

Thieves, Strangers, and Hired Hands

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn together to John chapter 10, the passage that Myrtle read. And we are continuing our study on John's Gospel. That's what we're working through on Sunday mornings.

And we're going to do two weeks in chapter 10. And then for the summer, we'll take a break from John's Gospel and we'll pick it up again after the summer holidays. But for this week and next week, we're going to be in this amazing, amazing chapter.

Let me read again, verses 9 to 11. Jesus said, I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Now, this is an amazing chapter, John chapter 10. It's one of the most famous chapters in the Bible. It's definitely one you want to have in your back pocket because it's a passage that you can go to for so much comfort and help and guidance.

[1 : 06] We could spend weeks in this chapter. I think we could have a sermon in every single verse because there's a huge amount of beautiful teaching. And not least because here in this chapter, we have another two of the great I am sayings that we have in John's Gospel and that we've been highlighting as we go.

We've seen Jesus say that he's the bread of life. We've seen him say that he's the light of the world. And now in this chapter, we have these two great statements. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. And the others we will come across as we continue to go forward.

There is loads in this chapter. So that means that we need to choose today what we're going to focus on. And I was thinking about that earlier in the week.

We're going to focus on where we should really focus our attention. And I was struck, as I read this chapter, by the imagery that Jesus uses. But not just the imagery that he uses to describe himself as the door of the sheep and as the good shepherd.

But I was also struck by the imagery that he uses to describe those that he stands in contrast to. And that's what I want us to use as our guide through this first half of chapter 10.

[2 : 21] And so our title for today is Thieves, Stangers and Hired Hands. The great lesson that all of this is teaching us is that the alternatives to Jesus are rubbish.

And that's what I hope we're going to see again today. So let's just look at each one of these in turn. We're going to start by thinking about the heading thieves.

Jesus speaks about thieves and robbers. He does that in verses one and two. He speaks about those who come in by another way. It's a thief and a robber.

And he does the same again in verses eight to ten, speaking about thieves and robbers. Now here in this chapter Jesus is using imagery of various different aspects of the ways in which a flock of sheep gets cared for.

And so he moves the imagery along and we're going to see that as we go. And we've got various things to think about. In these verses he's getting us to think about a flock in a pen or in a courtyard.

[3 : 31] And in terms of that pen, the only legitimate entrance and access is through the door or the gate. That's the gate that the shepherd uses.

But there are others who want to get to the sheep another way. And so they try to sneak in to get the sheep by another route and Jesus describes them, those who come in by another way as thieves and robbers.

Now why is Jesus doing this? Well the reason he's doing it is to set a contrast between the genuineness of his identity and his mission compared to the false and counterfeit claims and behavior of the religious leaders.

So as you read through this passage you want to have those two categories in mind. Jesus and his claims on one side and then you have the false religious leaders and the false conclusions that they are coming to and the inappropriate way in which they are using their position.

Now that kind of contrast between these two parties is really the theme, the thread that's been weaving its way all the way through, chapters 5 through to 10 of John's Gospel.

[4 : 43] We've seen this repeated interaction and tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. And in the midst of that the big question that we have to ask is, well who's right?

Whose claims are true? Do we listen to Jesus or do we listen to the religious leaders? Now we might not find it so hard to think about that question because we're like, well we're going to listen to Jesus anyway.

But imagine being in the crowd, imagine being just a normal Jew in the first century. You've got all these religious leaders, you've got decades of kind of experience and prominence behind them and then Jesus all of a sudden appears and you're like, who should I listen to?

Which one is right? Now the claim that Jesus is making is that he is the one who is genuine. He is the one whom God the Father has sent.

Now we're thinking about that, it's important that we don't forget what's just happened in the previous chapter. This 9 and 10 just run into each other. In the last chapter Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth but some of the Pharisees had refused to accept that Jesus had in fact healed him.

[6 : 02] They were thinking, well maybe the man wasn't blind in the first place and even when it does become clear that Jesus had healed him, they're still adamant that this is not the Son of God.

And in order to make the position clear, they take the blind man, they interrogate him again, they keep saying, Jesus healed me and they get so exasperated with him that they cast him out.

And so they're making their position very clear. They do not want to be associated with Jesus or with the healing that he has been performed. And you have this incredible contrast, Jesus healed the man, the Pharisees threw him out.

And so here in these verses, Jesus is clearly implying that these religious leaders are like the thieves that he's describing in these verses.

