

RUF Bible Study – John
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John 10 – The Good Shepherd

We had our presidential election yesterday, and the results are in. Barack Obama won by quite a large margin. As the votes were tallied, the networks interviewed various talking heads. Obviously, the McCain supporters were resigned to their fate, saying they were done in by the economy, the stock market crash and the bank bailout. They had a lousy October.

Supporters of Obama were euphoric. “A new day is coming,” they said. “America has hope again.” Many shed tears of joy that their man would finally be able to change things.

To be honest, I don’t really care who is the president. That may color me cynical, but I don’t know whom to choose, or what will be the best thing for our country. I’ve voted in enough elections now – and lived enough life by now – to know that what I think is best can go terribly wrong, and that I’m not always given the most reliable information (WMD for example).

But I do know this. In my Christian worldview, I want to participate in politics (that is why I voted), and engage in the world. However, the language given to Obama should more appropriately be given to Jesus Christ, God’s Son, the Savior of the world. He gives hope. He gives victory. He uses the church (yes, and the state) to work his good in this world. So, McCain or Obama. I guess it will be Obama. He may be the most liberal president ever. I don’t know. He may be great. He may find himself and become a wonderful leader of our country. He may raise taxes, which may help the poor or it may enslave them even further.

We serve a prophet, priest and king named Jesus. So it’s okay.

Our passage in John 10 is about leadership, so it’s appropriate to think of the president, governors and all the leaders elected every so often in our country. Let’s look at what Jesus says about his leadership as opposed to all others.

The skills of the shepherd and the stupidity of the sheep

Jesus gives us a long passage about shepherds and sheep in this chapter. This is his last big public discourse, and he chooses to discuss this particular husbandry issue.

The Ancient Near East was a desert climate, a rocky culture. It was a dangerous place to live, filled with troubles. When it rained, the topography could instantly turn lush and fruitful, but most of the time it was dry, waterless, and without readily available food. Bandits could hide everywhere, making it a scary proposition to get from place to place without being robbed.

A common job in this culture was shepherding. Although it might seem this would be the equivalent of working at 7-11, in fact it was a job that took considerable bravery and skill.

Let’s paint the picture of this shepherd, because everyone listening to Jesus would have known what he was talking about, and it’s slightly far removed from our culture.

A shepherd would have carried a staff with which he would direct the sheep and also keep away the wolves and foxes. For an offensive measure, he would have carried a sling with stones to scare away or injure the attackers. He didn’t have much else with him. He had his eyes, and he would watch all of the sheep all of the time. He would get them to a place where he could see each of the sheep, so they wouldn’t wander off or get into trouble. And he had his voice or something like a little flute to make noise. So each of the sheep would get to know his voice and the different commands he would use. If he saw a fox coming, he would say a certain something so the sheep would all gather around him and get in the pen.

There would be sheep pens set up at various places along the routes, and of course in town. These would often butt up against a hill or craggy mountain to provide shelter and protection. There would be rock walls perhaps with thorns on the top like barbed wire. And there would be a small opening. The shepherd would gather his sheep in there, and he’d even sleep across that opening so nothing could get in or out without his knowledge.

Because a shepherd would spend so much time with his flock of sheep, he knew everything about each one of them. He knew their characteristics, their personalities, their favorite things to do, where they always wandered off the path, their particular markings, and their names. These shepherds would name their sheep, and call them each by name. The sheep were so well trained and so well known by the master that he could go into a sheep pen all mixed up with thousands of sheep from different flocks, and he could call their name and he’d pick them out and gather them all together.

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2008, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Are you seeing this? Are you picturing this? Shepherding took time and skill.

Now, into this culture, Jesus is taking this metaphor to himself. In verse 11, he says, “*I am the good shepherd.*” He says “*I am the gate.*”

What is he saying? Jesus is using the most personal of metaphors here. In his other I Am statements, he’s said he’s light, bread and water. But now he’s saying he’s a shepherd, and that is so much more personal – it involves a person. He doesn’t say he’s a bull rider or cat-herder or dog trainer or dolphin rescuer. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we are his sheep.

I remember sitting on the columns in the Quad at Mizzou. It was a beautiful Spring day. People were playing Frisbee, studying and making out on blankets. Then I saw a huge pack of girls gathered around a guy holding something in his arms. I thought it might be a baby, but there were too many girls around for that. You see babies all the time. It could have been a puppy, but again, there was too much commotion for a puppy. It was a week-old lamb. And it was cute, but the women were gaga over it.

That’s not the picture we should have of shepherding. It’s really nothing like that at all – a fratty guy with a beautiful lamb sitting in the sun with the grass and women all around.

