

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
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The Voice of the Shepherd

John 10:1-30 (NIV)

10 “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. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 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. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

7 Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 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. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 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. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to 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 authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

19 The Jews who heard these words were again divided. 20 Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”

21 But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

22 Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade. 24 The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! I want to start by saying 'thank-you' to so many of you who helped out with Dean Stetler's funeral yesterday. Tech guys, those of you who helped with the lunch, Merry leading the choir, Judy playing, all of you who sang in the choir, David Nanne for reinforcing the platforms for the choir, the worship team for helping re-set for today's service. . .

You helped us honor Dean, bless the family, and do a great service for a family going through one of those times that no one wants to face. I was so proud of all of you and grateful for your partnership in showing the love of God to a family and sharing the truth of the gospel with those who came. Thank you.

And if you didn't come to last night's Valentine's Day Dinner—you're forgiven. We had a great time, and if you weren't able to be there, you should talk to someone who was, and maybe stick a reminder somewhere in your brain that the next time we do something like that you'll come and join us.

[Slide 2] *Introduction*

Today we're starting a new series on "Learning God's Voice." If we're going to be followers of Jesus, one of the most important skills we have to develop is the ability to hear from God. Yes, it is a skill, and it is something that can grow, something that we can develop. But learning to recognize the voice of God is also something that happens naturally as a consequence of our relationship with God. Just as it is with any relationship, there are things that start to grow in us simply by virtue of the fact that we are engaged with another person, learning how to know that person, and sharing who we are as we build a friendship. It's no different with God. So let's consider our text from John 10 this morning to begin learning about "*The Voice of the Shepherd.*"

[Slide 3] *Historical and literary context*

Let's start by putting this morning's passage in some historical and literary context. In this section of John's gospel, John is detailing the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, particularly the Pharisees. It was a heated, impassioned conflict, and it had serious ramifications for the outcome of Jesus' ministry.

The heart of the matter was pretty simple. The question was, who had the right to say what the Law of Moses meant? The corollary question was equally important: whom had God authorized to lead his people?

The Pharisees saw themselves as the rightful spiritual leaders of Israel, the teachers who sat in the seat of Moses, declaring what the Law meant and what was required to fulfill the will of God. They were the caretakers of the oral traditions of the rabbis, whose rulings on the Law were held to be nearly as sacred as the Torah itself and every bit as binding. God's Law was the covenant that constituted Israel as God's people. The Pharisees consecrated their entire lives to the study of the Law, to living according to the Law, and teaching it to others. So naturally, they saw themselves as the leaders God had appointed for the spiritual leadership of his people.

Jesus said otherwise. Jesus said, in so many words, *"You don't understand God's Law at all. I'm the only one who rightly understands it, and I'm the only one who has the authority to say what it means. In fact, the only way to rightly understand the Law is to read it through the filter of what I teach."* You can see why they had a conflict!

It didn't help matters that the Pharisees considered Jesus' conduct to be completely sacrilegious. In their mind, he was ungodly, because he didn't keep their traditions, didn't follow the commands laid out by their rabbis, and refused to separate himself from the sinners in the land. So most of them disputed his assertions about the meaning of the Law; they were antagonized by his claims; and they refused to acknowledge him as the Messiah, despite his miraculous powers.

So John is highlighting this conflict. And what he points out is that Jesus is boldly and adamantly insisting that he and he alone has the right to speak for God. Jesus repeatedly insists that he is the only one who understands God, the only one who has come from God, who knows God, who can say what God says. He is the unique son of God; he has an authority that is absolute; and his word, his teaching, represents God's perfect word. And he is saying this in contrast to the Pharisees and their claims to be the teachers of Israel. Jesus says, *"No. I am."*

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So when it comes to the question of who has the right to rule over God's people, to represent God on the earth and shepherd his people, Jesus is emphatic. "*I'm the good shepherd*"—implying by contrast that the Pharisees were the evil shepherds. And Jesus is referring to two significant passages in the Old Testament: Jeremiah (chapter 23) and Ezekiel (chapter 34) where God condemns the rulers of Israel for their failure to rightly shepherd his people.

Jesus says, "*I'm the one who speaks for God. My voice, my teachings—not yours—rightly represent what God is saying to his people. My word, my authority—not yours—should govern those who claim to be followers of God, to be God's people. And I've proved my claim—and will prove it further by laying my life down for the sheep.*"

This conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees lies behind so much of what we read in the gospels about Jesus and his teaching. And it is right at the heart of what John is trying to tell us in his gospel. In this chapter, chapter 10, it is the crucial piece of information that we need to understand what Jesus is saying, and why he is saying things the way he does. So let's go back to John 10 and look at some of the key points.

