no one else.

Then, Jesus calls himself the shepherd, the "good shepherd." He talks about the shepherd in vv.2, 3, and 4, and explicitly calls himself the good shepherd in v.11. In calling himself the shepherd, Jesus is doing at least two things:

- First, he is again emphasizing that he is the exclusive way to life. How does he do that? He does that by contrasting himself with everyone else who claims to have the way to eternal life: the Muhammads, the Buddhas, the Maharishis, the New Age gurus, or anybody else. He calls them thieves, robbers, and strangers. Why does he use such strong language? Because he enters by the door, the doorkeeper knows *him*. All other religions have various good aspects to them. But all other religions, religious leaders, gurus, or whatever do not try to find eternal life by going through "the door" which is Jesus. Jesus is saying that they try to "climb up some other way." But there is no other way. So he calls all other religious founders and leaders "thieves," and "robbers," and "strangers"—not to be mean-spirited but because even though such

people claim to show you the way of enlightenment or the way to heaven, they can't give what they promise. They are all baiting and switching and will steal your life from you if you follow them. That's why he says in **v.10**, "**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.**"

If Jesus is who he claims he is, namely, God come to earth as a man, that gives him both the right and the knowledge to make these statements. They may sound very narrow to us, but if he is God, then he knows what he is talking about, and we need to listen.

A girl I went to high school with is a Muslim now. She says she is happy. I'll accept that. Some time ago I sent her my ECLEA book on *Christianity & Islam* and asked her to read and critique it. She said she would. But then she refused. She wasn't willing to confront certain historical and other facts concerning who Jesus is and who Muhammad was. It's sort of like this: you can ignore your persistent cough or dizzy spells. You can say, "I feel great, it's probably nothing. I have a happy life as a Muslim or an atheist or whatever." And you do feel fine. But to ignore that cough or dizziness can kill you. Muhammad said, "**I don't know what will happen to me or to you after I die.**" Jesus said, "**I do know what will happen to you after you die. And I want you to live. And there is one way you will get the life you want and were created for—but you have to come to me to get it.**" Don't ignore him.

- Second, by calling himself the good shepherd, Jesus is giving us a hint of what he's like. In **v.3** he says he calls his own sheep by name. That means he knows us personally. He is the creator and sustainer of the entire universe, yet he knows you and you and you and me.

v.4 goes on to say, "**He goes ahead of his sheep.**" Jesus doesn't just sit in the back and issue commands. No. He goes in front of us. He doesn't ask of us anything that he wasn't willing to undergo himself. Are you worried about physical problems? Jesus was tired, hungry, thirsty, a man of sorrows, who ended up shedding his blood and dying at a young age in pain. Are you afraid of poverty? Jesus himself was poor. Have you been rejected by family members or friends? Jesus's own brothers didn't believe him and even thought he had lost his mind, and the religious leaders conspired to kill him. Whatever you are going through, Jesus has already been there. And when it says he leads us, it's telling us that he doesn't just leave us to go through hard times on our own. He is with us. He knows.

And v.11 says that Jesus "lays down his life for his sheep." He did for us what we never could do for ourselves. He gives people new life, not just at the risk of his life but at the cost of his life. Why? Because he loves us and wants only the best for us—a "best" that will last forever. Muhammad didn't and couldn't do that; Buddha didn't and couldn't do that; your job won't and can't do that for you. But Jesus could and he did. That's the kind of person we can trust. So now let's consider:

II. The Nature of Christ's People

Christ calls his people "sheep." While sheep are fuzzy and can be nice to look at and pet, it is not necessarily a compliment, although it is realistic. What do I mean? Sheep are social animals but are very dependent. One source says that absent someone to protect them, "**It is doubtful they could survive in the wild, if a predator risk existed.**" If you ever read Phillip Keller's book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, you will find it quite enlightening. Keller points out, "**It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep. The behavior of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways. . . . Our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance.**"

And that is precisely why having a good shepherd is so important. Keller says, "**When all is said and done the welfare of any flock is entirely dependent upon the management afforded them by their owner.**" That is true of sheep, and it also is true of human beings, because we are all living for something or someone.

