



Part 3 of the Ignite Series

Following the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-18

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 10:1-18

The Big Picture

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gives His life for His sheep. Hearing His voice, His listeners must choose whether or not they are going to follow after Him.

One of the oldest images in early Christianity is a picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The metaphor, powerful in that time, is just as meaningful for us today. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, cares for us, protects us, feeds us, and leads us. Even more, He demonstrated how much He was willing to do for us. He gave up His life by dying on the cross and rising again so that we might have a new—and more abundant—life in Him.

Context: Setting the Scene

The discussion of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John 10:1-21 comes immediately after Jesus had healed a blind man. The Pharisees (who were Jewish teachers in Jesus' day), heard about the miracle and refused to believe it. Jesus told the Pharisees that they could not

understand who He is because they, much like the man He had just healed, were blind and unable to see. Like all the Jewish people, they had been hoping and waiting for the Messiah (“the Christ” in Greek) for hundreds of years. As leaders of the Jewish people, they should have been leading others to Jesus. Instead, they were doing just the opposite.

The True Shepherd vs. the Thieves and Robbers (John 10:1-6)

To help the Pharisees understand their failings, Jesus compares robbers and thieves to a shepherd. Robbers and thieves sneak into the sheepfold to steal what is not theirs. The shepherd, on the other hand, is the true leader of the sheep. The sheep know their shepherd’s voice and follow him willingly. To the modern shepherd (or to the viewer of movies), this parable seems to be missing a character: There is no sheepdog urging the sheep along, keeping them in line. But in Jesus’ day, there was no need for the sheepdog. The sheep knew their shepherd personally. He lived with them, camped out with them, travelled with them. They knew his voice, and he had only to call for them to follow after him.

The Pharisees were familiar with shepherding practices in their day. They knew of passages in the Old Testament where God spoke of Himself as a shepherd. They also knew of warnings given to Israel, telling of false shepherds who would lead them astray. God warned that those He had put over Israel as guides and protectors—the kings and priests—had grown corrupt and lazy. They were ignoring and mistreating the people, leaving them open to political and spiritual attack. And so God had promised that He Himself would care for Israel to lead them back to safety.

Application to Jesus

The analogy of the Good Shepherd shows God's willingness to sacrifice His life for ours.

"I Lay Down My Life for the Sheep" (John 10:7-18)

Rather than clarifying His message immediately by explaining that they are the robbers and He is the shepherd, Jesus says that He is the gate of the sheepfold. In order to be saved, He says, one must enter through this gate. Shepherds often corralled the sheep into a sheepfold or cave and would then lay down at the opening. They used their very bodies as the gate, placing themselves at the door. Understood this way, Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate through which the sheep must pass.

Even further, as the shepherd lies down to act as the gate, Jesus says He will lay down His life for His sheep. A hired hand works for pay and runs when danger comes. Shepherds would fight off wild animals to protect their flocks, but it would have been foolish to give their lives freely to save the sheep. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, willingly accepts danger and death for His sheep. He chooses death in order that the sheep might have life. In doing this, Jesus demonstrates God's love for us. His passion and death on a cross is the ultimate sacrifice of love. This sacrifice is for all. There are others, Jesus says, who are not yet in the sheepfold, whom He must rescue so that there might be one flock and one shepherd. Offering Himself, Jesus promises to bring all under His care.

The Abundant Life

Not only that, but Jesus says that He came that they might have life, and “have it more abundantly.” By giving up His life, Jesus is promising that His followers will have a better life, a complete life, a life of absolute freedom and fulfillment. Following Jesus doesn’t restrict freedom, but rather enables it. The world often thinks freedom means “freedom from” (freedom from high taxes, from oppression, etc.), when true freedom is really “freedom for” (freedom for truly loving others, being a good friend, etc.). Freedom allows us to seek out those things for which we were made, to pursue true happiness. Trains cannot run when off the track, because they are made for it. We do not run well apart God, because our hearts are made for something bigger. Every person wants to be greater than what he is, and following Christ’s example by living virtuously enables us to become that person.

Are We Sheep?

