

Jesus the Good Shepherd

There are many different styles of leadership. There is, for example, the leader who leads from behind. This is the style favoured by generals in times of war. They stay a long way behind the battle lines, being constantly updated on what's going on at the front, and making decisions that can and usually will end the lives of many young people. They have an obvious leadership responsibility, but they usually exercise that responsibility a long way from danger -- leading from behind.

There is another group that leads from above. You would know them as the political class, the presidents and prime ministers, the elected people who make the rules that the rest of us live by. Why I say they lead from above is that they make sure that the rules don't apply to them, at least not in the same way they apply to you and me. A Canadian Member of Parliament or Senator, for example, has to not only be charged with a criminal offense, but be found guilty and sentenced to at least two years in prison before he or she automatically loses their seat. Before 1996, the sentence had to be at least five years before they were automatically turfed out of office. In the U.S., a member of congress is free to trade on the stock market on the basis of insider information, and the typical congressperson is exposed to a good deal of insider information. But if an ordinary citizen of that country were to buy or sell stocks based on insider information, they could end up in jail. This is leading from above, even if just slightly above, the laws that apply to everyone else.

Then, there are the leaders who lead from in front. They are the heroic warriors who lead the cavalry charge, being the first to face the spears and arrows of the enemy. They are also the guides who know the way to get where you're going and so they go ahead. The orchestra conductor sets the tempo and leads the musicians from the front. The top scorer on the sports team leads his or her teammates.

Jesus was a leader. He led twelve men on a mission to tell people about the Kingdom of God. He led them to have a personal faith in Himself as the Son of God and to build on that faith by telling their world about Jesus. But He didn't lead from behind - or from above, even though He came from above - He led mostly from beside, or with. And one of the phrases He used to describe His own leadership style was, "I am the good shepherd". John 10:1,2:

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.

What's Jesus talking about? If you look at the pictures on the screen you'll see a very old sheep pen on the coast of Ireland and you'll see a restored sheep gate from Talnotry in Scotland. You'll notice that a sheep pen has a very narrow entrance where the shepherd would take his place once the sheep were all in the pen. Nobody and no animal who intended to steal or harm the sheep would attempt to get at them through that narrow passageway. Rather, a thief would attempt to go over the wall and a predator would wait until the sheep were out in the open. Let's continue:

The watchman opens the gate for (the shepherd) 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.

In verse 6 we read that Jesus' listeners, who were likely still the Pharisees from the end of chapter 9, did not understand what He was saying to them.

Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep."

"All who ever came before Me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved. He 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."

Who is Jesus describing as thieves and robbers, people whose sole intention is to steal and kill and destroy? That's harsh language, a strong condemnation - who is it for? He uses the phrase, "all who ever came before Me", in describing this group of people. How would the people listening to Him speak understand that phrase? Maybe the simplest and most obvious sense is that all who had ever come to them with their insights about God, with their rules for religious observance, with their attempts to convert them to their way of thinking or acting. When we look at the structure of this passage, we notice that it begins with the words, "I tell you the truth", which both point ahead to say, "I'm going to tell you something important here!" and also point back, making a connection with something that has just happened. What's just happened is that Jesus has healed a man who had been blind from birth and has run into some strong opposition from the Pharisees because of that. Some of those Pharisees had even asked Jesus if He was saying that they were blind and His response is to say that if they were blind they would not be guilty of sin, but because they claim to have good vision into spiritual matters, their sin remains. And here, in chapter 10, He proceeds to show them the nature of their guilt, the reason why He is pointing them out as remaining in sin.

He says that those who came before Him were always on the lookout for themselves, always looking for what they could get, what they could take. In contrast, Jesus says that He is a giver, One who leads His sheep to pasture, one who is interested in providing life to the max! What was it about the Pharisees and their style of leading that Jesus was so strongly opposed to? Why did He keep on their case throughout His ministry when they were the ones most respected by the Jewish people?

1. They stole people's freedoms. The Pharisees took the laws that God had given Israel through Moses and added to them, line upon line, defining to the "nth" degree what a person could and could not do on the Sabbath, for instance. They converted a person's relationship with God from one of faith, like Abraham had, like David had, like the prophets had, and made it a relationship based on rules. "Do this and God will be pleased with you, just as I'm sure He's pleased with me."

2. They drew attention away from God and towards themselves. Jesus said they did all that they did in order to be noticed by others, to win the respect of people, not to please God nor to honour Him. Humility honours God because it draws attention away from ourselves and instead brings glory to Him.

3. They refused to come alongside people, but instead placed themselves above others. Jesus once said that the teachers of the law loaded people down with burdens they could hardly carry, and then added, “and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.”

4. What they practiced, and therefore what they modeled for others to imitate, was a cold, loveless obedience to God, a ritualistic religion that could never come from the heart.

How do these things make the Pharisees and teachers of the law “thieves and robbers”? If you’re not in the position of giving to others, of helping them carry their burdens, you are in the position of using them, of taking from them. If you’re not a servant, you’re likely thinking of yourself as a master and you can quickly fall into the temptation to lord it over others. That’s what the Pharisees had been doing and it was the opposite of the way Jesus treated people. That made it easy for Him to paint this picture of Him being the shepherd looking out for the best interests of the sheep while the Pharisees were trying to climb over the walls and steal away that which, really, belonged to God. They wanted people to admire them, to respect them, to follow them. They were stealing away from God the admiration and devotion of the people ... and Jesus wouldn’t stand for it.

