

Lesson Four

“I Am the Gate”

Jesus is the focus of all truly Christian ministry

John 10:1-10

Worship

Responsive Reading (Psalm 78:70-72)

A: [The Lord] chose David his servant

B: And took him from the sheep pens;

A: From tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,

B: Of Israel his inheritance.

A: And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;

B: With skillful hands he led them.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you have come
A teacher sent from heaven
And by both word and deed
God's truth to us have given.
You wisely have ordained
The holy ministry
That we, your flock, may know
The truth that sets us free.

Bring those into your fold
Who still to you are strangers;
Guard those who are within
Against offense and dangers.
Press onward with your Word
Till pastor and his fold
Through faith in you, O Christ,
Your glory shall behold.
(CW 546:1,5)

Introduction

How do you know your pastor is leading you in the way God wants? Discuss the following answers:

- He has a valid call from our congregation, and that call is divine.
- He uses many Bible passages in his preaching and teaching.
- I feel as if I am growing as a Christian under our pastor's care.
- His preaching and teaching are focused on Christ and his work for us.

Distinguishing between thieves and shepherds

In chapter 9 Jesus healed a man who was born blind. The Pharisees challenged the healing and criticized the fact that it was done on the Sabbath. They interrogated the man who was healed and ended up throwing him out of the synagogue. Jesus saw the man later, and the man confessed his faith in Jesus. Jesus accused the Pharisees of being spiritually blind. Now he begins speaking to a group of people that includes the Pharisees, the blind man, his disciples, and other Jews nearby. In John 10:1-6 Jesus paints a picture, but we are told that the people did not understand it. In verses 7 to 10, Jesus explains it. Note that two “I Am” statements are intertwined in this picture. Jesus is both the gate and the good shepherd. In this lesson we will focus on Jesus as the gate. However, the picture of Jesus as the good shepherd will enter into the discussion. We will look at that picture more closely in the next lesson.

Read John 10:1-2.

1. What does Jesus want to represent by the sheep pen?
2. In this picture, who is the one who does not enter by the gate?
3. Why can the shepherd enter through the gate?
4. What or who is the gate?
5. Who is the one who enters by the gate?
6. Discuss this statement:

“When you are preaching, never look out at a congregation directly. Always plant the cross between yourselves and it, so you have to look around, or over, or under, or through it. You have no reason to be up there except for the fact that they would see the cross of Christ in your preaching.”—Advice once given by an old Missouri Synod pastor

Sheep listen to the voice of their shepherd

Read John 10:3-4.

1. Who is the watchman or doorkeeper?
2. What is the voice that the sheep hear and know?

“Faith does not enter the heart unless the Word of God brings it there. This is why our lords are now mad and foolish for trying to drive people to faith with force and the sword; for Christ wants the sheep to come of their own accord, because they recognize His voice. The heart of those who are forced bodily is not compelled or captured.”—Luther

3. Why do you think Jesus includes the detail of calling the sheep by name?

Sheep do not listen to the voice of a stranger

Read John 10:5

1. Who is the stranger?
2. How will believers react to such people?

Jesus is the true gate

Read John 10:6-8.

1. What is Jesus telling us about himself when he calls himself the gate?
2. Whom does Jesus mean by “all who came before me”?

3. In what way is the picture of a thief or robber appropriate for a false teacher?

Those sheep who are led through the gate are blessed

Read John 10:9-10.

1. Consider the following words or phrases. What blessings are there for those who enter through the gate?
 - “saved”
 - “will come in and go out”
 - “find pasture”
 - “abundant life”
2. What is the one goal of the thief? What warning is there for us?

Summary

God has given us one certain way of testing those who teach his Word: Do we hear in their voices the voice of our Savior? Does the content of their teaching focus us upon Jesus himself? Jesus himself is the only way into the kingdom of God. He alone is the true gate. Those who lead people to believe in him are leading them into the church and into eternal life.

For further discussion

1. Consider Luther’s words above about not forcing people into the faith. Recall Jesus’ words about the sheep hearing his voice and willingly following him. How do you feel about the idea of parents forcing their children to go to church?
2. In light of Jesus’ words about the “thieves and robbers,” compare and discuss these statements:
 - “Lutheran Christians shouldn’t read too much of the materials written by those of other faiths.”
 - “Lutheran Christians should be familiar with the materials written by those of other faiths.”
3. Agree or disagree: Even when money is tight, health is poor, and relationships are rocky, Jesus is giving us abundant, full life.

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Introduction

How do you know your pastor is leading you in the way God wants? Discuss the following answers:

- He has a valid call from our congregation, and that call is divine.

