

The Great Shepherd

John 10:10-18

By Phil Johnson

This morning I want to go back to John 10 and pick up where we left off last time we looked at this chapter. We stopped with verse 10, one of the great, key verses of John's gospel—John 10:10, where Jesus says, "**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.**" That's the verse we ended with last time we delved into this chapter, and I want to start there this morning and work our way through verse 18.

This is the heart of Jesus' discourse about the Good Shepherd. It's a parallel passage to Psalm 23, ("**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want**"). That, of course, is practically everyone's favorite psalm—and it deserves to be. John 10 expands on the truth of the 23rd psalm, and this is therefore one of the most comforting and encouraging discourses Jesus ever gave.

And yet, as we saw last time, there's an overtone of severity that runs right alongside the comforting words about the Good Shepherd, and this severe note is a powerful denunciation and condemnation of the false shepherding that was being done by the priests and the Pharisees who were so eager to discredit Jesus and turn people away from Him.

One of the main points of this whole discourse is a condemnation of every form of corrupt, false, inept, self-serving, religious leader. That, by the way, is a *huge*

category. It would include those priests in gaudy robes; bishops in ostentatious mitre-hats; televangelists in their shiny suits; prosperity preachers behind their phony smiles; prophets and prophetesses who treat their own imagination as if it were prophetic revelation; cultish teachers who knock on your door every Saturday morning; that guy at the foot of the escalator soliciting your spare change for non-existent missionary work; respectable clergymen who give self-help lectures instead of preaching Scripture—and (let's face it) virtually all people for whom religion is a profession or a career rather than a commitment of authentic love for Christ and His sheep.

In our text Jesus calls such people "**hired hands**," or in the language of the King James Version: "**hirelings**." Such people are spiritually unfit, inept, and ill-motivated—and Jesus speaks of them with the utmost contempt.

The earthly embodiment of hireling shepherds in Jesus' time were the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The Sanhedrin were that select group of seventy-one elite priests and religious leaders who exercised absolute control over the Temple and therefore dominated the spiritual life of all Israel. They were the main source and the hotbed of *most* of the opposition against Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. This discourse is the culmination of a long, public conflict between Jesus and some leading Pharisees. The apostle John takes almost three full chapters to give us the details of this dispute.

In other words, when we take this passage in context, we see that Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees and false teachers is at least as prominent a theme in this passage as

the words of comfort meant for the sheep. And I want to look at the passage in that light this morning. We'll start by briefly reviewing John's record of this conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.

This passage is part of an extended account that began all the way back in John 8:12. John is recording a major conflict, or series of conflicts, between Jesus and the Pharisees. In that extended passage you have three distinct scenes, and most likely all of them occurred on the same day, in Jerusalem, in quick succession—on or very near the Temple mount, in full view of the people. John records the three scenes as one long narrative, with transitions that deliberately tie them closely together and suggest that there is no lapse of time between the three scenes he is describing.

So this conflict is one of the most prolonged and intense public conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees, and it undoubtedly figured large in the Pharisees determination to see Jesus put to death, because just one chapter after John finishes his description of that day, he records the raising of Lazarus, and then he tells us (John 11:47) "**the Pharisees gathered the Council**"—that's the Sanhedrin—and they discussed what to do about Jesus, because He had become such a threat to their status and their power over the common people. Verse 53 says "**from that day on they made plans to put him to death.**" It's reasonable to assume what pushed them over the edge in their violent hatred of Jesus was this extended public controversy. It took place on the Temple Mount, which the Sanhedrin considered *their* home turf (but Jesus referred to as "**My Father's house.**")

We have to go back to John 8 to see the first phase of this conflict, which begins with Jesus declaring things about Himself that reveal His deity. The Pharisees were outraged by that. They believed He was blaspheming by claiming attributes and characteristics that properly belong only to God. The scene starts when Jesus says in John 8:12: **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"**—and then when the Pharisees challenge the propriety of making a claim like that about Himself, Jesus simply escalates His claims. Verse 19: **"You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."** Then he adds this in verses 21-24: **"Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."**

Then follows an extended debate about who Jesus really is and where He came from. He not only claims that God is His Father; He tells the Pharisees (in no uncertain terms, verse 44) that *their* father is the devil. Now, these are the religious elite of all Israel—men who professed to take the Bible seriously and who had devoted their lives to strict obedience to the ceremonies and precepts of Moses' law! But in chapter 8, verse 47, Jesus tells them, **"You are not of God."**

So they respond with an insult (v. 48): **"Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"** That was tantamount to cursing at Him—just about the strongest denunciation they could use. It was similar to curse-words in our culture that question a person's parentage—then they tack on the charge of demon possession to make it as emphatic as possible.

