

I love this video clip because I think it really shows how special the relationship is between a shepherd and his sheep. Shepherds and sheep have been together since the beginning. I know we often think about horses being important animals to humans, noble warriors--and dogs being man's best friend. But the fact is, we don't know if Adam rode a horse or if Eve had a pet dog, but we do know that their son kept sheep. Abel was a shepherd, mentioned at the very beginning of the Bible. From the outset of the story, we are introduced to the important relationship between sheep and their shepherd. Why does God start His story with a shepherd and sheep? I think the same reason He starts the story with a married couple -- because there is something about this relationship that symbolizes the relationship God has with His people. In our text today Jesus spells it out for us, let's take a look at the text. John 10:11-21.

As Jesus reintroduces Himself in this passage, just like the other ones you've been studying so far in this series it's important to look at the context. Jesus has just performed a miracle -- one of the seven miraculous signs that John records in his gospel account. Jesus has healed a man born blind. But the interesting thing about this miracle story is that more space is given to the fallout from the miracle than to the miraculous deed itself. Because after this blind man is healed there's a huge controversy about what happened. An investigation takes place -- how did the man receive his sight? who healed him? Is this even the same man who was blind from birth? The Pharisees are the ones pursuing these questions and they go so far as to interview the man's parents about the situation. Throughout this story the Pharisees are making some judgments about Jesus. They say He is not from God because this miracle took place on the Sabbath. They say multiple times that He is a sinner. And so at the end of the story Jesus comes back and pronounces a judgment on them. Jesus says that actually, the Pharisees are the ones who are blind. And the Pharisees are not fans of this. And in response Jesus gets into this teaching about sheep. So what's going on here? How did we get from a blind man to sheep?

The Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day. They didn't necessarily have official political power, they weren't priests in the temple, but they had a huge amount of social capital. They were lay leaders. And as such, they considered themselves like shepherds for the Jewish people. You can see them trying to shepherd the blind man and the other people in the community through this story. Because what are they doing? They're trying to ascertain how the man received his sight, and whether or not it came from God. And it says that the parents were afraid to talk to the Pharisees because they had started putting people out of the synagogue if they confessed that Jesus was the Christ. That's a shepherding move. They are -- in a very flawed and misguided way -- trying to protect their sheep. They are looking at Jesus and deciding, He's a danger to our people. He's got to go.

The irony is of course that while they think they are acting like shepherds, they are really acting like thieves, robbers, and wolves. They are acting like bad shepherds that were prophesied against in the text we heard earlier from Ezekiel. And Jesus is drawing from the imagery of that prophesy. And when the Pharisees heard it, it must have really stung. Because there's some history here.

Ezekiel was a prophet during the Exile. He was taken to Babylon, like Daniel, and from there he received messages from the Spirit of God for the people who were experiencing the exile. And in Ezekiel 34 God is grieving over the wicked shepherds who had led His people astray. The leaders of that time, the kings and the priests, who were supposed to guide the people into a stronger relationship with Him and instead had done the opposite. Because of their bad leadership, their idolatry, their sin, the people were receiving covenant consequences and curses. And this is where the history of the Pharisees really begins. Because when the people came back to Jerusalem after the Exile they rebuilt the temple, and they re-dedicated themselves to observing God's commands. In the book Nehemiah we see the people making a promise to God that they won't make the same mistakes they had made under their "bad shepherds" but instead they would be extra faithful to God's laws. It had been disobedience that got them into the mess in the first place, so to fix the problem they would be really obedient. Part of that was a renewed promise to observe the Sabbath, maintain temple rituals, and separate themselves from unclean people. Do those priorities sound familiar? The strict traditions and ritualistic legalism that the Pharisees hold to in the New Testament has its origins in the post-exilic Jewish community. The narrow thinking of the Pharisees started as a way to combat the bad shepherds. But there was a problem in this plan. Because the solution to sin isn't legalism. And by holding to

these legalistic traditions they actually ended up being just as bad as the “bad shepherds” they were trying to avoid.