Their leadership is corrupt. They're going to threaten and they're going to throw out anyone who doesn't listen to them. They're going to harm the sheep in order to protect themselves.

[7 : 04] And they're quite happy to have that, to abuse the position that they've got. The leaders who have all the status and responsibility are actually hurting the sheep.

Now all of this immediately rings lots and lots of bells with many things that we read in the Old Testament. Because right through the Old Testament, one of the most common metaphors for leadership is the image of a shepherd looking after their flock.

The great Old Testament example of that is David. He was the shepherd who became king and he was the model king against which all the other kings were compared. But throughout the Old Testament, again and again and again, the leaders abused their position and instead of caring for the people, instead of caring for the flock, they just looked after themselves and defended themselves at the cost of the people.

And this was an issue all the way through and it's something that God repeatedly rebuked them for. And the big chapter that calls that kind of behaviour out of leaders abusing their position, the big chapter that calls that out is Ezekiel 34.

Now Ezekiel 34 is a big chapter. We don't have time to read it all. I'm just going to read the first 10 verses. You can read the rest of it maybe later this afternoon. But you'll see exactly what I mean as I read these words.

[8 : 28] The word of the Lord came to me, son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God.

Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves should not shepherds feed the sheep. You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.

The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you've not healed, the injured you've not bound up, the strayed you've not brought back, the lost you've not sought and with force and harshness you have ruled them so that they were scattered because there was no shepherd and they became food for all the wild beasts.

Now when you read that you can immediately think the image of sheep being abused like that. You have to remember that's an image for how they were treating people. So when you're reading about the sick not being helped, the weak not being strengthened, the injured not being cared for, that's talking about how kings and rulers were just neglected and hurting the people under their care.

My sheep were scattered, they wandered all over the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth with none to search or seek for them.

[9 : 47] Therefore you shepherds hear the word of the Lord as I live, declares the Lord God. Surely because my sheep have become a prey and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts since there was no shepherd and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep but the shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep therefore you shepherds hear the word of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord God, behold I am against the shepherds and I will require my sheep with their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves, I will rescue my sheep from their mouths that they may not be food for them.

Now these words are a piercing rebuke of those leaders in the Old Testament who instead of caring for the people were abusing their position for their own gain.

Now here in John 10 Jesus is making the same point. He is rebuke those who are meant to be leading and caring for God's people when in actual fact they are abusing their position.

You see that in the last chapter they are threatened by Jesus, they are threatened by this man who has been healed so what do they do? They get rid of him and throw him out.

[11 : 08] Now there are loads we can see here and a couple of crucial things are highlighted that I want to just look at together. First of all in these verses we see the reality of awful human leadership.

Now history is full of examples of this, of leaders who abuse their positions and that is true whether it is politics, business, even at times in the church you see it in history you see it today.

In so many ways people, us humans, we don't know how to handle power. And the result is that people who are in positions of leadership they will use those positions.

They will use that privilege in order to benefit or protect themselves even if it means exploiting those who are under you. Now I don't need to prove to you that this is the case, you can see it in the world all around you.

You see it if you look at politics you see today, I don't know if it has always been like this, I am sure it has but it feels like it is worse than ever where you see bullying and corruption and all sorts of things going on in the political world among some of them, not all of them but among some.

[12 : 22] It can happen much closer to home, it can happen at work, you could be working for somebody and your boss is just a nightmare and they are difficult, cruel, unpredictable, maybe it is colleagues, just will always just protect themselves even if it means hurting you.

It can happen in families which is awful, those closest to you actually treating you badly and it can happen in churches as well where people have responsibility but they use that responsibility and power to be cruel and harsh.

What I want us to recognize is that God is utterly and resolutely opposed to all of that and that is something you see throughout the whole Bible.

Old Testament prophecies are full of rebukes to Israel's leaders for neglecting the people. Ezekiel is one, Isaiah is another, I don't have time to read it but it is saying exactly the same thing.

Ezekiel here supposedly offering excellent religious, outward religious behavior and yet inwardly they were cruel and harsh and exercising injustice in their lives.

[13 : 45] Jesus repeats the same warnings, he does it in John 10, he does it in Matthew 23 where he says woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you tithe, mint and dill and cumin but you neglect the more important things, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

All of this is teaching us a crucial lesson, it's reminding us that we must never ever use our faith as an excuse to be horrible to people.