Unfortunately, the metaphor isn’t too flattering to us if we are his sheep. Let’s talk about being his sheep for a minute. You can read anything about sheep and find out they are just stupid. They’re distracted. They fall down and can’t get up. They’re not good at taking care of themselves, grooming or eating. They wander off and can’t find their way back. They won’t really run away to freedom, but neither will they come back home because they are domesticated and like it. They just wander away. They’re really a huge pain, and they must be taken care of. You don’t find packs of wild sheep roaming around anywhere because they need a shepherd.

Isn’t that true of us? Jesus is saying it is. We are spiritually desperate. We are spiritually needy. We wander around, get lost and can’t take care of ourselves spiritually. We don’t know where to come or go, to return or run away. We eat the wrong food, and we try to do our best but can’t seem to figure it out.

Think back to when you were in junior high.² Think back five years ago. What do you think about what you knew then? What you were doing then? How you were like then? Most of us would say we were pretty foolish, awkward and acted like idiots. Maybe we might have even been jerks. But we all think we’re past that. We’re getting over that. We are just on the verge of a big change.

Except – in five more years, won’t you look back on your current, present self and think the same thing then as you do now? Is *this* the age when you have it all figured out? No. You will then look back at now and shake your head and think you acted like a fool.

That’s an example of lostness without even using the terms of sin and iniquity. It’s for all of us, but it points to our inadequacy to direct our own lives. That all of us know we are wandering around lost, dazed and confused, like spiritual sheep. It points to the doctrine of sin in our lives without being explicit about it like we find in other places.

Jesus sees us like this. In Isaiah 53:6, we read, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way.” When Jesus passes by Jerusalem in Matthew 9:36, he is moved to tears with compassion because, as he says, “they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

For you to grasp the gospel of grace, the good news of salvation for you, you have to first see yourself as a sheep. Not a wise owl, or strong bull, or fast cheetah, or mysterious newt. A stupid, spiritually stumbling sheep. Can you see yourself that way.

If so, where are the dangers in your life? Where do you get off the track? What wolves and foxes come around you in order to steal, rob and eat you?

How do you get off the track and away from the shepherd with your sexuality? What voices do you listen to other than the kind, orderly whistle of the Good Shepherd? You think your way is so much better, and you’ll find shade and food there, but the rock may give way and you’ll plunge down, down, down.

We live in the dangerous society of a secular campus and college town. It’s a perilous situation with wolves and foxes all around. We must have the ability to listen to the right voices and follow the correct shepherd.

We must listen to the shepherd, the Good Shepherd, to Jesus. The word “good” is more than just our word. It means beautiful, noble and strong. Shepherding was tough, manly work. It was a dangerous, brave job that entailed a watchful eye, a huge base of knowledge, leadership, defending, quick thinking, and compassion.

Jesus says he is the way to go in and out. He is the gate for the sheep pen. There is no other way to safety except through him. And he is the one who lays down in front of the gate to protect the sheep.

Do you know the voice of the Good Shepherd? Have you lost your way from him? Are you listening to other voices? Do you see yourself as a sheep without a shepherd?

The authority of the shepherd

Jesus says he is the Great Shepherd, an image and metaphor with great personal flavor. As per usual in the book of John, people aren’t so sure, and they want to know why he thinks so.

² From Keller

He tells them it's because he and the Father are one. He says throughout this chapter, *"just as the Father knows me and I know the Father... for this reason the Father loves me...this charge I have received from my Father... my Father has given them to me... I and the Father are one."*

Jesus again claims both intimacy and authority with God himself, and we again know the Jews understood this because in verse 31 they picked up stones to kill him for blasphemy. They got it. He was saying he was God.

We've heard Jesus say things like this before. He's not claiming to be merely a good teacher with good things to say. In fact, in John he hasn't given us many "little ditties" that would latch onto out of context. He's been telling people they must be born again, they must worship him, they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, they must follow him as the light of the world.

Jesus is pressing the authority issue here, and he's doing it in a really interesting way.

The first fascinating thing to realize is that shepherds have another special connecting point in this biblical culture. Not only are shepherds all the things we mentioned in our previous point, but they also have a connotation of – Kings. The biggest and best example of this is King David, who started off as a shepherd boy.

The Jewish culture understood the imagery of what a shepherd does is what a king does, and how the two could be connected. Ezekiel 34 is illustrative for this. In this chapter, God takes his leaders to task, again using the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep. You should read 34:1-10.