And Jesus answers that insult an even more bold declaration (v. 51): "**Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.**" The Pharisees *jump* on that, because clearly Jesus is saying His own words are equal to the Words of God—and they challenge Him (v. 53): "**Are you greater than our father Abraham?**"

And Jesus absolutely stuns them with his answer, which boils down to an unqualified *Yes*. "*Yes, as a matter of fact, I am greater than Abraham.*" John 8:56: "**Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.**" And then the real shocker, verse 58—He takes the sacred covenant *Name of God* for Himself! "**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.**"

Their response is to try to kill Him (verse 59): "**they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.**" If you are reading the King James or New King James Versions, those versions include some words at the end of that verse explaining that Jesus escaped by walking right through their midst. Perhaps He supernaturally confused the Pharisees in some way that made them oblivious to Him. Or maybe while the tumult grew around the Pharisees and the crowds of people, He took out a different way of the Temple courts. In any case, he went out (and according to most texts), "**so [He] passed by.**"

Then, with no interruption and no hint that any time has passed, John 9:1 says, "**As [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.**" John 9 goes on to recount how Jesus healed the blind man, and that stirred up scene two in this conflict with the Pharisees.

I've covered all of chapter 9 in past messages, so I won't take time to review it now, but the bottom line is that because they were unable to refute Jesus' miracles; because they never won a single debate with Him; and because they had no legitimate reason to accuse Jesus of any sin, they tried to take up the argument with the blind man—only to find that they weren't prepared to answer *him* either. And they come off looking extremely foolish, in front of crowds of people who had witnessed this whole incident. But they were so pompous and self-assured that at the end of the chapter, they virtually dared Jesus to tell them what He really thought of them. John 9:39:

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."

40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?"

41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains."

That's the last verse in John 9, and at the start of John 10, Jesus immediately goes into this discourse on shepherds and sheep. We have already looked at the first ten verses of chapter 10 in two sermons. I won't review that for you, except to remind you that it is an extended allegory in three parts.

In part one (vv. 3-5), the setting is a large, communal sheepfold at daybreak, when the sheep are leaving the fold. The main character is the gatekeeper. He is one of the shepherds, is appointed to stand guard at the door. He opens the door and the shepherds call their sheep by name, and

they gather in flocks with their respective shepherds. Here, the focus is on differentiating between true and false shepherds.

Part two consists of verses 6-10. Now the setting is a peaceful pasture, during the daylight hours (because verse 9 says the sheep are free to "**go in and out and find pasture.**") The main figure here is the door. And I explained to you before that the door is most likely not a wooden gate, but a flesh-and-blood shepherd who sits or stands in the passageway so that His sheep know the way to the place of safety. Here, the focus is on differentiating between Christ's sheep and all others.

Now we come to part three—verses 11-18, where the setting is a hostile field, probably at dusk, because that's when the predators come out. The Chief Shepherd—the Good Shepherd—takes center stage. (Notice—in each scene, the central character is the Shepherd in charge. He is the gatekeeper in scene one, the door in scene two, and the Good Shepherd in scene three. All three figures are emblems of Christ. So He is the focus of the whole allegory.) And in this third scene the focus is on differentiating between the true shepherd and mere hirelings.

Although the Christ-figure is different in each scene, He remains the key figure in each scene. In verses 1-5, he is the gatekeeper who keeps the thieves and robbers away. In verses 6-10, He is the Door that provides salvation and security for the sheep. And in our passage, He is the Good Shepherd who stands in opposition to the wolves and in

contrast to the hirelings. Everything He does, He does for the defense and protection of the sheep.

