

I want to begin today by asking you an introspective question, one that requires reflection and deeper thought. Who are the people you trust most in life? Who are the people you know for sure are going to look out for you, protect you, always have your best interests in mind? Do you trust your spouse in that capacity? Do you trust your parents in that capacity? Do you trust siblings or extended family members in that way? Do you have friends you trust like that? Do you have a doctor or a financial advisor, a boss, or a mentor who you trust in that way? Trust is an incredibly valuable and precious commodity, and we choose to give it to people we have deemed to be trustworthy. Few things bring more vitality and momentum to a relationship than when trust is strong. Few things bring more pain and heartache than when trust is broken, especially by someone who was supposed to have our best interest at heart. Our passage today is all about deciding who is worthy of our trust. We're not talking about trusting with our emotions or our physical health, or with our finances or professional advancement, but rather who we can trust to care for our soul, who we can trust regarding the overall direction of our lives, who can we trust for eternal life, who do we know will always have our best interests at heart, will always point us in the right direction, will always speak truth to us, and will always protect us. If you have your Bible, turn with me to John 10.

Now as you are turning to John 10, I'll set the background. First, shepherds had a prominent role in Scripture. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve leaders of the tribes of Israel were all shepherds. Moses was a shepherd. David was a shepherd. The most prominent leaders in Israel's history were all shepherds, men who cared for sheep. When God spoke about leading people, he was looking for leaders who would care for his people the way a good shepherd cares for his flock: "May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Numbers 27:16-17). God wanted good leaders, caring leaders, trustworthy leaders to care for his people. But what happened time and time again? Non-trustworthy leaders rose to prominence and power. Instead of nurturing the sheep, they exploited the sheep. Instead of serving the people entrusted to their care, they used the people to serve their own self-centered purposes. This is most climactically described in Ezekiel 34:1-4:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.'"

This was the nature of the spiritual, political, and cultural leadership throughout Israel's history. God was heartbroken over the corrupt, untrustworthy leadership. This was his response:

"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down,

declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.” (Ezekiel 34:11-16)

The people appointed to take care of God’s people were harsh and self-serving, so God says, through the prophet Ezekiel, roughly 600 years before the time of Christ, that he himself will come to shepherd his people, to care for them, to bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, feed them, protect them, and guide them.

You can see how rich, significant, and far-reaching the use of the image of shepherding is throughout Scripture. With that in mind, we come to our passage today in John 10, where Jesus picks up this image and uses it throughout the entire passage.

Let’s also remember the passage we were in last week. Jesus touched the eyes of a man born blind and restored his sight. The Jewish leaders saw this as a threat to their power and authority, so they cast the man out of their community and said that anyone who believed Jesus to be the Messiah would be excommunicated from their fellowship, kicked out of the synagogue, labeled a heretic, and deemed unworthy of societal interactions. Jesus extended compassion and mercy; they responded with vindictiveness and wrath, all because they were threatened by Jesus because the people loved him and were beginning to look to him instead of them. They didn’t care about the truth, or about righteousness, or about the people, or about the glory of God; all they cared about was themselves and how this might adversely impact them. In John 10, Jesus calls them out, saying they are the wicked shepherds spoken of in the Old Testament, and he has come to be the faithful shepherd to care for God’s people.

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (John 10:10-18)

This is such a beautiful passage about the heart of Jesus and the nature of his leadership in our lives and over his people. The essence of what he is saying is that the Jewish leaders are unfaithful shepherds. They don't care for the flock, they only care for themselves. They have hurt people. They have abused people. They have used people. And I want to stop right here and recognize how harmful that is for people. Some of you have personally walked that road. You've had a leader at work who you were supposed to be able to trust, but they lied to you, or unjustly fired you, or passed your hard work off as their own, and it hurt. Some of you had family members you thought you could trust, but they used that trust to hurt you in ways that are too deep to put into words. Sadly, some have had religious leaders use their position of spiritual influence not to help you grow closer to Jesus, but to take advantage of you. So many people have been hurt and wounded by untrustworthy leaders. Jesus comes and says, "I know that the sheep have been hurt by other so-called shepherds, but I am the good shepherd, the one sent by God to care for you. I came from heaven to earth to find you. I see you. I know you. I will care for you, provide for you, and protect you." In 1 Peter 5:4 Jesus is called "the chief Shepherd." In Hebrews 13:20 Jesus is called "the great Shepherd." More than anyone else in the entire world, he is the one we can trust. As we look at this passage, we see Jesus highlight four specific reasons why we can trust him.

Jesus knows you. We live in a society that has become very impersonal, a bunch of nameless faces. That is not how it works in the kingdom of God. That is not the heart of Jesus toward you. Jesus says, "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:2-4). Jesus is referencing the way ancient animal husbandry worked. An ancient village would have several shepherds who all had their own flocks. At night, all those shepherds would bring their flocks into the same pen, where a gatekeeper would watch over them as the shepherds slept in their homes. In the morning, a shepherd would come back to the pen. There might be a thousand sheep in that pen, but maybe only 50 or 100 belonged to him. He didn't have to go and grab each one by the wool—all he had to do was raise his voice and talk, and every one of his sheep would recognize his voice, come to him and follow him out. I read a story this week of a dispute down in Australia between two farmers about which of them a certain sheep belonged to. The judge had the sheep brought in. One farmer left the room and was told to speak loud enough he could be heard while not seen. The sheep did nothing. The next farmer left the room and spoke loud enough to be heard while not seen. The sheep trotted right to him. Shepherds know their sheep, and sheep know their shepherd.