So when Jesus taps into the metaphor of shepherd, not only is he making use of the staff, the gate, guarding from the wolves and thieves, and the sheep hearing his voice – but also that shepherds are where kings come from. He is the King, Loving, Shepherd Warrior King.

That matters because of the other things we find out in this passage. We read in verse 22 that it was winter and the time of the Feast of Dedication. That is what we now call Hanukkah.

Let's get some background, but try not to get bogged down in the details. The Greeks had been encroaching on Jerusalem for a long, long time. The Greeks were all about assimilation. They loved Greek culture so much, they wanted everyone to have it. They succeeded in this to amazing degrees, but when they were strong and powerful, they weren't always quite as tolerant, depending on the leader (this is not surprising and is often the way it goes). The Jews hadn't exactly stood up for themselves, and by the time of Jesus, it is doubtful if many of the Jews could even speak Hebrew any more. They spoke Greek. So the encroaching, the assimilation, the adoption of numerous cultural and religious habits worked.

But at one point, the Greeks went to far. Greek soldiers took over the temple in Jerusalem, desecrated it with pigs' blood and set up statues to Zeus there. They ordered a stop to sacrifices – some of the Jews complied.

Not all. The Maccabean War began, pitting conservative Jews against the Greeks and Hellenized Jews. One conservative, traditional Jewish leader, Judas Maccabeus, captured the temple back and in 165 B.C. rededicated it. This is why it's called the Feast of Dedication in the Bible, and what is celebrated now as Hanukkah because the story goes that Judas' supply of oil miraculously burned for eight days in the temple during the fight and wait.

It's amazing that the focus of Christmas spoke during Hanukkah. Here's what I want us to know and think about: Hanukkah is about leadership. It's about what direction the temple and God's people will take. It's about who will lead them, and if they'll give in to the outside world. It's about the miracle of light and life.

Here is Jesus – in the Jewish world, in the midst of a nonBiblical Jewish holiday (it would be akin to Thanksgiving in its nature), and HE is the light of the world, the hope of the world, the life of the world. He is the temple, the sanctified place, the Son of God, the true object of worship.

He is the leader of God's people. He is the redeemer of God's elect. He is the Warrior King that Judas Maccabeus only pointed to. He has the authority of God.

What I'm trying to say is this time of the year and this festival were both about leadership and authority. Maybe we could make the connection to our political season. Some people were sick of it. Some want to give into the global economy. Some want all the illegal aliens out so we can have our country "back."

Everyone is talking about leadership. Who will the new coach be? Who will be in charge of new taxes? Who will run the coffee shop? Who will be the new mayor? Who will be the new sorority president? Who will be the new department head? Who will be the new campus minister?

What will change? Will we have hope?

Into this discussion Jesus has something to say. He says – I am the Good Shepherd. Listen to my voice. There are competing voices out there. Some of them dress up like me, but you must be able to discern my voice. Some of them try to woo you outside of the wall, but don't go there. Some of them try to climb over the wall, but don't listen to them.

Some of these voices are blatantly evil and destructive. They want to harm and deceive you. They want to eat you alive like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

But others are more like the hired hand. He isn't evil and bad, but he's only concerned for his own welfare. He's trying to make money, and doesn't really care for the sheep. He's there and helping, but will scatter when trouble comes.

Think of King Herod.³ He was wildly successful as a Jewish king under the rule of the Romans. He learned from the Romans, and even outdid them in some things. He was the picture of worldly success – lavish homes and castles (seven), massive building projects, and he built much of what still remains today from ancient Jerusalem. Sure, he was a cruel man, killing his own family on any suspicion. He had plan in place that was supposed to be enacted on the day he died. The officials were to take priests from each village and kill them in the town square – so everyone would be crying and wailing on the day Herod died.

Although that is unsavory, Herod was a man of success in the eyes of the world. He made something of himself.

Yet, Jesus ignored him. Jesus was a man who was also trying to build an empire, a kingdom. Jesus talked about the kingdom all the time, especially in the Synoptic gospels. However, Jesus did not employ the methods of Herod, nor consult him or even talk about him (he mentions him in passing once).

Herod built an impressive empire that was soon forgotten, overrun and destroyed. Jesus had a motley crew of ragtag disciples who wandered around the wilderness, and yet he has built the biggest, longest-enduring kingdom ever known.

I'm telling you all that to make you wonder. Which king should you follow? Which plan might be best?

There are places in your life where you resist the shepherd. Even though you are a sheep, you think you know best. You should reconsider that position. Following Jesus means following all of him. Following all of his teachings, even if they seem to contradict the way you're going. He has the authority to tell you. He is the leader, the true leader and king of his people. He is in control of his death and its timing. He and the Father are working together to gather the flock, to get together the people God has given him. Follow this leader.