So that's the context of this passage. But bear in mind that it is all part of this extended conflict with these Pharisees, and Jesus brings up all this pastoral imagery, not merely in order to speak words of comfort and safety to His own sheep—though He certainly does that. But the occasion here is this conflict with the Pharisees. They were sparring with Jesus over the issue of spiritual authority. They were livid that He refused to recognize their authority as Israel's chief religious leaders. He kept humiliating them in public and conspicuous ways. When they demanded that He state whether they were spiritually blind, He affirmed without hesitation that they were. And now he makes this discourse about shepherding in order to affirm once more His own authority, His deity, and His messianic credentials. And while making that statement He casts *them* in various roles as false shepherds, thieves and robbers, hirelings, and even wolves.

There are many layers of significance in this passage. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we emphatically affirm everything that implies about His deity, His messianic authority, and the supremacy of His Word. This is a *powerful* declaration about Christ.

But at the same time, it is a solemn *condemnation* of the Pharisees and everything their phony spirituality represented—hypocrisy, greed, false religion, and an agenda that was traceable to Satan himself.

And on top of all that, the text is full of comfort and reassurance for Christ's true sheep. And the one person

there that day who would have been most uplifted by the words of encouragement was the blind man of chapter 9. Remember: he had just been excommunicated from the Temple. Now immediately, he finds himself in the arms of the Good Shepherd. No wonder we love this passage.

But keep this in mind: on the day Jesus gave this discourse, *most* people weren't standing around admiring the tenderness and warmth of the shepherding metaphor; they were utterly and completely shocked at the boldness of His claims; the harshness of His behavior toward the chief priests and Pharisees; and *the uncompromising authority with which He spoke*. He didn't give opinions and then footnote his ideas with quotes from the rabbis. He spoke "**as one having authority, and not as the scribes**" (Matthew 7:29). It made the spiritual leaders of Israel angry. You're in John 10. Look at how this whole three-act drama concludes (v. 31): "**The Jews** [that's the Jewish religious leaders—the Sanhedrin and the religious scholars—they] **picked up stones again to stone him.**"

And verse 39: "**Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.**" That was the end of Jesus' public ministry in Jerusalem—with the exception of one instance when He returned to Bethany and raised Lazarus from the dead. But after this run-in with the Pharisees, Jesus basically moved the focus of His ministry to Perea, a region east of the Jordan, the same region where John the Baptist had ministered. There for many weeks Jesus remained—out from under the constant opposition of Jerusalem Sanhedrin. Verse 40 says "**He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been**

baptizing at first, and there he remained. And many came to him."

When he finally came back to Jerusalem for the last time, He was welcomed with shouts of *Hosanna!* But then the same fickle crowd called for his crucifixion just a few days later. So this passage that we're studying is Jesus' last recorded public dispute with the Jewish leaders prior to the week of his crucifixion. And if you read John 8-10 as one long narrative, you'll see that this was a bitter and prolonged dispute, sandwiched by two attempts to stone Jesus for blasphemy (John 8:59: "**they picked up stones to throw at him**"; and John 10:31: "**[they] picked up stones again to stone him**").

Now, with all that in mind—remembering that these are words of conflict and condemnation; not all comfort and consolation—let me read the portion of text we need to cover this morning, verses 10-18. Jesus says:

- The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.**
- 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**
- 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.**
- 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.**
- 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,**
- 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.**

- 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**
- 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.**
- 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."**

That's a rich passage, and there's no way this morning we could adequately cover *all* the important themes it touches on.

So I want to home in on three points. We'll look first at what Jesus declares about himself; then second at how he sets himself apart from the Jewish religious leaders; then third, we'll consider what this imagery says about those of us who are numbered among His sheep.

First, let's take note of—

1. WHAT JESUS DECLARES ABOUT HIMSELF

There is no more potent sentence in this entire discourse than the simple statement you find at the beginning of verse 11. It's repeated again in verse 14: "**I am the good shepherd.**" The crowd must have gasped when Jesus said that, because they knew what a profound statement it was. Everyone on or around the Temple mount must have been somewhat biblically literate. This was a culture that revered only one book—and they all knew that book. If they couldn't read for themselves, they had been taught the Scriptures in their synagogues. The Old Testament and its imagery was at least as familiar to them as this New Testament picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is to the average member of Grace Church. This was a very well-known Old Testament symbol: YHWH—God Himself—was the true Shepherd of Israel.