Now that's a crucial lesson because it's easily done. We can think that because our theology is right, therefore our behavior is right and that is not necessarily the case at all.

You might have a firm grasp of theology that behave in a way that contradicts some of the most basic commands that Jesus gives us. You must never use our faith as an excuse to be horrible but it's also reminding us as well that I think for everyone here it's far more likely that rather than being horrible you'll be on the receiving end of somebody being horrible and when that happens when you encounter bad leadership, when somebody does mistreat you, you can fall back on the incredible theological truth that Jesus is not like that.

You see a corrupt politician, Jesus is not like that. You have to work with somebody who's really difficult, Jesus is not like that.

[15 : 30] You are hurt by someone close to you, Jesus is not like that. And please, please, please, never, ever, ever let your view of Jesus be shaped by somebody who's actually a terrible representative of Jesus.

Never allow that to happen. In a world of selfish, twisted and at times abusive leadership, Jesus is just beautifully and magnificently different.

So we learn crucial lessons about leadership here. We also see the reality of what sin is trying to do to us and this is an incredibly important lesson.

In all these verses, in all of this and in all the examples of wrong behavior that we see in the Bible and in life, they're all manifestations of one big reality.

They're all manifestations of the fact that the world has been broken by sin. And so whatever you see, whatever evil behavior you see in the Bible, in life or whatever, all of that has its root in sin.

[16 : 43] And that means that the behavior of the thieves that Jesus is describing here, that is also a manifestation of the reality of sin, the fact that humanity and the world are broken because of sin.

That reality of sin is absolutely central to both to how we understand the Christian faith but also central to how we understand what we see in the news every week.

This passage is teaching us one of the most important lessons that we can ever learn about sin. It is teaching us what sin is trying to do to us.

Now, that is such a crucial lesson because when it comes to sin, it is so easy to downplay what sin is trying to do.

So we think of sin and we think that it's maybe, maybe it's time to entertain us. Maybe it's time to distract us. Maybe it's time to satisfy us.

[17 : 44] Maybe it's time to give us a treat. It's so easy to think that sin is doing that, none of that is true. Sin has come to steal and kill and destroy.

That is what sin is trying to accomplish. The devil and the kingdom of evil that he rules is trying to accomplish that. Jesus has spoken about that in John 8. You can go back and have a look at that, again, time is marching on so I don't have time to go through it.

The key thing here is that, and it's not hard to prove, it's one of the easiest doctrines to prove because we see it in the world around us all the time.

Sin is trying to steal and kill and destroy. And it's easy to prove when you think of specific examples. When you think of the sin of greed, it steals your contentment because you think, oh, it just wants a bit more.

It destroys our environment because people will just push for more and more and more and more in terms of the earth's resources in order to increase their wealth. And worst of all, at its worst, greed leaves literally millions of people dying in poverty or of diseases that some parts of the world have got an abundant of treatment for.

[19 : 12] Greed steals, destroys, and kills. Same with something like pornography or sexual sin. It steals your purity. It can destroy relationships.

Judging other people or judging yourself, that brings guilt and shame that robs your self-confidence. It crushes you feeling inadequate and feeling like a failure.

Revenge or unforgiveness, that destroys friendships, families, churches. It eats away at you from the inside. Addiction, whatever kind of addiction it might be, is desperately destructive.

And perhaps most dangerous for many of us is just distraction. The fact that we just march from one week to the next, looking for something to occupy our minds so that we'll just get through the next week.

And with every day that passes, Satan is stealing an opportunity for us to find the salvation and peace that only Jesus can give. All these examples are reflecting the fact that sin has come to steal and kill and destroy.

[20 : 23] But do you know what all of these things have in common? We think of greed, pornography, judging others or ourselves, revenge, unforgiveness, addiction, distraction. Do you know what they all have in common?

They are all attractive. They're all tempting. But the truth is, they're poison.

They come to steal, kill and destroy. Jesus has come to do the opposite. Please come, why, that we may have life and have it abundantly.

Now we could do a whole sermon on that phrase. I wish we had time to. That word abundantly is just magnificent. It means that which exceeds the usual expectations.

And boy, is that true of following Jesus. It exceeds our expectations. It just blows our minds when we discover more and more of who he is and what he's done.