This is true. Our pastors do have divine calls to serve in our congregations. But the fact that a pastor has a call doesn't ensure that he will be faithful to his call. A pastor with a divine call is still capable of sinning, and he is still capable of falling prey to becoming a shepherd in wolf's clothing. Just because he is called, doesn't mean he automatically will always interpret Scripture correctly, teach rightly, or do his job to the glory of God.

- He uses many Bible passages in his preaching and teaching.

This is important. If a pastor isn't teaching Scripture, then he isn't doing his job. The RIGHT use of Scripture is a good proof that the pastor is leading the congregation in the way that God wants. But what do we know of humanity's ability to misuse Scripture to suit their own needs and feelings? It's not hard for us to do. A pastor must handle the Scriptures correctly and also properly balance law and gospel.

- I feel as if I am growing as a Christian under our pastor’s care.

Again, it’s not a bad thing to feel as if you are growing in faith. We should certainly hope that we are growing in faith and being properly led and fed by our pastors. However, we’ve already talked on many occasions about how our feelings are sinful and fallen. The scriptures tell us that the Holy Spirit works through the Word and Sacraments to produce and strengthen faith. When we humble ourselves before God and regularly avail ourselves of the Word, we will grow in faith, even if we don’t feel very faithful at times.

The problem with relying on our feelings to determine whether or not we are growing as a Christian and whether or not the pastor is leading us in the way we should go is that sometimes, the wrong things can feel very good and very spiritual, and sometimes the right things that we need to hear from God may make us feel bad, even if God is using them to benefit our faith and help us grow in Christ.

So, finally, how do we know that our pastor is leading us in the way that God wants? How about this next statement:

- His preaching and teaching are focused on Christ and his work for us.

This is probably the best answer of the four we’ve read. Christ-centered preaching and teaching is most important. Christ is the embodiment of the good news of God’s forgiveness and mercy, and that gospel is, as Romans 1:16 says, the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”

If the pastor is preaching and teaching Christ and Him crucified, we can have confidence that he is leading us in a God-pleasing direction.

The purpose of these introductory thoughts is to lead us to think about what makes for a faithful pastor or teacher. In this lesson Jesus teaches us about true shepherds, and he identifies them as those who lead the flock through himself, who is the gate.

Distinguishing between thieves and shepherds

In chapter 9 Jesus healed a man who was born blind. The Pharisees challenged the healing and criticized the fact that it was done on the Sabbath. They interrogated the man who was healed and ended up throwing him out of the synagogue. Jesus saw the man later, and the man confessed his faith in Jesus. Jesus accused the Pharisees of being spiritually blind. Now he begins speaking to a group of people that includes the Pharisees, the blind man, his disciples, and other Jews nearby. In John 10:1-6 Jesus paints a picture, but we are told that the people did not understand it. In verses 7 to 10, Jesus explains it. Note that two “I Am” statements are intertwined in this picture. Jesus is both the gate and the good shepherd. In this lesson we will focus on Jesus as the gate. However, the picture of Jesus as the good shepherd will enter into the discussion. We will look at that picture more closely in the next lesson.

Read John 10:1-2.

1. What does Jesus want to represent by the sheep pen?

A sheep pen keeps sheep safe and secure, especially at night, when they aren’t out grazing. The church is like a sheep pen for us, the sheep of our shepherd, Jesus.

2. In this picture, who is the one who does not enter by the gate?

In the immediate context of this teaching, the ones who do not enter by the gate are the Pharisees. That's who Jesus has been talking to.

For us today, the ones who do not enter by the gate are new "Pharisees." They are false prophets who teach something other than the truth. They are those who would teach something other than Jesus and His message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus as true God who takes away the sin of the world by His sacrifice on the cross.

The one who doesn't enter by the gate is the one who tries to get the sheep to follow a different message, to get them to trust in something other than the message of sin and grace.

3. Why can the shepherd enter through the gate?

The shepherd can enter through the gate because the gatekeeper knows to be the true shepherd. If the thief or robber tried to get in by the gate, they would be found out for what they are. That is why they have to sneak in by some other way.

4. What or who is the gate?

It is interesting to note that in the Holy Land the gate for a sheep pen is often a shepherd himself. The shepherd guards his flock by sitting down or lying down across the entrance to the sheep pen, which is an area enclosed by a stone wall, which may have thorns and briars along the top to discourage anyone from entering by climbing over the walls. The shepherd would permit wolves, bears, or robbers to enter the sheep pen only "over his dead body."