Jesus' audience that day knew the twenty-third psalm as well as we do: "**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.**" And Psalm 100:3: "**We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.**" In fact, that same expression, "**his people . . . the sheep of his pasture**" appears at least 8 times in the psalms and prophets. Psalm 95:7: "**For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.**" Ezekiel 34:31 echoes that: "**You are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD.**" And backing up just a few verses, here is Ezekiel 34:15: "**I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares**

the Lord GOD." Psalm 80:1 refers to God as "[The] Shepherd of Israel . . . enthroned upon the cherubim."

So God Himself was the Great Shepherd of Israel. He led them through the wilderness, fed them, cared for them, and rescued them again and again. Isaiah 40:10-11 describes the God of Israel in these terms: "**Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.**"

So when Jesus made this statement ("**I am the good shepherd,**") everyone understood that He was making a profound claim: he was declaring that He was God. And it wasn't the first time in this dispute. In 8:12, at the start of this conflict, He said, "**I am the light of the world.**" John 8:58, is where took the covenant name of God for His own: "**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.**" Those were claims no one would ever make unless he were either a rank blasphemer or the one True Shepherd.

And it was obvious to practically everybody that Jesus was no rank blasphemer. The Pharisees desperately *wanted* to portray Him as a blasphemer. But they couldn't make that *charge* stick, because of the miracles Jesus did and because of the gracious way He spoke. Look at 10:19-21: "**There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, 'He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?' Others said, 'These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'"**

So the Jewish rulers were in a quandary. They couldn't discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people. They couldn't disprove His claims because he backed His words up with undeniable miracles. In this case, He had just opened the eyes of a man born blind. When He immediately declares that He is the Good Shepherd, they had no effective answer.

Consider how much this simple 8-verse section says about Christ. It's a rapid-fire catalogue of divine attributes, and Christ applies them all to himself.

He affirms His omniscience, when He says in verse 14 "**I know my own.**" He isn't saying he recognizes the variety that belongs to him. It's a much more intimate expression than that. He knows them each one individually in a personal and familiar way. Remember how He described the typical middle-eastern shepherd's morning roll-call in verse 3: "**He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.**" He knows each sheep singularly and specifically. It's not merely that He knows *about* them; He knows *them*. In the words of Isaiah 40:11, He "**gather[s] the lambs in his arms; he . . . carr[ies] them in his bosom, and gently leads [them].**" The flock of God is vast and innumerable—in the words of Hosea 1:10, "**like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered.**" So to claim that He knows all the sheep in that flock so intimately is to claim omniscience.

He was likewise declaring his sovereignty. Verses 17-18: "**I lay down my life that I may 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 I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.**"

That sort of absolute authority over life and death belongs only to a sovereign God.

Jesus was also unveiling Himself as Messiah. One of the most famous messianic prophecies of the Old Testament is Micah 5:2: "**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.**" That's the verse that prophesied the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. The Hebrew scholars of Jesus' day knew that text well, because in Matthew 2:6, they quoted that verse to tell Herod Bethlehem was the place Messiah would be born. Micah's prophecy goes on, however, with this (verse 4): "**And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure.**" So Jesus' Good Shepherd claim had clear messianic overtones, and that is no doubt one of the things that drove the Pharisees into such a rage. They did not want a Messiah who was opposed to their system. If it meant rejecting the true Messiah of Israel to maintain their status and their own self-serving religion, they were willing to do that. By the way, that attitude epitomizes what made them so contemptible. And I want to get to that.

But first, I need to remind you that we are barely scraping the surface of this text. This is a crucial passage doctrinally as well as pastorally, and if we had endless time for a long series, we could spend several weeks in this chapter.