Keller adds: "**I have known some of the wealthiest men on this continent intimately—also some of the leading scientists and professional people. Despite their dazzling outward show of success, despite their affluence and their prestige, they remained joyless people held in the iron grip and heartless ownership of the wrong master.**"

What kind of master is he talking about? It could be anything or anyone, because *everyone* is living for something. Maybe it's success; it could be your family; perhaps it's your independence. We all give ourselves to something which gives us meaning and purpose. The problem is, they will all let us down in the end. Success is fleeting—you will lose your abilities one day, others will surpass you, and you'll be sidelined. Your family will leave and/or die.

Independence? Many of us tend to think, "**I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul**" as the poem "Invictus" puts it. Particularly those of us who are well-educated and successful tend to think it was *my* effort and *my* hard work that brought me success. But that is not entirely true. Yes, one's education, effort, and hard work are all important factors. But you didn't give yourself the brain or the body you use. You didn't

give yourself the family, the time, the place, the circumstances you were born into, and all the people and connections along the way. We don't even hold ourselves together. We are the subject of forces beyond our understanding and beyond our control. We're far more dependent than we kid ourselves into thinking. As you age you will finally see that and will see that your life of "independence" has left you alone.

All these other "masters" will leave us at the brink of death. All except one. That one is Jesus who will never leave us or forsake us. That's why having the right master is so important. Phillip Keller concludes: **"I [also] have numerous friends among relatively poor people—people who have known hardship, disaster and the struggle to stay afloat financially. But because they belong to Christ and have recognized him as Lord and Master of their lives, their owner and manager, they are permeated by a deep, quiet, settled peace that is beautiful to behold."** That leads us to consider what our passage tells us about:

III. The Nature of Life in Christ

Today's passage of Scripture tells us that if Christ is your shepherd, your manager, then your life should be one of security, abundance, and one of expert guidance. So let's talk about these:

- Security. v.1 talks about the "fold of the sheep." In v.9 Jesus says, **"I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved."** The sheepfold is the place of protection—if you are inside it. Jesus talks about "entering" it, which implies that if you have not entered it, you are on the outside; just like when he talks about being saved, he is implying that if you are not saved then you are lost.

This is fundamental, although most of us tend not to think about it too much. What I mean is, when times are good, when we're healthy, we tend to put both our fragility and our mortality out of our mind. But they are still there, just like the persistent cough or dizzy spells. Jesus is here to tell us there is more to our lives than our earthly bodies and our earthly lives. He is here to tell us that when we die, we only die to this earthly body and this earthly life—but in fact we continue to live and will continue to live forever in one of two places. That's why he said, **"Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"** (Matt 10:28).

In our passage, Jesus is saying. **"If I'm your manager, if I'm you're shepherd, you don't have to worry at all, about anything, any more. You are safe. You are in a place where nothing can touch you that I, your shepherd and manager, don't allow. And because I am God, nothing takes me by surprise; nothing can take you out of my sheepfold; and nothing can take you out of my hand—forever."** No one else has ever given a guarantee like that, and no one else ever *could* give such a guarantee even if they wanted to—because no one else is like Jesus. That is why I summarized this passage by saying **"Christ guarantees a life of fulfillment."** That also is why Phillip Keller could say that the Christians he has known who have known hardship and disaster and who struggle to stay afloat financially **"are permeated by a deep, quiet, settled peace that is beautiful to behold."** That is what security in Christ and the salvation he gives are all about.

- Abundance. In vv.9-10 Jesus says that his sheep **"will go in and out and find pasture"** and **"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."** This is telling us that, in Christ, we will always find spiritual nourishment and fulfillment, more than we could imagine. Everyone wants to have a life that matters—one in which we are significant and our life is full and meaningful. Jesus is saying, **"I give such a life to you."** Why? Because he made us; he made us for a purpose. He knows us. And if we let him manage us, he will lead us to be and do everything he created us to be and do. We will be pleasing to the greatest being in the entire universe. If that is not fulfillment and significance, then I don't know what is.