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In the first paragraph, verses 1-5, Jesus uses the imagery of a shepherd and sheep—a very familiar image in the ancient world, especially in the Middle East, to represent a ruler and the people whom he governs. So Jesus is using a familiar metaphorical way of speaking about the kingdom of God, about who rules the kingdom, and what it means to be a part of that kingdom (to be a sheep!). But they didn't understand him because it didn't conform to their pre-conceived ideas and their cultural bias about what a king would look like. And it didn't conform at all to what the Pharisees firmly believed about who had the right to speak for God (i.e., them), about who was 'in' the flock, and who had the right to make that determination.

Jesus plainly says: (1) I speak for God—and you don't for you don't understand him. (If you did understand him, you would be following me, because I'm saying what God told me to say.) (2) The only way to come 'in' to the flock, to be a part of God's people, in other words, is to come through me. I'm the door, I'm the way in. You have to come through me; everyone else is a thief trying to break in, but I'm the only way to come in legitimately. (3) And I'm the only one who has the right to make the determination of who is in the flock and who is not, because I only do what the Father tells me to do; I only judge based on what he says, so my

judgment is always right, unlike yours which is clouded and messed up because you are spiritually blind.

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Then Jesus makes this remarkable statement in verse 4: *“My sheep know my voice.”* He is again working with a familiar image, this time from ordinary life. In the Middle East at this time—and still today—shepherds do not herd their sheep like Western cowboys herd cattle. (Or how Western shepherds herd sheep, for that matter.) In the Middle East, shepherds train their sheep to recognize their voice—and then they simply call them. The sheep follow their shepherd because they know his voice. They can distinguish it from the other voices around them. And they follow that voice.

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What is Jesus saying here? First of all, he is saying, *“My sheep recognize me as the one who speaks for God. They recognize my authority as God’s Son, God’s Messiah. And they demonstrate that they are God’s sheep, God’s people, by the fact that they recognize the voice of the one God sent.”*

His implication about the Pharisees is also obvious: *“They don’t follow you, because they don’t recognize the voice of God when you speak.”* The Pharisees blamed the people for not following them. The people were stupid; they were rebellious; they didn’t follow the Law. The Pharisees had lots of reasons why the people wouldn’t listen to them. Jesus said, *“No, the reason they don’t follow you is that you aren’t speaking for God. There’s nothing of the love and care of God in what you say. You can quote the Scripture, but you don’t understand it and you don’t rightly represent the God who gave it to you.”*

Jesus says, *“These are my sheep. These are my people, God’s people. And my people know my voice.”*

Jesus says a very similar thing in verse 14: *“I know my own [that is, my own sheep, my own people, the ones who belong to me] and my own know me.”* There is a mutual recognition between the sheep and the shepherd. And it’s more than just a casual recognition. The word ‘know’ here implies a deep and intimate relationship, something that both parties acknowledge and enjoy.

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Here’s a way to think about this that might help you. Let’s say you’re a Chiefs fan, for instance, and you’re shopping in KC for Chiefs’ gear. And you see me there and decide, *“Pastor Barry really ought to get on board with this; I’ll buy him a Patrick Mahomes jersey.”* And you insist that I join you to shop for a Mahomes jersey, and since I’m a nice guy and don’t want to offend you or give

you a reason to leave the church, I play along. I even try on the jersey and stand beside you while you ask the store clerk to take our picture in our matching jerseys. Suddenly Patrick Mahomes comes into the store with his girlfriend—and you go nuts . . . And he realizes that he’s trapped and has to play nice . . . and you take more pictures. And he smiles at us, and after a little while, he and his girlfriend leave, but not before he realizes that even though I acknowledge that he’s a really great quarterback, I’m not really a part of the Chiefs kingdom. I belong to a different fan base; I’m just being polite. But we shake hands and it all ends amiably. And you’ve got some nice pictures.

What does this silly illustration show us? Well, it shows us three different statuses of relationship.

(1) There’s one guy wearing the jersey who’s an imposter. He looks like a Chiefs’ fan, but he really isn’t. He’s just pretending—maybe to be nice, maybe to fit in, maybe to fool people around him, who knows? The point is that he doesn’t really belong and he doesn’t have any relationship with Patrick Mahomes at all, despite wearing the jersey with Mahomes’ name on the back.

(2) There’s another guy (or gal) wearing the jersey who’s genuinely a huge Chiefs’ fan, and someone who really likes Patrick Mahomes, gushes over him. This guy (or gal) likes to think that he (or she) has a relationship with Pat. *“Here’s a picture of us in the store!”* But honestly, it’s all an illusion. There’s no relationship; it exists only in his mind.