For example, alongside the obvious claim Jesus is making about His deity, there's a wealth of important

Trinitarian doctrine here—as Christ talks about His eternal relationship with the Father, their perfect oneness, the eternal love between Father and Son, and their mutual participation in the plan of redemption. Verse 15: "**The Father knows me and I know the Father.**" Verses 17-18: "**The Father loves me, because I lay down my life. . . . This charge I have received from my Father.**" And then (a little further into the chapter), verse 30: "**I and the Father are one.**"

On top of that, the atonement is a major theme here. "**The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep**"—and Jesus goes on to declare His own death and resurrection (v. 17): "**I lay down my life that I may take it up again.**" So He is talking about the atonement and making a prophetic announcement about how it would be accomplished.

The doctrines of election and particular redemption are also here. Jesus speaks of His sheep in distinction from all others. Verses 14-15: "**I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.**" He's speaking about His electing love—echoing what he said earlier in verses 3-4: The shepherd "**calls his own sheep by name and leads them out . . . and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.**" His redemptive ministry is particular; it is for those who belong to Him by His sovereign electing choice. The end of verse 15: "**I lay down my life for the sheep**"—not for the wolves, hirelings, thieves and robbers. To them He will say (in verse 26): "**You do not believe because you are not part of my flock.**" That's exactly backward from the common notion that people are outside the flock because they don't

believe. Jesus says, instead, that they don't believe because they don't belong to His flock. So there's a very powerful affirmation of the doctrine of election here.

There's also an implicit announcement of the coming transition out of the Old Covenant and into the new. Verse 16. When Jesus says this: "**I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd**"—He is announcing the breaking down of that middle wall of partition that was erected by the Old Covenant. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4: "**the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father . . . [but] true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.**" Jesus was about to usher in the New Covenant, and all the ceremonies and rituals of the Old Covenant—the very things the Pharisees had become obsessed with were about to be done away with. The sacrificial system, the dietary laws, the priesthood, and the Temple itself were passing away—because all those things were symbols of something greater to come. They were never supposed to anything more than that, and as such, they were temporary. The Pharisees made them an end in and of themselves—treating them as if they were means of salvation and the ground of justification before God—and therein lay the whole error of the whole Pharisaical system. That, too, is a major theme here.

But we have to move on. Obviously, I think you can see that this claim in verses 11 and 14 ("**I am the good shepherd**") has profound implications. In other words, what Jesus declares about Himself here is quite simply that

He is God incarnate. The Pharisees got the gist of it perfectly, and that is why they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

So that's the first thing I want you to note: What Jesus Declares about Himself. Here's a second point. Notice:

2. HOW JESUS SETS HIMSELF APART FROM THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF ISRAEL

Jesus is making these claims of deity; declaring His inherent authority. He is not only the Gatekeeper and the Door to the fold (which implies that He has authority over the Pharisees), but (v. 18) He says He even has power over life and death. There is no spiritual authority higher than His.

He is also making Messianic allusions, not only with the shepherd analogy, but also through the many signs and miracles (such as the healing He had just performed). Throughout this whole discourse, He never makes any explicit claim that he is Messiah. But all the "deliverance language"—talking about giving His life for the sheep, rescue from wolves and robbers, and (v. 18) a special commission received from the Father—these things had messianic connotations, and the Pharisees got that.

Look at verse 24: "**How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly**"

And Jesus says (v. 25), "**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 my flock.**" Now, notice: He still doesn't make the claim explicit, but He says he has spoken plainly enough for the true sheep to hear His voice. And then he

makes this statement that sums up the whole point of this discourse insofar as it concerns the Pharisees: "**You are not part of my flock.**" Wow.

Now if you were a Pharisee or a follower of the Pharisees' teachings in that culture, you would have every expectation that when the true Messiah came, he would congratulate the Pharisees, probably even join their party, and make them prominent in His kingdom. Jesus' response to the Pharisees is the exact opposite, and the Good Shepherd Discourse, more than any other single episode in Jesus' public ministry, underscores how far apart the Pharisees were from Jesus. They are the ones He is portraying as robbers, wolves, and hirelings.