How is this achieved? I said that life in Christ involves security, abundance, and expert guidance. So let's talk about:

- Expert Guidance. In vv.3-5, 8 Jesus says that his sheep "hear" and "know" *his* voice but do *not* "hear" or "know" the voice of the strangers, thieves, and robbers. This is a critical point for living in Christ and for receiving the spiritual nourishment and fulfillment we all want and need. How do we do this?

To know Christ's voice we need to know his word. And we need to know his will which is found in his word. But if we are in Christ, we are not just on our own to try to figure out what his word means and what his will is. No. Later in the book of John, Jesus promises to not leave us on our own but to come and actually live inside of us in the person of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who opens up our understanding of the Bible, who puts thoughts in our minds, who guides us through the circumstances of our lives—all to draw us closer to Christ and make us more like him.

Those who are in Christ have a direct, personal relationship with him that is unlike any other relationship, religion, or way of life. As we draw on him, we will be able to hear him speak to us when he puts thoughts in our mind, and we will know what to do as we confront various circumstances in our lives.

We will also find a depth of character and the resources for dealing with the hard circumstances of life—resources that are simply unavailable to anyone else.

Our problem is that, although Jesus said in v.5 that his sheep will not follow a stranger “but will flee from him because they do not know the voice of strangers,” we know the voice of strangers all too well. They are all around us, in the media, the movies and TV shows we watch, the culture as a whole—the voice of “strangers” is everywhere. But we should know the shepherd’s voice precisely because it is *different* from all the other voices we hear. It is that “still, small voice” that should stand out by its difference. But if we don’t know it because we don’t know his word, and if we are not attuned to his voice because he is not regularly in our mind, then we will not hear him when he is speaking to us. His voice will be drowned out by all the other voices we are accustomed to hearing.

The song “Come Thou Fount” says, we are “prone to wander”—just like sheep. Therefore, we need to cultivate our relationship with Christ and thereby become more and more attuned to *his* voice. There are different ways we can cultivate this relationship.

- Spending time in the Bible and with God’s people are important ways to cultivate our relationship with Christ. For example, Nancy was in a great Bible study facilitated by Betsy Rozelle which really helped to cultivate her relationship with the shepherd. Likewise, whenever I go to Africa I find that my relationship is enhanced because I spend so much of my time in the word of God among the people of God.
- Getting connected with a life group is another way that could help foster a deeper relationship with Christ because it connects you in a deeper way with some of his people whom you can get to know on a more than just superficial level.
- Applying our faith by getting involved with those who have physical, spiritual, and other needs is a tremendous way to deepen your relationship with Christ himself and hear and know his voice more and more. Applying our faith in service to those in need shows both us and those we are working with that our faith is real and that Christianity “works.” As we apply our faith in practical ways in service to others, we will start seeing Christ at work in and through us and will start hearing his voice. And as we hear his voice and respond to it, we will be changed and become more and more like him.
- Ultimately, the issue is: do we obey him; do we do what he says. Jesus said, **“He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me” (John 14:21).** Are we doing that? As we read the word, the Spirit will prompt us: he will call to our mind the person we need to forgive; the activity we need to stop doing; the thing we need to start doing. Jesus said, **“It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).** What are we doing with our money? How much are we giving to advance Christ’s mission and help the poor and needy versus how much are we spending on ourselves. All of these things show whether he is managing us or we are managing ourselves.

CONCL: Christ has more for us than most of us realize. He is the good shepherd. He cares about his sheep. He wants the very best for us, and not just the best for here and now, but the very best for us for the next ten thousand million billion trillion zillion years. We may not always understand why we are going through some of the things we are going through. After all, we are sheep. But Christ is a shepherd we know we can trust. He is the manager who manages our lives more expertly than we can manage our own. So we can relax and have a peace and security even in the most difficult of circumstances, because we know that our shepherd cares about us and is working all things out for our ultimate good because we love him and he loves us.