

Knowing A True Shepherd

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There is one of those one-panel cartoon strips that I just love called The Far Side. I think probably a lot of you read those. There is this one Far side cartoon where it shows a cocktail party, but instead of humans, they are all sheep at this cocktail party. So all these sheep are standing there having their drinks, and this one sheep, I guess it is the hostess, says to what must be her husband, "Oh, Henry, this is terrible. This party is a disaster. No one knows where to stand. No one knows what to drink. No one knows what to eat." And then you look and you see, standing in the doorway, there is a dog and she goes, "Oh, this is wonderful. There's a border collie!"

Well, sheep have a natural inclination to assemble in flocks and this is a characteristic that enables a lone shepherd to handle hundreds of sheep. And as you all know, we are compared, as members of the church of God, to sheep in the Bible and our ministers are compared to shepherds. So to set up the remainder of the sermonette, I want to give you a few characteristics of sheep because we live in an urban society and many times we do not know some of these things.

Now to be of any value, sheep require constant care. They are notorious creatures of habit. If they are left to themselves, they are going to follow the same trails until they become ruts, and they are going to graze the same hillsides until they become wastelands, and they are going to pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites. So given these traits, you can see that sheep had to be constantly led to fresh pasture. You can also readily see the importance of the shepherd. A shepherd is defined as one who herds, guards, and cares for sheep. And I think you can also see the spiritual application there.

I Peter 5:1-2 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of

God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly.

I Peter 5:4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

That would then be directions to the elders to shepherd the flock. With that in mind, turn back a few books to Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.

It is interesting to note here that the word translated pastor is everywhere else in the New Testament translated shepherd. In other words, the Greek word *poiemen* means, literally, shepherd but figuratively pastor. Now, from these verses in I Peter and in Ephesians, it is very clear that we are sheep, that we are part of a flock. And our Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, has ordained various men to serve as human shepherds.

Let us turn to Acts chapter 20, doing a little bit more set up here for the remainder of the sermonette.

Acts 20:28-30 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [Paul is speaking here to the elders in the Ephesian church. He tells them], to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves [or the King James calls it grievous wolves] will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Paul, in his farewell to Ephesus, does just like Peter did. He exhorts the elders to feed the flock, but he goes a little further. He warns about grievous wolves, savage wolves, false prophets entering the flock trying to turn the sheep away. You have heard of wolves in sheep's clothing? Well, Paul says that some of these wolves in verse 30 will come from our very midst.

So my question for you this afternoon, for all of us is, how are the sheep to know their shepherd? How are the sheep to know that they are not following a wolf until it is too late? Well, the answer to that is in John chapter 10, verses 1 through 5, a section I think that we probably all spent time with in the last few years especially. He says,

John 10:1-5 "Most assuredly [Christ says], I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door [or the gate] is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."

How do you know your shepherd? The answer is, very simply, his voice. In this parable, we have many sheep gathered together in an enclosure, some type of a pen, possibly they are put up for the night. Now, when the shepherd speaks, the sheep that belong to that shepherd move, they physically separate themselves from the larger group and they go to that shepherd.

Now it is clear from verse 3 that his own sheep come to the shepherd, implying that others do not. Those that do not belong to him do not come when he speaks. And in verse 5, we see that the sheep will not follow a stranger. It is possible within the framework of this parable that a strange shepherd has tried to lead these particular sheep and they would not follow him because they did not know his voice.

Again, like I said earlier, living in an urban environment we do not know the habits of animals like, I guess, perhaps generations ago we did. I thought this was interesting. In National Geographic, September of this year, you may have seen this with the little shepherd boy on the front and his very colorful garb. Well, there is an article in here where a lady spent about six months traveling with these nomads of India called the Rebari. Probably one of the few of their kind left in the world. They had a herd of about 5,000 sheep that belonged in groups of 200 and 300 to each of the families. So each night they would put all these sheep together and they would have guards around

them. But in the morning, they would separate out into each family and take their sheep with them.

Quoting here from this lady [the author], she says,

Each shepherd has slightly different calls, variations on a theme. There are morning calls to move out, a call to bring the sheep to water, and so on. Each man knows his own sheep and vice versa. And his particular flock will disentangle itself from the larger flock and move out behind him in the morning.

That must be a fascinating thing to see. Five thousand sheep and then little groups of 200 or 300 peel off when they hear the voice of their shepherd.

Now, I need to make an important distinction at this point. Every time the word *voice* is used in the New Testament, it comes from the same Greek word, *phone*. *Phone* comes from a Greek word, *phaino*. *Phone* does mean voice. It does mean sound, but it can also mean "an address." Now, the word that it comes, *phaino*, means to lighten or to shine. So *phone*, the Greek word translated voice, can mean disclosure through an address or a message, in other words. And that is exactly what it means in John 10. It means a message. The true and faithful shepherd will be preaching a message that the sheep will hear and follow.

How can we know that this message or this voice that is leading us is a true one? Well, the answer to that is in I John chapter 4 (we were there in the sermon last week near the end).

I John 4:1 Beloved do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits [the King James says, try the spirits], whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

I John 4:5-6 They [speaking of these false prophets, those grievous wolves we read about in John 10] are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us [speaking of the ministry or the shepherds]; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

So we are told here to try or to test the spirits. Only those of God are going to hear God's ministers. Now, the word hear means more than just hearing a noise or sound. It carries with it the further, the better definition of understand. Let me give an example of that. When the apostle Paul was still known as Saul and he was struck down by God (we are all familiar with that example I am sure), it says early in Acts that the men with Saul heard a voice but saw no one. Later in Acts Paul tells the story and he says that the men with him did not hear the voice. Now, there really is no contradiction. The men with Saul heard a voice, they heard a sound but they did not understand it.

Now, back to verse 6 which says that we try the spirits, we hear and understand the voice because "he who is not of God does not hear us," does not understand. Now, if the world understands that shepherd, then that shepherd is of the world. That is what it says in verse 5. If the world understands him, the world hears him, then they of the world. This is how we know truth from error; and all error means is forsaking of the right path. God's sheep will know the right path and the wrong path through the voice, through the message of the shepherd.

That leads us right back to the parable in John 10. The job of the shepherd is to oversee his flock in all respects and that includes leading them down the right path. Do you remember the psalm? Psalm 23 talks about the shepherd leading the sheep or down the paths of righteousness, actually Christ is leading the sheep. If we are sheep, and we are in a manner of speaking, we hear the voice of our Shepherd. Now, if you think back to that parable in John 10, we were penned up for the night with all the other sheep. We were all asleep, if you want to take it that far. It was at night, we were all sleeping if you want to look at the parable a little further. But we heard the voice of the Shepherd. Our ears were opened. The verse in I John talked about trying the spirits which simply means understanding the message. And we have done that.

Further, the parable in John 10 says that we responded, we did not stand still, we separated ourselves from the flock as a whole. We have left the enclosure and, to a large extent, the main body of sheep.

Now, really the point of all this is merely just, I think, clarification or help to understand because I know in Protestant circles we hear a lot of times the phrase, "we hear the voice of our shepherd." And I have even seen it on, you know, little bulletin boards in front of churches and whatnot. And we have used the phrase ourselves a time or two. I would just hope that in the future when we think of or hear the phrase, "the voice of our shepherd," you think the greater meaning that goes to it. It is not simply hearing a sound or hearing the voice itself. It is understanding the message that comes with it.

Let me finish in I Peter chapter 2

I Peter 2:25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.