Jesus knows their true motives, and He exposes them here in all their ugly, self-serving, profit-mongering, spiritually-destructive hypocrisy. Verse 10: "**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.**" So both their motivation and the effect they have on the flock is destructive, dishonoring to God—the most profane expression of pure evil. They are purveyors of false religion, and their own pretense of slavish obedience to the law is just that: a charade. It is hurtful to the true flock of God and utterly destructive to the souls of the Pharisees own proselytes. (That, by the way, applies to all false religion. I know people who think religion is the highest and most noble achievement of the evolving human mind. False religion is the exact opposite: the lowest, most supremely wicked expression of the fallen human heart.)

Thieves, of course, are consciously driven by evil, self-serving motives. Not all the destruction perpetrated by the

Sanhedrin was so deliberate. Some of the damage they caused was more comparable to the neglect and malfeasance of a hireling shepherd who runs away when danger threatens the flock. The motive there might not be as premeditated, but the effect is the same. The hireling is just as hurtful to the flock as the thief. And the motive is the same: unfaithfulness.

Then there are the wolves, also mentioned in verse 12: "**The wolf snatches them and scatters them.**" The wolf represents pure malevolence—hatred of the Good Shepherd, hatred of the flock, and above all, hatred of the Father, who owns the flock. Some of the Sanhedrin were every bit that evil, I think. The whole household of the High Priest, Caiaphas, was notoriously corrupt. He was a wolf, pure and simple.

But consider this: the negligence and lack of care reflected in the hireling's desertion is just as damaging in the end as the wolf's attack.

I think the party of the Pharisees—and certainly the elite council of the Sanhedrin—included all of these kinds of characters: robbers, hirelings, and wolves. Jesus sets himself against them all. They were driven by evil and self-serving motives—a thirst for power, a love of human esteem, and (most wicked of all) a desire for financial gain. *Hirelings*. Robbers. Lust-driven wolves.

By the way, when Jesus says in verse 10, "**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly**"—it should be clear that the abundance he is promising has nothing whatsoever to do with material abundance. The wolves and hirelings of our day love to twist that verse and imply that it means

Jesus wants to make you rich. That's not what this means. The robbers and hirelings do what they do for money. The wolves are likewise drive by their fleshly appetites—in some cases, sheer bloodlust. Jesus is condemning that kind of profit-mongering; he is certainly not encouraging it with a promise of material abundance. The abundant life he promises is the abundance of heaven. Spiritual wholeness. The forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. That's what the gospel is about—not material prosperity. If you have heard otherwise from religious charlatans on television, understand that they are thieves, hirelings, and wolves, not true followers of Jesus.

Jesus is purposely setting himself apart from that kind of religion. In the strongest possible terms, He is condemning all spiritual leaders who corrupt the truth like that. The Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, and their cohorts *claimed* that they were the pastors and caretakers of Israel, but Jesus was declaring that they were not true shepherds at all.

The Sanhedrin had always insisted that unless Jesus had some kind of commission from them, He must be rejected as an intruder and impostor. Jesus turns the tables on them here. And I love the way He does it. As Matthew Henry says, Christ simply "describes who were the false shepherds, and who the true, leaving [these Pharisees] to infer what they were."

Now: we have considered what Jesus was declaring about Himself; then we talked about how He set Himself apart from the religious leaders of Israel. Finally, consider—

3. WHAT ALL THIS MEANS FOR US AS SHEEP

This imagery of the people of God as sheep runs throughout Scripture. At the start, I read you a dozen or more verses, from places throughout the Old Testament, where God is referred to as the shepherd of His people. And the corollary of that truth is likewise a constant theme, in the words of Psalm 100:3: "**We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.**" In any picture where God is a shepherd, we are portrayed as sheep.

Now, may I point out that this is not an entirely flattering picture of the people of God. Sure—little lambs are cute and cuddly and white-looking—when you put them against the backdrop of a pasture. But in reality, sheep are stupid, helpless, filthy creatures. Put a lamb against a backdrop of fresh, pure snow, and you'll see what I mean.