Why isn't legalism the answer? Well, let me ask you a question, how do you feel about cabbage? I ask, because there is a somewhat popular diet called the cabbage soup diet. It's for people who recognize that they have been eating unhealthily and who want to lose weight. It is reported that you can lose up to 10 pounds in a week! Sounds great right? Well here's how it works. For a week, basically, just eat cabbage soup. But hey - you can have as much cabbage soup as you want. Ok, however you feel about cabbage, does anyone think that this diet is truly going to be someone's answer to an unhealthy eating pattern? Probably not. Because after that week of eating only cabbage soup you know what I would want to do? Eat a whole lot of just about anything else. It seems like a solution at first, I mean, you probably do lose a lot of weight, but it isn't a long term viable option. The legalism of the Pharisees was something like the cabbage soup diet. They said, okay, we don't want to fall into the bad sin patterns of our forefathers, so instead of doing all those bad things we are going to get really restrictive. Like saying, instead of eating fast food and drinking soda, I'm just going to eat cabbage soup. And the tricky thing about it is that the law is not a bad thing. Just like cabbage is actually really good for you. It's full of fiber and vitamins! But thinking that eating nothing but cabbage is going to change your life is asking cabbage to do something it just can't do. If you really want to get healthy you need to deal with your relationship to food, and exercise. And following the law, even as strictly as the Pharisees tried to, isn't going to solve your sin problem. You need to deal with your relationship to sin. And the only way we can do that is by being in relationship to God.

Are there any ways you are falling into the same problem as the Pharisees? Are there areas in your life that you realize are unhealthy, sin patterns that you know you need to address? Do you ever think that to fix those problems you really just need to hunker down? Get your act together? Try harder? Do better? Because any time we try to address our own sin problem with our own ability to obey God better, we're really just eating cabbage soup. And it's not going to work.

So the Pharisees were trying their solution to the sin problem diagnosed in Ezekiel 34. But God promises to solve the problem in the same prophecy. He says that since the bad shepherds have messed everything up, He will seek His sheep and bring them to good pasture. He will judge between them. And He promises this, “Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I the Lord have spoken.” (Ezekiel 34:23-24) In this prophecy God says that He will be their shepherd, and that David will be their shepherd. Now, when Ezekiel was receiving this prophecy King David had been dead for 500 years. So who was this future David, who would also be God, who would shepherd God's people and bring them to Him?

Well, Jesus pretty clearly thinks it's Him. And that's why there is a division among the people after Jesus says that He is the good shepherd. Some even accuse Him of being demon possessed. Because in that statement, “I am the Good Shepherd” Jesus is equating Himself with the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the God-man shepherd that Ezekiel promised. The solution to the sin problem of the people won't be strict observance of the law. They won't be able to fix their broken nature by just trying harder to follow the rules. The only solution to sin is for God, the Good Shepherd, who cares for and guards and guides His sheep. Who feeds His sheep, even of Himself as Pastor Paul preached last week, who leads them into green pastures and still waters. For this shepherd to lay down His own life for them so that they may receive His righteousness. That is the only solution that's going to work.

So the Pharisees are not good shepherds. That would have been offensive enough. But Jesus goes a step even further. Not only are they not good shepherds, they are not even His sheep. In the text that follows, some people get blunt with Jesus. They say, if you are the Christ tell us plainly. And Jesus gets very blunt back -- I showed you signs that I am but you do not believe because you are not My sheep.