There’s an amazing passage toward the end of John 3 in which we see the greatness of John the Baptist. He got this. He got what the Pharisees and teachers of the law never put into practice. Here come some stirred up people with a question for John:

“Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan -- the one you testified about -- well, He is baptizing, and everyone is going to Him.”

To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.

John says, “I’m just the best man at the wedding. I’m not here to steal away the affections of the bride from the one she will marry. I’m here for my friend, the groom, the one to whom her affections belong.” He got it. He didn’t draw the hearts of the people away from their God, but pointed the way to Jesus and told people that He was the One who would take away the sins of the world. So when Jesus came and His ministry began to grow and become greater than John’s, John was able to say, “He must become greater; I must become less.” That was just the thing that the Pharisees and teachers of the law couldn’t say, wouldn’t say, because they weren’t

the kind of people who would lay down their lives for others, weren't the kind of people who would take the humble road of service. They sought the limelight and would even take people's focus away from God if it brought greater glory to themselves.

A couple more points about these verses before we move on. One: Jesus said that "the sheep" did not listen to the voice of the thieves and robbers. Who is Jesus talking about here, because many people were listening to the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Most people were listening to them. So who are the sheep who didn't listen? I think He meant the people who rejected religion and its cold formality and the arrogance of its leaders. I think He meant that there were people who wanted God, but didn't see God in the people who were God's official representatives. They were looking for the real thing and, when they didn't find it, they got disillusioned and walked away. But when Jesus came, they heard His voice and they embraced His invitation to life.

Which brings me to the final observation on this paragraph: Jesus said that He had come so that people, so that WE, could have life to the full. He came as a giver, as the Creator who made life and who could now give life to all who would embrace His presence.

Moving on to verse 11:

"I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns 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.

Twice more in the three verses that follow, Jesus mentions that He lays down His life for the sheep. That becomes like a definition of what it means to be the "good shepherd". "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

The hired hand is the same person as the thief in the previous story. First, he tried to steal the attention, the love, the devotion of people for himself. Now we see that when danger threatens the people he's trying to influence, he turns his back because he doesn't really care about them. He wants them to think he's something great, but he doesn't want to do the things that make for greatness. He wants to put on a show, but not put himself out for others. On the other hand, and the contrast is dramatic here, there is the good shepherd who lays down his life for those people He is trying to reach with good news, with healing, with joy and peace and the eternal love of the Father. His mission is all about them, about us, and not about His own comfort or reputation or popularity. That's a good shepherd.

Then we come across this wonderful line that gives us so much hope and so much comfort: "I know My sheep and My sheep know Me." Jesus knows us, He knows our faith, our struggles, our strength and our weakness. He knows that we love Him and

He knows that our love is weaker by far than His love for us. He knows us and He says another encouraging thing here; that we know Him. We know His voice and we don't respond to the voice of a stranger, as He said in an earlier part of the chapter, verse 5.

If you're a believer, you don't need the voice of a pope or a pastor, a leader or writer or preacher. You can hear the voice of your true Leader, your Shepherd, when He calls out to you, "This is the way, walk over here." You can hear Him speak to you as you read the Bible and you can hear Him speak to you as you pray about the issues that you are facing day to day. The more time you spend with Him, the easier it becomes to recognize His voice. Then, when He asks something that doesn't immediately make sense to you, you'll do it anyway, because you've learned to trust that voice. "I know My sheep and My sheep know Me."

There are tons of applications from this passage, so let's look at a few of them and you may find more in discussion time.

1. What's your leadership style? You may not think of yourself as a leader, but there are circles where people look to you, whether it's in your home, your school, your place of work, your neighbourhood -- wherever you have influence, you're a leader, you have followers. There are some leaders who need to be noticed, who just have to be appreciated and who get offended when they're not recognized for some contribution they've made. In other words, they are self-focused instead of team or goal-focused. Their leadership is about them as a leader instead of about the goals of the organization. Jesus' followers, the ones who started the church and whose stories are told in the book of Acts, made sure that their focus was on Jesus, that they talked about Him, that they gave the credit to Him and that they helped people to know Him like they did. It was their passion as they led people and we can learn from them. Have a goal in the way you lead -- whether it's leading your family or being an influence in your neighbourhood. Make it a goal that glorifies the Lord and you'll have a focus for all that you do that will allow you to worry less about yourself.

2. The second application is similar in that it involves turning the focus away from yourself, but this is in the area of serving, of ministry. John the Baptist had a ministry role that was very prominent and, to the average observer, very successful. But he understood that this role was to prepare the way for Jesus and so, when the time came, he was able to say, "He must increase, I must decrease." Make sure that, as you minister, you minister as a servant, that you consciously serve Jesus.

3. Third application: you can hear the voice of the Spirit of Jesus. He knows you and you know Him. Don't let your life become so busy, so distracted, that you don't take time to listen to the voice of your Shepherd. Take time to be quiet in His presence and ask Him to speak to you -- then wait in quietness for the voice that leads you into life.

4. Number four: Remember that Jesus came to give us life. He came so that our lives could overflow with purpose and passion, to the glory of God. His focus was on giving to us, imparting to us, blessing us, the sheep He has been given by His Father.

Remember that so you can live with a confidence and joy no matter what comes your way. Don't forget that Jesus always has more to bring to the table; more wisdom, more grace, more patience, more direction, more passion, more of everything that makes life wonderful. While you remember that, think of all the things that you have to give to others. We're called to be like Jesus, so let's do this simple thing first: determine to become givers, a people who look for opportunities to bless others, a people whose first concern is not looking for people who will do things for us, but people who will let us do things for them ... so we can truly be children of our Father in heaven. And remember that Jesus was always the "others-centred" One and that He calls us to follow Him.