Jesus is the gate. He identifies Himself as such later in the story. He is the gate by which we enter the kingdom of God, the Church. All who enter go through Him and He is the only way in.

5. Who is the one who enters by the gate?

The only way you enter is by the gate, which is Jesus. So in this story, when it is talking about the shepherd entering by the gate (Jesus), Jesus is saying that pastors (shepherds), teachers of the Word, and church leaders who enter by the gate are those whose message is the same as His message. Those are true shepherds.

6. Discuss this statement:

"When you are preaching, never look out at a congregation directly. Always plant the cross between yourselves and it, so you have to look around, or over, or under, or through it. You have no reason to be up there except for the fact that they would see the cross of Christ in your preaching."—Advice once given by an old Missouri Synod pastor

"We preach Christ and Him crucified (portion of 1 Corinthians 1:23)." This quote drives home the point that those who teach God's Word are to lead God's people to and through Christ. That is the goal of preaching. I like that the quote says, "you have no reason to be up there except for the fact that they would see the cross of Christ in your preaching." If Christ crucified for our sins isn't there, why would we be in church in the first place? The only thing needful is to hear the message of Christ. Any other message that the pastor could preach is sinking sand.

Sheep listen to the voice of their shepherd

Read John 10:3-4.

1. Who is the watchman or doorkeeper?

I like how the author asks this question and then his answer is, "Eh, probably best not to try to interpret this." As is the case with other parables, we can't always find a parallel between each detail, but we know that the gatekeeper in this story helps to support the fact that the shepherds who enter by the gate are true shepherds meant to be there. They are approved and are freely admitted, they don't have to sneak in some other way.

2. What is the voice that the sheep hear and know?

The sheep know the voice of the shepherd. I was reading in a commentary this week that the shepherds that the people Jesus is talking to would know would lead their flocks from the front, as opposed to drive them from the back. The sheep know the tone and cadence of the voice of the shepherd.

In the Church, it's not just tone and cadence, however. The sheep know the voice of the "true Word of God, whether it comes from their home pastor, vacancy pastor, guest preacher, or lay teacher. Believers recognize the truth of Scripture when they hear it."

"Faith does not enter the heart unless the Word of God brings it there. This is why our lords are now mad and foolish for trying to drive people to faith with force and the sword; for Christ wants the sheep to come of their own accord, because they recognize His voice. The heart of those who are forced bodily is not compelled or captured."—Luther

3. Why do you think Jesus includes the detail of calling the sheep by name?

Jesus knows each of us, his sheep, by name. Those who shepherd God's people according to Jesus' will, will know their members well. It is part of a true pastor's love and care for those whom God has entrusted to him.

Sheep do not listen to the voice of a stranger

Read John 10:5

1. Who is the stranger?

The stranger is anyone who is not the shepherd. Their voice is different. Their words and message are different. This could be any false teacher in any sort of situation.

2. How will believers react to such people?

They will flee. I was telling pastor this week that Jesus gives us more credit than we deserve here, because we aren't always good at fleeing from strange, non-shepherd people. But Jesus tells us that believers should and will flee from false teachers. They will hear in their voice and message and know that something isn't right. They will turn from false teaching and run to the shepherd.

Jesus is the true gate

Read John 10:6-8.

1. What is Jesus telling us about himself when he calls himself the gate?

He is the way to get into God's kingdom. He is the one who opens up to us forgiveness and a restored relationship with God. We receive all the blessings of salvation when we place our faith in him.

2. Whom does Jesus mean by “all who came before me”?

Jesus isn't talking about every human being before him. There were certainly good shepherds amongst the prophets of Israel and moving into Jesus' day with figures like John the Baptist. He is referring to religious leaders of the day that don't care for the sheep and their well-being and don't know the message of Jesus—namely, salvation and grace for all who believe. He's sort of poking the Pharisees that are right there with him...

3. In what way is the picture of a thief or robber appropriate for a false teacher?

False teachers preach something contrary to Christ. There are even false teachers that claim that to teach the truth about Christ, when they lead sheep to put their faith in something other than Jesus. These people are like robbers and thieves who steal souls away from Jesus. They make disciples for themselves and for their own messages and purposes.

Those sheep who are led through the gate are blessed

Read John 10:9-10.

1. Consider the following words or phrases. What blessings are there for those who enter through the gate?

- “saved”

Jesus switches gears here from talking about shepherds to talking about sheep. The sheep that enter by the gate will be “saved” and “safe.” The word saved may make us think about redemption, and this is absolutely true, we are saved by Jesus. But the Greek word here is most commonly used in Scripture to talk about being kept safe and sound—rescued from danger and destruction. Because we are saved from our sins by faith, we also are safe from all harm and danger, because even if harm and danger comes, we have comfort even stronger—namely, the knowledge and faith that nothing can separate from Christ.