Today, it is not a good thing to be compared to a sheep. When I was younger I was in a dance class, and as part of the class the teacher would demonstrate a routine and then she would stand at the front and watch the class perform the routine. And each girl was supposed to pay attention to what the teacher demonstrated so they could accurately replicate it. Well one class, everyone kind of spaced out. So when the teacher went to the front and the music started we all forgot what we were supposed to be doing. So we looked for the girl who usually knew what the deal was, and we all just kind of followed her. And from the front of the

classroom, I'll never forget it, my teacher just started bellowing at us. Baaa. Baaaa. Baaaaaa. You're all just sheep. I was not proud of that comparison. Being a sheep is synonymous today with being a follower. For not thinking for yourself. It's not a good thing. But things were different in Jesus' day. For the Pharisees and other Jews in Jesus' audience the idea of being compared to sheep would have been very familiar and actually very popular. Just like Pastor Paul talked about last week, Psalm 23 is a beautiful and famous poem where David, the greatest King of Israel, compares himself to a sheep with God as his shepherd. And elsewhere in the Bible the same comparison is made, God is the great shepherd of His people.

So when Jesus says that the people are sheep, no one would have been offended. Because He's not saying they are sheep because they smell bad, or they are sheep because they are stupid or anything like that. They are sheep because of their relationship to the shepherd.

There would have been a temptation for His audience to assume that they were in God's flock because of their ethnicity. Their family. Their heritage. They were Jewish, therefore they were God's sheep, right? But Jesus disagrees with that sentiment. He says He has other sheep who are not of this fold and He must bring them in as well. He's referring to the Gentiles. So there are sheep of His out there who were not from the right group. And then, of course, the people who thought they were definitely God's sheep, the Pharisees, show that they don't know the Shepherd at all. They don't believe in His signs. They are not His sheep.

Because here's the thing, being one of God's sheep has nothing to do with where you're from. It has nothing to do with what language you speak or where you were born. What family you had or how you were raised. What you look like, what you do for a living, what clothes you wear. Being one of God's sheep has very little to do with you. It has everything to do with the relationship you have to the Shepherd. Jesus says He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him. That they know His voice and follow Him. Just because you were raised in church, you attend faithfully every Sunday, you have your memory verses in order and you give your 10%, none of that means you are one of Jesus' sheep. So what does? If you believe that Jesus is the Christ. If you have really put your faith in Him. If you are trusting Him to guide you to green pastures and through the valley of the shadow of death. Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep. He died the death that they deserved so that they can be in right relationship with God. And then He took His life back up again. He rose again from the dead so His sheep can have new life in Him, today and in the age to come. And if you can't say with certainty this morning that Jesus is your shepherd then I want to encourage you to take that up one on one with Him. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

So then where does that leave us? If we are His sheep and He is our shepherd, what does that mean for you and me today? Jesus talks about knowing His sheep, His sheep knowing Him, and them following His voice. Just like the sheep in the video from earlier, if we are Christ's sheep we know His voice and we follow Him. At BCA we recently asked the students to come up with questions they want a panel of teachers to answer in chapel. One student wrote the question, "how do you know when it's God telling you something." Now, these questions were meant to be anonymous, but when you teach the same students year after year you start to know their handwriting. And the student who wrote this question is a senior. They need to pick a college, they need to pick a major. Seniors in high school are under a lot of pressure to figure out what they're doing with the rest of their life. I can understand why a student would really want to know -- how can I hear God's voice? How will I know what God wants me to do? And we all wonder this from time to time right?

God speaks to us in different ways. Another one of my students recently told the story about her own experience of hearing from God. She feels called into ministry, and she was praying and asking God if she should pursue ministry domestically in the US or if she should think about doing missionary work in another country. Her mom has done work in Africa and so she's asking God, tell me which direction I should be looking in. And she said that the text popped into her mind -- Isaiah 56. So she looked it up in her Bible, and the title of that section in her Bible was "Salvation for foreigners." And for her, that was a confirmation from the Lord, so she's seriously considering some sort of work abroad. Now, God doesn't always answer us like that right? Sometimes He does. Sometimes He's even more clear. God can speak to us in visions and dreams, some people literally hear His voice. But more often than not, that's not how the Good Shepherd leads us.