The gifts of the shepherd

So we have the skills of the shepherd and the authority of the shepherd. The shepherd things for the sheep that the sheep need.

Faith – Jesus keeps on talking about how the sheep can hear his voice, and they come to him. He mixes this up with belief and faith. For example read 10:25-27: *I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me but you do not believe because you are not part of the flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*

Jesus says that belief and hearing his voice go together, and these are given to those who follow him, who are given to him by the father.

Prosperity – we read in John 10:10: *I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.* Jesus isn't coming to give his sheep a scraggly existence. We may not be living in lush, tropical Greek islands, but we will be taken care of and this life in Christ with the Father is the way we're meant to live in the full.

Security – Jesus says he will protect us against robbers and thieves in John 10:10-13. He will not abandon us. He is there with us in the danger. He doesn't always prevent all danger from coming our way, but he is there and present with us because he's personal and intimate with his people.

Unity – in verse 16, Jesus says he'll bring other sheep into the fold. He's talking about the unexpected sheep, especially the Gentiles. Most likely, that means you and me.

Love – Jesus knows his sheep. He's a personal savior. I read *Fast Food Nation* this summer and was sickened by the description of the American meat packing industry. The cities of cows, the pesticides, the steroids, the feces, the poor wages for cutting the meat, the sheer numbers games, the corn prices kept so low – just awful.

We're not identified with ID badges or bar codes on our necks. We're not a statistic to Jesus. We're names. Real people with real characteristics. He gives us names. He knows our names. We hear his voice, and he hears ours as well.

I hope you see that following Jesus benefits you. He is a good shepherd king.

The mystery of the shepherd/ the worth of the sheep

The last and greatest gift gets a category all to itself. Jesus not only protects and guides the sheep. He not only defends and feeds the sheep. He doesn't just take care of and unify the sheep.

Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, says he willingly dies for the sheep. Why does he do that?

Didn't we say that sheep are dumb, ignorant, only trouble, rebellious and mean? Yes we did say that and it's all true. We are like that.

Sheep have one other quality we left out – they're extremely valuable. Otherwise they wouldn't be worth all the trouble. Everything on a sheep could be used. It's wool, it's meat, it's hooves, everything inside can be eaten. Really, there wasn't an animal that was pound-for-pound more valuable.

So on the one hand we have the doctrine of sin found in our sheepness. We are worthless creatures. On the other hand, we have the doctrine of the image of God, of the inherent worth of humanity in our sheepness. We are worth so much that God would die for us.

³ Thoughts from a chapter in *The Jesus Way* by Eugene Peterson. I would highly recommend this book.

That's what Jesus did. He says he will lay down his life for his sheep (only his sheep), and then he'll be raised again. He says he lays it down of his own accord. He's willing to die for his people. It's not suicide or a human sacrifice to appease the gods. It's an atonement. We have the doctrine of the atonement.

At the end of the chapter, John writes that Jesus went back to the Jordan River where he'd been baptized by John the Baptist. That was where God had said, "*This is my son, in whom I am well pleased.*" That was where John the Baptist had said, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*"

Did you hear that? This is the mystery of the shepherd. The shepherd didn't just die for his sheep. He became a lamb so he could be sacrificed for his people. There is a reversal here. The shepherd became a lamb so the sheep could become the children of God.

It's truly amazing and unprecedented. It's unheard of. It's staggering. Even the way the preposition there in 10:15 goes points to sacrificial language: I lay down my life "on account of" the sheep. For the purpose of. It's a sacrifice.

In Hebrews 13:20, we read of this double image of shepherd and sheep: *Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant...* That blood of the eternal covenant is the blood of the spotless lamb. Of Jesus.

Again, we must point out that this is not "Jesus as example" theology. It's Jesus as Savior. He dies for his people.

When Jesus quotes Psalm 22 on the cross when he's dying, he is thinking of the whole psalm. Some of that psalm is talking about being attacked by wild dogs, being torn to shreds by evildoers. The shepherd dies for his sheep.

We mentioned Isaiah 53:6 earlier, but let's hear the rest of the verse. *We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Someone saves us because we need saving. That person is the suffering servant, the Good Shepherd, the Warrior King, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

The response to the shepherd

Like usual, John is pushing for a response here from us. What do you think when you hear about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, as the Lamb of God, as the Warrior King who leads his people, who has authority from God to lead you wherever he chooses?

Some just didn't understand him (verse 6). It went over their heads. Maybe they couldn't identify themselves as sheep. Maybe they were half asleep. Jesus' parables do need some explanation, and perhaps they didn't stick around because they were too busy.