[21 : 29] Time is blasting on. We need to move on to our second heading, strangers. In verse four, Jesus shifts the imagery forward. So he started with sheep being in a pen.

Now he's thinking about sheep going out of the pen, being led by the shepherd and the sheep follow the shepherd. And this reflects ancient Near Eastern practice whereby the general way to shift sheep around was for the shepherd to walk and for the sheep to follow.

We don't always do that in our country. Sometimes sheep are driven from behind. But in this culture, shepherd went ahead, sheep followed behind. And there's a key tool that the shepherd uses to make this happen.

What does he use? He uses his voice. He speaks and they follow him. You see that there in verses three to five, they hear his voice.

He calls his own and he leads them out. The flock follows the shepherd's voice. And that is such a clear and striking description of how the gospel works.

[22 : 37] We follow Jesus' voice. We respond to his call. We listen to his claims. We follow his teaching. And that's why at the centre of Christianity is a book of words.

The words that Jesus has given is what lies at the centre of our faith. Now here, Jesus draws a comparison between the voice of the shepherd and the voice of a stranger.

And again in doing so, he's doing the same thing. He's drawing a comparison between the genuineness of his identity in comparison to those who oppose him and in comparison to those who've made false claims about their status.

And as he does all that, Jesus makes an absolutely massive theological point. He highlights the fact that there is only one shepherd.

Now that again echoes the language of Ezekiel. Ezekiel 34 rebukes the shepherds who have been abusing the people.

[23 : 45] It then goes on to speak about how God himself is going to come and shepherd his people. That ultimately there will only be one true shepherd.

And it uses the language in Ezekiel 34 of the servant David. But all of that is prophetically looking forward to Jesus as the ultimate son of David, the true king.

And so this if you like is the next level up from the question of Jesus' identity. Yesterday afternoon I went to watch the Super Mario Brothers movie. Excellent. I highly recommend it. It's very good.

And you know, whenever you play a computer game like Super Mario, you have levels. Level one, complete level one, level two, da da da da. Here Jesus is pushing up another level in terms of thinking about him.

If you like, level one is the question of his identity. Who is Jesus? And okay, right, we've completed that. We recognize Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the good shepherd.

[24 : 44] But once you've completed level one, you have to go on to level two, whereby you recognize that not only is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the good shepherd, but you realize that only Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ, the good shepherd.

In other words, within the question of Jesus' identity, you discover the reality of Jesus is exclusivity, the fact that only Jesus is the shepherd.

Now, you might be asking the question, well, how do I know that? How do I know for sure? We're saying here, Jesus alone is the Christ.

Jesus alone is the good shepherd. How can you be sure of that? And I'm sure there's more people than we realize who have that question. If you do have that question, don't actually be afraid.

It's a very common question to have. How do we know that he's the one that we should follow? In other words, what's the identifying marker of the one through shepherd?

[25 : 52] Well, John 10 gives us the answer. The shepherd knows his sheep. You see that in verse three, he calls them by name and leads them out.

You see in verse 14, he knows his own. And so if you want to find the two shepherds, how do you know who he is?

Find the one who knows you. Find the one who really knows you. Now, this is a very important thing because it touches on a pattern of behavior that we see all around us in the world.

If we look at the world today and if we look at our own lives, we see that humans like us, we are frequently captivated by important people that we think we know, but actually they don't know us at all.

And really, we don't know them either. So they're a big part of our lives. We feel like we know them. We feel like they should know us, but actually they are strangers. Now I do this myself all the time.

[27 : 00] One of the programs that our kids watch a lot is a thing on YouTube run by a group of guys called Dude Perfect. They're one of the most watched and subscribed people on YouTube in the world, like 60 million subscribers or something.

They're very funny and very good. I like them. They're very good. They're from Texas in America. A group of guys, they're probably about my age now. They're all Christians, but they do really funny stuff and they're great fun.

So I watch Dude Perfect quite a lot. I like Dude Perfect. And so I feel like they're my friends because they make me laugh and I hear their voices and I know their names.

I feel like I know them, but they don't know me at all. And that's not their fault. It's just the reality. They can't know all 60 million of their subscribers.

Same with music that we like. I love Run Rig. I love Cullum and Rody McDonald. I feel like they're my uncles, but they wouldn't even know who I was if I met them. And it can be the same with whoever it is we admire in life.

[28 : 05] And you might be thinking, well, okay, yeah, but these people aren't our shepherd, but are you sure? Where do you go for feeding? Where do you go for guidance?