Jesus says that his sheep are not impersonal to him; he calls his sheep by name. Every person I know who has a dog names their dog. No one calls their dog "Dog." Their dog has a name. When they call their dog's name, their dog comes to them. People who have cats name their cats. When they call their cat's name, their cat ignores them. Jesus knows you. Jesus not only knows your name, he not only is able to identify you during roll call, but he also knows everything about you. In Luke 12:7 Jesus says he has all the hairs on your head counted. In Psalm 139 we learn that God was the one who knit us together in our mothers' wombs; all our days ordained for us are already written in his book. He knows our most inner thoughts, our deepest fears, our hopes, our prayers, our insecurities, our joys. He knows everything about us. In fact, listen to what Jesus says in 10:14-15: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." God the Father and God the Son have been in complete unity with one another from all eternity, with perfect and complete knowledge of one another, and that is the knowledge, the intimacy, the personal relationship Jesus has with us. Jesus is the good shepherd who knows you.

Jesus provides for you. In verses 9-10 Jesus makes three powerful claims: everyone who comes to me:

- Will find pasture.

- Will be saved.
- Will have life to the full.
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When Jesus says in 10:9 “they will come in and go out, and find pasture,” he means that he will take care of your practical needs. A good shepherd always provides for their sheep. Psalm 23 says: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he guides me beside quiet water.” Jesus is a good shepherd and it brings him great joy to take care of you. Jesus says that God cares for the lilies of the field, he cares for the birds of the air, and he cares for you. Philippians 4:19 says “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.” When we are heartbroken, Jesus gives us compassion. When we are lost, he comes and finds us. When we are confused, he speaks the truth. When we are surrounded by darkness, he gives us light. When we are tempted he provides deliverance. When we are lonely he is our companion. We find our pasture in him! All our needs are met in the riches of his glory! Including our deepest need, which is for salvation.

Jesus says, “I am the gate, whoever enters through me will be saved” (John 10:9). Some people liken salvation to making it to the top of a mountain: there are lots of paths you can take to ascend to the peak. All religions are different roads that get you to the top. You can take the path of Islam, or the path of Hinduism, the path of Buddhism or Shintoism or whatever other faith is out there, and as long as you are sincere and devoted, you’ll be saved. That’s a nice image that doesn’t offend anyone, but that’s not at all what Jesus said. He didn’t say salvation is like a mountain and you can choose any path you want to take to get to the top, just be sincere. He said that he is the gate, and you must come through him to be saved. There is only one way into the family of God, and it is through placing your faith in Jesus Christ. That is what makes him such a great shepherd, he saves us. And he not only saves us by giving us an eternal quantity of life someday when we die, but by giving us an eternal quality of life today. He says in John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. Other versions of the bible translate this as “abundant life,” “satisfying life,” “more and better life than you ever dreamed of.” Jesus came to give us peace. He came to give us joy. He came to give us hope. He came to give us strength. Psalm 40 says that God lifts us up out of the muck and mire, places our feet on a rock, and gives us a firm place to stand. James 1 says every good gift we have in life has come from above. Our lives are literally a canvas of God’s grace. Jesus is a shepherd who provides for us and gives us all we need.

Jesus protects you. Shepherds are not simply a luxury for sheep; they are an absolute necessity, because sheep cannot survive without someone to protect them. They are not fast enough to run away from threats; they are not strong enough to overpower threats; they have no teeth or claws to fight off threats; they are not intelligent enough to outmaneuver threats. They are utterly and completely vulnerable. Their threats are primarily thieves who would steal them and predatory animals that would devour them. Just last year in America, according to national agricultural statistics, over 250,000 sheep were killed by predatory animals. Coyotes, wolves, bears, foxes see an easy meal when they see sheep. Sheep are 100% dependent upon a shepherd to protect them. Jesus said there are some people who are looking after the flock who aren’t truly committed to their well-being. He compares a good shepherd who owns the sheep, knows the sheep, and cares for the sheep to someone who is just hired to look after them. ““The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep”” (John 10:12-13).

There are a lot of people in your life who, as soon as things get hard, as soon as they get costly and challenging, they run the other way; they’re not going to be inconvenienced or set back by you. They’re looking out for number one. Not Jesus. When life is the hardest, Jesus draws the closest. Psalm 46:1 says that God is our refuge and our strength, and ever-present help in times of trouble. Make no mistake, there are real threats at work against you, real forces of darkness. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark

world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The threat is real. We have an enemy who wants to steal, kill, and destroy. But Jesus is the shepherd who protects his flock. Listen to what he says later in John 10:27-30, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” No matter the threat, challenge, or obstacle you are facing right now, you can trust Jesus to care for you, to protect you, and keep you safe.

Here the final reason we are given to trust Jesus: **Jesus lays his life down for you.** Jesus is not a shepherd who sees a threat such as a wolf or a bear and runs away to protect himself. He’s the opposite: he runs to the danger, he confronts the threat, and he absorbs the attack himself so those under his care will be unharmed. Not once, twice, or three times, but on four separate occasions Jesus says he lays his life down for us.

- “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).
- “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15).
- “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life” (John 10:17).
- “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (John 10:18).

Do you know how wonderful the heart of Jesus is for you? He chooses to die for you. He is the shepherd who chooses to become a sheep, a sacrificial lamb, so that you can live. Jesus saw the threat against you. He saw your spiritual enemy prowling around like a lion seeking to devour you. He saw the consequences of your sin, selfishness, and rebellion coming at you full speed like a freight train, he saw death and eternal judgment waiting to consume you and pull you under, and he stepped in front of you and laid his life down for you. He took the punishment, so you could be saved. Some people these days come to Jesus with suspicion. Some with hesitation. Some with doubt. Some with a “prove it to me” mentality. But Jesus is a good shepherd. He is the one who knows you, who provides for you, who protects you, who lays his life down for you, he is eminently worthy of our trust, love, devotion, adoration, and eternal gratitude.