(3) There is a person in the group who does have a relationship with Patrick, and that’s the girlfriend. And that isn’t defined by whether or not she is wearing his jersey. What decisively decides the matter is the answer to this question: *“Do both of them acknowledge that they are in a relationship?”* Do they share a mutual knowledge of one another that is more than just a casual *“oh, hey, I’ve seen you around here before, I think, right?”*

Now, it is possible for our #2 guy or gal to move from being just a fan with a one-way imaginary relationship to having an actual relationship of being friends with Pat Mahomes. But it would only happen if he or she went to Pat, asked if they could be friends, was accepted, and then followed that up by beginning to share life together. There’s even a place in some parallel universe where guy #1 goes from trying on the jersey and giving it a chance to actually embracing fandom in the Chiefs kingdom and becoming a friend of Pat Mahomes. (Although it’s far more likely that he becomes a friend of Mahomes without actually becoming a traitor and abandoning his Broncos.)

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Do you see the point of the illustration, as silly as it may be? The question is not whether you say you are a part of the people of God, or whether you claim to know God. The real question is whether he acknowledges your claim. Does God acknowledge that you are a part of his flock, one of his sheep? How do I know if he does or not? Simple: do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your shepherd? God insists that the only way to become one of his sheep is to come under the rulership of the shepherd, Jesus. If you do that, he will acknowledge you. Jesus promises “*whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*” (John 6:37)

And if you do that, if you come to Jesus and recognize him as your shepherd, your ruler, the one who will govern your life, if you go “all-in” with him, what happens is that he will start speaking to you (he’s actually been speaking to you for quite a while), and you’ll start to recognize his voice.

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[Illustrate pregnant mother: child begins to recognize and respond to the mother’s voice while still in the womb; continues on after birth; fathers also, if they’ll speak to the unborn child; that voice continues to be both memorable and special, with an emotional connection that is profound and deep.]

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There’s another aspect to this thing of hearing his voice. Jesus says, “*My sheep know my voice.*” That is, they recognize me as their shepherd. That statement implies two essential truths, two basic realities that define what it means to belong to Christ, to belong to God’s people.

First, it means that his people submit to his authority. If you don’t let him rule over you, saying you like him as your shepherd doesn’t really mean anything. You might be a top-ten rated high school basketball player. And you might say, “*Yeah, I think Bill Self is a really great coach, I admire him a lot. It would be great to be one of his players and to play for such a historically great team as KU.*” But if you don’t sign that letter of intent and actually come and submit to the rigors of practicing and going to classes and learning Bill’s system and playing the way he insists you play, you won’t be a KU basketball player. And your declaration of what you think about Bill Self and the KU program doesn’t really mean much. Unless you submit to Jesus’ rule over you, saying you think he’s great and an important teacher and the son of God, etc., doesn’t really mean much at all.

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Second, recognizing Jesus as your shepherd means you’re not shopping around for a second option. You’re not checking out the alternatives to see if there’s a better offer out there somewhere. (That’s a mistake a lot of people make

when it comes to marriage, by the way. You'll never have a good marriage if you're looking around to see if there's a better option that you didn't consider.)

If you want to know what it means to be ruled by Jesus, to be under the care of the good shepherd, it's an all-or-nothing situation. You are shutting the door to any other claim on your life—and going all-in with Jesus.

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Jesus comes back to this one more time in verse 27. “*My sheep listen to my voice,*” Jesus said. They have learned to recognize me as shepherd, and acknowledge my authority over them, to submit to my teaching, and to let me guide them. “*I know them*”—I validate their claim to know me. We have an intimate relationship of knowing one another.

Then he adds a third important statement: “*They follow me.*” Following is different than considering. There are lots of people who are happy to consider what Jesus might have to say. There are even people who are willing to consider what the Bible might say about how to live. But they're approaching Jesus and the Bible in the same way as they'd approach the Google, or a new Op-Ed columnist in the LJW, or a new advice columnist replacing “Dear Abby.” “*Let's see what Jesus has to say; maybe it might help somehow.*”

That's how the Pharisees considered Jesus. “Let's listen and see if we agree with what he thinks.” But Jesus flatly refused to be put in that category. He said, “My sheep follow me.” They don't just consider what I said, they have committed themselves to living by my word—no matter what. No matter how hard it might be, no matter whether it feels nice, or whether others approve, or whether it forces a complete re-boot of my life. They have chosen to live according to what I say. They have chosen to trust me, to trust my word; to follow me.

[Slide 14]

[Experiment in hearing God's voice]

Personal hearing

The point of the experiment: *If you want to distinguish Jesus' voice from all the other voices out there, you need to listen to it when you're alone with him. The longer you do that, the easier it will be to hear his voice when you're in the midst of the crowd.*

Transition to communion

[END]