Where do you go to feel safe and secure? And that's questions that we all have to ask ourselves, whether we're Christians or not yet Christians. Where do we go to find comfort at the end of a hard day?

Where do we go? What are these words do we want to hear as we look forward to the weekend? What are we longing to do? What are we kind of craving in terms of contact? Who is it who's going to feed us, help us guide us?

And so often we choose a ton of different things that are not Jesus. But the key point is this, if they don't know you, then they are not a real shepherd.

And that's the incredible thing about Jesus. He knows you. He knows you. He knows your weaknesses, your strengths, your joys, your sorrows, your hopes, your fears.

[29 : 14] He knows what made last week good. He knows what made last week rubbish. He knows what makes your heart sing. He knows what sends tension right down your neck and into your back.

Jesus knows you. He has known you forever. And so today, can you hear His voice? Now, when I say that, I don't mean some kind of mystical experience of hearing a voice.

I mean, can you hear Him speaking to you in His Word? And as you hear His voice, are you going to follow Him? Or are you going to keep wandering after strangers?

Time is running out, just so frustrating. But I do want to talk very briefly about hired hands. This is the third comparison that Jesus presents.

You see it in verses 11 to 15. Now what I want us to notice about this is that you've got a shepherd here and a hired hand here. On a good day, they look exactly the same.

[30 : 19] You imagine sheep out there, grazing on the hill. There's a guy or a lady sitting at the top, watching them from a distance on a nice day. You have no idea whether that is a shepherd or a hired hand.

There was no kind of high vis or hi-vis jackets for the hired hands in the ancient Near East. The difference is only apparent when there's danger and when there's cost.

And as Jesus explains here, when a wolf comes, the hired hand flees because to Him doesn't actually care about the sheep, they're not worth the risk.

And what I want us to see here is what we can call the difference between a commercial arrangement, commercial arrangement and a committed relationship.

It should be two T's there shouldn't there be a relationship. I decided a few weeks ago that my handwriting would improve if I stopped joining it up. But I don't think that's the case.

[31 : 22] It's still as bad as ever. Anyway, it says commercial arrangement, committed relationship. I want to finish by looking at this distinction. For the hired hand, his connection with the sheep is this one.

It's just a commercial arrangement. It's just about getting some benefit for him. He's going to earn a living by looking after them. When danger arises, it's not worth the risk. For the shepherd though, it's all about a committed relationship.

He is there to protect the flock and when the flock is threatened, he is going to put himself in danger to make sure that the flock is safe.

But we can summarize the difference like this. In a commercial arrangement, if you become weak or vulnerable or struggling, you get dropped.

In a committed relationship, if you become weak or vulnerable or you're struggling, you get carried. And this is incredibly important for us in our lives because our relationships with other people will fall into one of these two categories.

[32 : 33] And one of the most painful experiences that we can ever have is that when we are in a relationship with somebody, whether that's a friendship or a romantic relationship or a work relationship or whatever, and we think it's a committed relationship and yet to them, it's actually a commercial arrangement.

And that manifests itself when we are in a situation where something goes wrong, we look to somebody else because we think they are going to carry us and actually they drop us.

And that can happen at work, it can happen among school friends, it can happen with someone we fall in love with, it can happen in churches. It is one of the most painful things that we can ever experience.

Imagine being those sheep with that hired hand. You're saying the sheep, you're saying there's rumours of a wolf and they're like, it's okay, we've got a shepherd. Then the wolf comes and they realize it's not a shepherd at all.

He's a hired hand who abandons them. The amazing truth that Jesus is driving home to us today is that he is not a hired hand.

[33 : 47] He's the good shepherd, he is your good shepherd and he will lay down his life for you. That's what John's Gospel is pointing us towards.

It's all pushing us forward towards the cross. There Jesus laid down his life for you. There he conquers sin so that you can be saved forever.

That means that if you're a Christian or if you become one, he will never, ever, ever drop you.

He will always, always carry you. And when you think of a shepherd and you think of that question, will this shepherd die for me?

Jesus doesn't stand here and say, I will. He stands here and says, I did.

[34 : 47] And all of it is teaching us that the alternatives to Jesus are thieves, strangers and hired hands and they're all rubbish. Jesus is the shepherd and he is so, so good.

Let's all follow him this week and for the rest of our lives. Amen.