As a matter of fact, there may be no dumber creature in the entire animal kingdom than a sheep. They wander away from safety. They are pathologically prone to trouble. They have virtually no natural defenses and no instinct to thrive in the wild on their own. Leave a domestic sheep in any untamed setting without a shepherd and it will be dead in very short order. They have no means of cleansing themselves like a cat does, and no instinct to do it anyway. They have no intuition to find their way to safety when they get lost. (They aren't like dogs or homing pigeons, able to find their way home across vast distances. No sheep has ever done that.) They have to be led to pasture. For all their wooly cuteness, lambs are practically the dumbest, most pea-brained mammals known to man.

That is what Scripture compares the people of God to.

And let's face it: It's a fitting comparison. We are sinful, foolish, pathologically astray, spiritually clueless, utterly fallen and helpless creatures. Like sheep we are totally dependent on the Shepherd. He is our Savior, our deliverer, our Guide, our master—our Good Shepherd. And we desperately need all those things.

The Shepherd, of course, is Lord over the sheep. We not only depend on him to lead us to green pastures, make us lie down beside still waters, and restore our souls—we owe Him our obedience. If we are truly his sheep, we hear His voice and will follow Him. He is not merely the one who tends the flock, He *owns* us. He has every right to command us, and we have no right but to obey.

And yet, His leadership is expressed in loving authority. He is the *good* Shepherd. Verse 14: "**I know my own and my own know me.**" Verse 3: "**He calls his own sheep by name.**" This describes the most tender, sacrificial love. Four times the Good Shepherd says, "**I lay down my life for the sheep**" (v. 15). Verse 18: "**I lay it down of my own accord.**"

That, of course, speaks of the atonement Christ purchased with His blood. He took the burden of guilt that belonged to the sheep and bore the punishment of their sin. That's how He delivered us out of the miry clay and set our feet on a rock.

So you have the entire Gospel portrayed in this imagery of the Good Shepherd. There's the crucifixion (v. 15): "**I lay down my life for the sheep.**" There's the resurrection (v. 17): "**I lay down my life that I may take it up again.**" And

in between is this statement that I can't pass over without dealing with it, even if only briefly. Verse 16: "**I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**"

That verse is often twisted totally out of shape by Universalists and theological liberals who are trying to make the argument that all religions are equally valid and all of them ultimately lead to heaven. They often suggest that the "other sheep" Jesus spoke about were followers of other religions—Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and whatever. And in the end, they say, Jesus will make all the major world religions into one big flock. That whole idea, of course, contradicts what Jesus himself said about the broad way that leads to destruction, and the narrow way to heaven.

The way Universalists use this verse also fatly contradicts what the verse actually says. Jesus says this about those other sheep who are not members of "this fold" (v. 16): "**They will listen to my voice.**"

The interpretation of this verse is simple and straightforward. "**This fold,**" the sheepfold Jesus was referring to, was the same sheepfold represented by the people He was *speaking* to. It was Old Covenant Israel—the Jewish nation. They thought they were the exclusive people of God, but following the leadership of the Sanhedrin, most of them rejected their own Messiah. That came as neither a surprise nor an obstacle to the plan and purpose of God. He had "**other sheep**"—Gentiles who would listen to the voice of the Shepherd. Moreover, that was a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, when God

told Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed by his offspring. Jesus is the Savior of the world—not the Jewish nation only. And by underscoring this truth, Jesus was striking another blow against the hard-hearted unbelief of the Jewish leaders and all who followed them in rejecting Christ.

In John 6:37, Jesus said, "**All that the Father gives me will come to me.**" His sheep *do* hear His voice, and they follow him.

Someone says, "That sounds like the doctrine of predestination." Exactly. If God did not choose us and Christ did not give His life to purchase us and the Holy Spirit did not draw us as lambs into His flock, none of us would ever follow His voice. In John 6, Jesus also says, "**No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.**" That's verse 44. And verse 65: "**No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.**"

You might ask, *how can I know whether I am one of His flock?* Simple: Do you hear His voice? Do you want to follow Him? If that's not your heart's desire, if you love your sin more than you long to follow the Good Shepherd, then don't complain that you aren't chosen. But if you truly hear His voice—if you sense from what He has said here in His Word that He is calling you to follow—that is all the warrant you need to know that you belong to His flock. Come to Him by faith, and He will not turn you away.

In the words of Hebrews 4:7: "**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.**"