

***Remaining in Christ:
Jesus' 'I AM' Statements in the Gospel of John***

Session V

The Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18)

Notes on the teaching

In this passage we encounter two more “I AM” sayings in our study. These images again help to illustrate the relationship between God, Jesus, his followers, as well as with those who reject his role as a teacher and leader sent from God.

- **Jesus uses a “figure of speech” (v. 6).** This phrase translates the Greek word *paroimia* used by John. In antiquity a *paroimia* was a proverb or short fable functioning as an allegory – a story, poem, or picture that carries a veiled or hidden meaning. A *paroimia* often used hurtful, offensive, or insulting speech to make a moral or political point. According to John, Jesus uses *paroimia* here, but his adversaries are blind to its meaning. What is the veiled or hidden meaning here? What is the moral or political point of the *paroimia*? To answer these questions, we must look closer at the characters and setting.
- **Notice the characters and setting.** First, we have the shepherd, who is Jesus. The gatekeeper - an image for God – determines who properly enters the sheepfold through the gate. Of course, we have sheep (probably the people of God) and a sheepfold (likely the synagogue or church, where God’s people gather). The sheepfold is the place of safety, where sheep are corralled at night to escape the marauding creatures that would otherwise prey on them. The pasture refers to the world outside the sheepfold, the place where sheep find food and water to thrive. But it is also a place of risk, where those same marauding creatures roam freely. Finally, we have thieves and bandits who enter the sheepfold surreptitiously without the gatekeeper’s approval. They enter the sheep pen to steal away God’s people from their rightful shepherd, to lead the people to death and destruction.

The hidden meaning of the insulting or hurtful *paroimia*? According to John, only the Word made flesh – Jesus – has God’s authority to lead God’s people to abundant life. He leads the people who recognize his voice in and out of the sheep pen so they experience abundant life. Jesus insults all the other Jewish leaders by characterizing them as illegitimate and harmful to the life of God’s people (vv. 7-10).

- **“I AM the gate for the sheep” (vv. 7, 9).** Jesus renews the insulting speech aimed at his opponents. Now characterizing himself as the “gate” of the sheepfold, Jesus aligns himself with the boundary between the safety of the sheepfold and the danger that lies outside beyond the gate. His characterization probably alludes to Wisdom’s identity as the door or gate to the people’s way to life (see Proverbs 8:34-35).

- **“I AM the good shepherd.”** Jesus uses another metaphor to differentiate his relationship with his “flock” of followers from those who are led by the thieves and bandits. Many of our churches have paintings, stained-glass windows or woodcarvings that depict the gentle Jesus cuddling a baby lamb in his arms. It’s an image more illustrative of the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:10-14 than from the picture of Jesus being painted here in John’s gospel. Three brief things are noteworthy when considering what it means for Jesus to be the “good shepherd.”
- **“Good shepherd” means “model shepherd.”** First, most of us are familiar with this characterization of Jesus as the “good” shepherd, a particular translation of the Greek adjective *kalos*. John first uses *kalos* in 2:10 to describe the “good” wine that the wedding host has saved to serve near the end of the wedding feast. There, the word clearly denotes wine that is “better” or “best” when measured against a particular standard or norm for wine. So, too, John’s other use of *kalos* in 10:32-33 refers to “good” works, once again alluding to a measurement against particular standards for what are “good” and “bad” works. In both cases, “good” denotes the highest standard for what is being considered – the model or standard for good wine and good works. Consequently, here in 10:10, we suggest that John intends the same usage for *kalos*: Jesus becomes the “model shepherd” – the norm for how shepherds ought to act in caring for their sheep.
- **Shepherd and flock come to know each other well.** Second, to understand the full import of what Jesus is saying, remember that shepherds and sheep spend long hours together. Over time the sheep learn to recognize the shepherd’s voice and the shepherd learns to recognize and name each sheep according to their unique attributes. Thus, Mary Magdalene later only recognizes the risen Jesus when he calls her by name (20:16). She has spent weeks, months, maybe years following Jesus and responding fruitfully to his voice of his leadership in her life.

The experience of spending so much time together – as shepherd and flock – is also critical for understanding the distinctive friendship motif in John’s gospel. Jesus later tells his disciples that he no longer calls them servants but friends, because he has made known to them everything the Father has made known to him (15:12-17). This takes time and abiding presence with God’s people.

- **The “good shepherd” lives openly and transparently for the flock to follow.** Third, translators typically render the Greek verb *tithēmi* in 10:11, 15, 17, and 18 in such a way that Jesus, as the good shepherd, “lays down his life” for the sheep. This translation overemphasizes the *death* of Jesus on the cross. Most often this verb simply denotes the act of “placing” something like a book on a table, or “setting out” good wine (2:10) or “appointing” friends (15:16).

The translation used in the NRSV (the shepherd “lays down his life for the sheep”) actually *conflicts* with the image and role of a “good shepherd.” In antiquity, when a shepherd herded his flock into the pen at night, he would literally “lay down” across the threshold of the pen in order to keep out dangerous intruders. This protective action hardly suggests the necessity for the death of the shepherd. As scholar Sharon Ringe notes, “while the purpose of the shepherd is to safeguard the life of the sheep even at the risk of his own life, the intent is that the shepherd be alive in the morning!” to continue his leadership role.

John has made it clear in this passage: life not death is the purpose of the shepherd's role (vv. 9-10). The good shepherd leads his sheep in and out of the sheepfold and into the pasture, where they find life. Thus, it might be better to say that the good shepherd "sets out" or "appoints" or "places" his life in front of the flock for the sheep to follow. Speaking symbolically, Jesus becomes the model for his friends/disciples to follow – in and out of the place of safety (the synagogue or church) and into the pasture (the world) where the people find sustenance and life. Jesus may ultimately lose his life for his followers, but life not death remains at the heart of their relationship. In fact, Jesus tells us, he has "other sheep" that are not part of this community that he must also bring into the one flock.