Now that we know how Jesus is the Good Shepherd, how are we like the sheep? Sheep have no real natural defenses, are easy targets for predators, and rely on shepherds for protection and care. Sheep also are not very smart and are given to herd mentality. Sheep tend to follow each other blindly, not thinking about where they are going or the dangers that might be waiting for them. Dr. James Dobson wrote:

I observed this herd instinct a few years ago in a documentary on television. It was filmed in a packing house where sheep were being slaughtered for the meat market. Huddled in pens outside were hundreds of nervous animals. They seemed to sense danger in their unfamiliar surroundings. Then a gate was opened that led up a ramp and through a door to the right. In order to get the sheep to walk up that ramp, the handlers used what is known as a “Judas goat.” This is a goat that has

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been trained to lead the sheep into the slaughterhouse. The goat did his job very efficiently. He confidently walked to the bottom of the ramp and looked back. Then he took a few more steps and stopped again. The sheep looked at each other skittishly and then began moving toward the ramp. Eventually, they followed the confident goat to the top, where he went through a little gate to the left, but they were forced to turn to the right and went to their deaths. It was a dramatic illustration of unthinking, herd behavior and the deadly consequences it often brings.

Whether or not we like to admit it, we often fall into this same pattern of non-thought. We tend to follow our peers, or the most charismatic personality in the group. We just “go with the flow,” even if the flow isn’t carrying us anywhere in particular, or is carrying us in the absolute wrong direction.

Even if we avoid this herd mentality for the most part, we still cannot do everything for ourselves. God refers to us as sheep to remind us that we need a shepherd to lead us, and that we are dependent on Him. He brought the world into existence. He holds it in balance, so that we have food, shelter, work, and rest. And He brings us from this life to the next. We can no more easily save our souls from death than we can cause the stars to shine or the plants to grow. Understood this way, the metaphor of the sheep should be just as meaningful for us as it was for the Israelites.

Application to Our Lives

Jesus seeks to teach us that, like sheep, we are easy prey and are swiftly led astray. Will we choose to follow the Good Shepherd who sacrificed His life for us?

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 10:1-18

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever had a coach, teacher, friend, etc. that you looked up to as a role model? What about them made you want to follow in their footsteps?

STEP 2: BACKGROUND (READ THIS TO YOUR GROUP)

The ancient Israelites looked to God as their shepherd. Jesus makes a bold claim: He is the Good Shepherd. He is the one who will lay down His life for His sheep so that they are able to have an abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven. This passage will look at what we can do to make Jesus our shepherd and listen to His voice.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 10:1-18 together.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Read a few verses back to John 9:39-41 for a bit of context. Who is Jesus speaking to in our passage?

Answer: Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, a group of spiritual teachers and leaders in Israel.

2. Why does He direct His statements to them?

Answer: They did not believe that Jesus could heal the blind. Jesus is showing them that they are spiritually blind— blind to the truth that He is the true shepherd, whereas they have led many astray.

3. Why were the religious people in Jesus' day thieves and robbers?

Answer: Even though they were religious, they still failed to see God working around them.

4. What are some ways that religious people today (including ourselves) can be thieves and robbers?

Example responses: Being overly judgmental of others; refusing to reach out to others because they are different from us; not being willing to recognize how God is moving in our lives and on our campus.

5. What does it mean for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd?

Answer: Jesus is saying that He is the one promised by God who would lead His followers to peace and safety. He will care for them, protect them, and provide for them.

6. Jesus says, "I came so that they might have life, and have it more abundantly." What is the difference between life and an abundant life?

Answer: The abundant life, beyond normal "life," means freedom, fulfillment, and happiness.

7. If you could have an abundant life, what would it look like?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. What does the world think about following Jesus and the Church? Do they think it leads to a more abundant life?

Allow the group to discuss.

9. If you had to convince someone that being Catholic led to an abundant life, what would you say?

Allow the group to discuss. Example responses: Following Jesus doesn't restrict freedom, but rather enables it. Trains cannot run when off the track, because they are made for it. We do not run well apart God, because our hearts are made for something bigger. Every person wants to be greater than what he is, and following Christ enables us to become that person.

10. Read the quote from Dr. Dobson. Why do you think God uses sheep to describe us?

Answer: We are easily led astray, have no spiritual defenses apart from God, and need His care. God refers to us as sheep to remind us that we need Him and are dependent on Him. We can no more easily save our souls from death than we can make the plants grow.

11. What challenges do we face if we follow Jesus as our shepherd?

Answer: In today's culture, the world is filled with competing voices, each claiming to have the answers or to bring real happiness. We can easily get off track when we follow these other voices.

12. How do we overcome these challenges?

Example responses: Root our identity in Jesus and the true freedom and abundant life He gives us; listen to Jesus' voice found in Scripture and in prayer; be fed by the Shepherd through the Sacraments.

13. What is one specific way you want to follow Jesus this week?

Allow the group to discuss.