Jesus says that His sheep know His voice, that they follow His guidance. As much as we might feel like the problem for us is that we don't know when God is speaking to us, I think most Christians actually have a different issue. I was working with one of my students on his paper analyzing Psalm 23. So we're sitting there and I say, "Let's start at the beginning. What does the very first verse mean?" And the student says, "David

doesn't want God to be his shepherd." And I asked him, "Where do you see that?" And he responds, "The Lord is my shepherd--I shall not want." Now, that's not what the psalm is getting at. But I think there's more truth there than we like to admit. More often than us asking to hear from God and not hearing from Him, I think we do hear from God but we don't like what He's saying.

God speaks to us in many different ways. First and foremost He speaks to us through the Bible. If you want to know what to do, in this book God gives you a lot of ideas. Love Him first and love others as you love yourself. Pursue peace, justice, righteousness. Care for the widow and the orphan. Live selflessly. Give generously. Set your mind on things above. Gather for yourself treasure in Heaven. There is no shortage of guidance on how to live when you start to read what God has to say. God speaks to us through other people. Whether it's someone giving a message or sharing a testimony, or just a wise Christian friend offering advice or counsel, God speaks to us through one another. And God speaks to us in the quietness of our hearts. But in all of those instances, we're left with the decision of whether or not we're going to listen. Is the Lord the shepherd that you shall not want?

Have you ever had that feeling that you should help someone or talk to someone? That little prompting in the back of your head that says, "You should tell this person about Jesus?" I had that feeling the other day. I was pumping gas on my way to work, I was kind of running late, and there was this lady on the other side of the gas island. And I just had this sense that I should say something to her, invite her to church, ask her if she needs prayer. Something. And you know what? I ignored it. I reasoned it away saying, "It's cold, I'm running late, and I don't want to seem like a creeper." And I even said in my head, "Sorry God. not this time. It's not convenient." And I finished pumping my gas and I drove away. Has that ever happened to you?

As a result of that situation, I took some time to do some self evaluating. Because I didn't like the way it felt to sense something like that and then ignore it. So since then I've been trying to really listen to the voice of the Shepherd. More recently I was walking with Elijah and an older woman by a crosswalk asked me if I knew if the bus stopped near there. I told her, no, sorry, and I kept walking. But then that little feeling showed up saying, you should go help her. You have a phone, google bus routes. So I turned around and went back. And together we looked up the bus routes and I was able to point her to the place across the street down a few yards where the bus would stop in about half an hour. Then I turned and started for my car, which was just down the road. As I got in my car I got that feeling again -- you shouldn't leave her to wait in the cold for half an hour. The place she's trying to go isn't that far. Offer her a ride. So I did. And on the way I asked her if there was anything I could pray for her for -- there wasn't. I didn't give a gospel presentation, she didn't give her life to Christ sitting in my passenger seat. But I drove her the few miles that it was and dropped her off and I trust that for whatever reason that's what God wanted me to do that day. What has God been calling you to do? Can you relate to these stories? Have you heard the voice of the Good Shepherd? Have you listened?

I want to encourage you this morning. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He cares about His sheep, you, so much that He laid his life down and took it up again. He guaranteed His sheep that they can have an abundant life here on this earth, and an eternal life with Him in the life to come. We can be comforted by this, because Jesus says that no one can take His sheep out of His hand. Even if you're like me and you're still learning what it looks like to follow His voice, and like me you mess it up just as many times if not more often than you get it right, it's okay. You are safe in His hand and nothing can change that. We can have confidence, that no matter how well you feel you know God, He knows you. He knows His sheep by name and He cares for them. And you can have courage. Why don't I always follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit? Why don't I always take every opportunity to serve others and tell them about the good news of the gospel? I think it's because when I hear that directive it feels risky. It feels like I would be putting myself out there. Going forward alone into this precarious place. But nothing could be further from the truth. Because the Good Shepherd leads His sheep. If the shepherd is leading you somewhere, that means that He is already ahead of you. And that actually, the isolating thing would be not to follow. When we go it our own way we are going off alone. When we follow the voice of the Shepherd we are going toward Him. He is right there for us. So I want to challenge you, listen for the Good Shepherd and follow Him.