Some of the dismissed him (verse 20). Jesus must have a demon! He's crazy. They can't explain him, so they attribute something to him and then write him off.

Some of them are impressed with him (verse 21). They've seen him in action, and know he has power. They can see the effects of Jesus on the lives of others and they're intrigued with Jesus.

Some of them have a suspicious questioning (verse 24). *How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, then tell us plainly!* It doesn't seem like they really want to know because that's what he's been talking about. They aren't really listening, but acting like they are.

Some of them take out stones to kill him (verse 31). They hear his words, and they don't like it one bit. They are mad at Jesus for messing up their worlds, and they're going to defend God to the end by killing this man who is saying these things. They hate Jesus.

Some of them believe (verse 42). It's interesting that those who are said to believe in this passage aren't in Jerusalem, the city of Belief. Instead, they're out in the hinterlands again, far from the city of faith, but they're willing to follow Jesus, to listen to him, and to believe in him. They've seen the signs, the pointers, and they think Jesus is who he says he is. They believe.

What about you?

We all can respond to this chapter.

Beware of thieves and robbers who come in to destroy. Keep watch over who you listen to, and who you follow. Are they teaching you about the gospel or just good works? Are they moralists or hedonists?

Do you recognize the voice of the shepherd? Can you hear the shepherd of your soul? Have you lost touch with him? Have you wandered from the path?

Pastor Tim Keller gives helpful summaries of our responses. He says we should follow Jesus as our shepherd comprehensively, absolutely and intimately.

We must follow him *comprehensively*. He knows everything about our lives. He watches us, listens to us, bathes us, feeds us, shears us, protects us. There is no area of our lives that is not under his shepherd's eye. So many of us turn over parts to him, but keep back other parts. We turn our careers or majors over to him, but we keep back our relational lives. Or we turn over our dating and sex life to him, but don't want him to say anything about our finances or spending. He is Lord and shepherd of all of it. We've been saying this all along as we've talked about Jesus as life, light, bread and water. Here is another example. As a shepherd, he watches and controls it all.

We must follow him *absolutely*. When sheep get lost, they must be found by the shepherd. He goes and looks for them. When he finds them, the sheep isn't glad. The sheep doesn't willingly follow the shepherd back to the flock. Instead, the

shepherd has to basically tackle the sheep, throw it on the ground, bind all of its legs together and carry it back on his shoulders. When you see the picture of the shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders, realize that there has been a considerable amount of violence to the sheep before that. It's all for the sheep's good.

Some of you are in the middle of that struggle. You don't get what's happening to you. You see and hear the shepherd coming toward you, and you're scared – to change metaphors – like a deer in the headlights. You're not sure you want to go with the shepherd. Maybe you do. Maybe not. Then – Jesus seems like he's hurting you. He's throwing you down and binding your legs. You feel stunned and groggy, bound and dragged away.

That is disconcerting to say the least. Remember – you're a sheep. You must have help in every way. That means you have to trust the one who helps you. You have to trust him absolutely, even when it feels like he's hurting you he's helping you because he loves you.

And you must follow him *intimately*. Jesus knows and loves his sheep. Jesus isn't just giving you a teaching for you to follow. He's not given you a treasure map to discover. Or a book of rules to keep. He's given you himself. It's a relationship. He loves his sheep. He knows his sheep. He died for his sheep. Know his love. Pursue him as you would pursue a friend. Talk to him about what's really going on in your life, about how you need him. That's called confession and repentance. Go beneath the surface and beyond what you can get from him. Be real and honest with him about your life.

I heard a story about a town that took all the sheep from the neighborhoods and stuck them in a pen. A huge pen filled with thousands of sheep. The reason they were collected had been dealt with, but the officials didn't know what to do with the sheep, or whom they belonged to any more. An Arab woman came to the policeman and asked him if she might be able to get hers out. The man looked at her like she was crazy – how would you be able to find yours in this mass of mess?

She motioned to her son. He pulled out a small flute and started walking through the pen, playing a simple, distinctive song. Sheep started moving around, and gathering around him. He kept playing, and he led them out.

Jesus will find his sheep. Can you hear his song? Can you hear his voice? If so, then can you lead others by loving them in the way you have been loved?

*“Come,” said Jesus' sacred voice “Come, and make My paths your choice
I will guide you to your home, Weary pilgrim, hither come.*

2. *“Hither come, for here is found Balm that flows for every wound
Peace that ever shall endure Rest eternal, sacred, sure,
Rest eternal, sacred, sure.”*