- “will come in and go out”

We are free in Christ. Free from slavery to sin and also free from slavery to the Law. We are free to serve God out of gospel joy and love in whatever vocation and station we find ourselves in.

- “find pasture”

“[They] have sustenance; the riches of God's bounty are poured out upon them anew every day in: the Gospel.” We are fed daily by the Word, by the message of life and salvation.

- “abundant life”

“But Jesus has come for the purpose of giving life, true, lasting, eternal life, and not in small measure, but in a fullness far exceeding all needs. Every Christian receives the full measure of everlasting life with all the glories and satisfying beauties that are included therein. Here is an offering of sustaining comfort which is without equal in all religions without Christ, of which no unbeliever can have the faintest conception.”

To have life “to the full,” or “abundantly,” is to live lives of faith now in joy, peace, and contentment under God’s gracious care and enjoying fruits of the Spirit even in the middle of our earthly troubles. Ultimately, the full, or abundant, life is the life of perfection, bliss, and love we will enjoy with our Savior in heaven.

2. What is the one goal of the thief? What warning is there for us?

The goal of the thief is to steal, kill, and destroy (v 10).

He never has the good of the sheep in mind, but is concerned only with how he might use them for himself—only what he can get from them. He wants to consume them immediately. In the end he destroys their souls.

What is the warning for us? Stay away! Jesus gives us abundant life, while the thief destroys souls. We shouldn’t mess around with thieves.

Summary

God has given us one certain way of testing those who teach his Word: Do we hear in their voices the voice of our Savior? Does the content of their teaching focus us upon Jesus himself? Jesus himself is the only way into the kingdom of God. He alone is the true gate. Those who lead people to believe in him are leading them into the church and into eternal life.

For further discussion

1. Consider Luther’s words above about not forcing people into the faith. Recall Jesus’ words about the sheep hearing his voice and willingly following him. How do you feel about the idea of parents forcing their children to go to church?

We can’t force anyone to believe. The Holy Spirit works to produce faith, but people are free to reject it. We can’t force kids to believe anymore than we can force anyone else.

But this doesn’t mean that parents should give their children an option when it comes to hearing the Word. This is how God works faith! If you desire your child to believe, put them in the Word. Every time you put your children in contact with the Word, you are giving them a chance to hear that call of the shepherd’s voice. This is what God uses to call them to faith.

2. In light of Jesus’ words about the “thieves and robbers,” compare and discuss these statements:
 - “Lutheran Christians shouldn’t read too much of the materials written by those of other faiths.”
 - “Lutheran Christians should be familiar with the materials written by those of other faiths.”

Jesus says that thieves and robbers—those who have a different message than His own—are dangerous. They come to steal, kill, and destroy. Why give them the opportunity? We are to flee from them.

The old saying goes, you are what you eat. The same is true regarding what we ingest by hearing and reading. If we make regular use of music that has false teachings in it, if we always read books by those who hold false beliefs, we may well be in danger of adopting beliefs that are contrary to God's Word. When the sheep hear the wrong voice long enough, their ears may be retrained to follow that voice, instead of the Shepherd's voice.

This is not to say that there won't be time when we want to make ourselves aware of what others teach. It may help to sharpen our own understanding of what we believe. But we don't listen to that voice attentively, and we certainly do not trust it and follow it.

It reminds me of the story of the Pied Piper leading the children of a German village away never to be seen again. Don't follow a voice that isn't Christ's.

3. Agree or disagree: Even when money is tight, health is poor, and relationships are rocky, Jesus is giving us abundant, full life.

We may not want to agree that our life is abundant and full when we are experiencing earthly troubles. We may feel as if we have been abandoned.

But our material and earthly situation is not what Jesus is referring to when he speaks of life to the full. He is not promising good health, plenty of money, and peace in our families. Rather, his Word teaches us to be content in any and every situation, just as the apostle Paul was (Philippians 4:11). God teaches us that he will take care of our daily bread. He teaches us to value his spiritual gifts most highly, for these make our lives truly abundant and full.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, my Good Shepherd, thank you for taking such a personal and intimate interest in me. As you shepherd me into the final green pastures of eternal life, I know that you will lead me into green pastures throughout my earthly life. Water and feed me with your life-giving Word, and use every event of my life to bless me and to enable me to be a blessing to others. Amen.