

54 - Good shepherds

John 9:35-38; 10:1-21

I have no idea what the number might be, but I know it's sizeable. How many people have walked away, not only from the church of Jesus Christ, but from God Himself, not because of something God did, but because of ungodly leaders? Lying, abuse of power, double-standards, slander, ambition, lovelessness, false doctrine, financial dishonesty, sexual immorality, etc. have often been the cause of a loss of trust. But in other cases it wasn't a lack of character; it was the exhaustion of trying to follow incompetence or the boredom of shallow teaching that undermined respect, not only for a particular troubled leader but for the Lord's church in general. If you talk to such people they often ask, "Why wasn't something done about it? Where were the elders? Where was the fear of God? If people who are supposedly so close to God can do something like that, then where is the miraculous change of heart we've been told takes place when someone believes in Jesus Christ?"

Those and many more questions like them can keep echoing through a person's mind long after they have been betrayed by church leadership. Painful memories can leave that person in the grip of a deep abiding fear that to come back to God risks falling prey to such people again. The problem is as old as time. Humans have always misused religion. Yet each of us still needs to be part of God's family. We're not designed to function alone. We need shepherds, healthy, God-fearing leaders to heal, protect and train us. That's why every one of us has to find our way between two dangers: the fear of following the wrong humans and the loneliness of not following the right ones.

Is there a way to identify "good shepherds"? Can we be sure that we are following the right ones? If we can answer that question, there are a lot of lost sheep that can come home. Let's listen to Jesus' answer.

The man at His feet (vs35-38)

The man at Jesus' feet, worshipping Him, had been physically blind but not spiritually blind. In fact, during his years of disability God had prepared him to have the courage to hold onto truth once he saw it. When God's light came to him in the form of a dramatic miracle he immediately faced enormous pressure from the nation's religious leaders. They wanted him to renounce the person who had given him new eyes. A lesser man would have denied Jesus in order to protect himself, but not this man. He was loyal to Jesus even before he knew who He was and quick to believe once he did.

When Jesus explained to him that He was the heavenly "Son of man" that Daniel saw in a vision of the throne room of God (Da 7:13-14, 27), the man confessed, "Lord, I believe," and then he must have fallen to his knees because he worshipped Him. That confession and worship did not take place in private. Many were watching, including some Pharisees who had begun following Jesus as disciples (Jn 8:30-31; 9:40, 19-21). They, along with everyone else, had observed a terrible miscarriage of justice. A man who had done nothing more than refuse to slander someone who had restored his eyesight had been "cast out" by the highest religious court in the land. That meant he was no longer a member of Israel's spiritual community. The punishment did not match the offence. The harsh, arbitrary abuse of authority by those leaders was glaringly obvious, so Jesus used the moment to clarify in everyone's mind what had just happened and to teach them how to choose the right leaders.

The doorway (Jn 10:1-2, 11-15)

In effect, here's what Jesus said, "You've just watched bad shepherds abuse a sheep. Here's why that happened. They aren't God-appointed leaders; they're self-appointed. They deceived and stole their way into those positions of authority because of greed. Anyone who desires to be a shepherd in God's flock must be willing to pay the price God requires of every one of His shepherds: They must be willing to die for the people they lead (vs11, 15). That is the doorway through which every God-appointed leader must pass."

The signs of a shepherd (Jn 10:3-4)

Then to answer the question: "How can we know who is a God-appointed leader?" Jesus gave us four more signs:

- 1) The doorkeeper of the sheepfold (the Holy Spirit) will "open the door." That means He will welcome the God-appointed man or woman. There will be evidence of sovereign guidance and miraculous provision which has led that person to this community and protects them while they're here. The Holy Spirit's presence will attend them when they minister.
- 2) Those who love God and are familiar with His voice will recognize a person who truly speaks God's words. They can hear God's voice behind the human voice. That person's authority does not come from physical stature or force of personality but from their faithfulness to God which is witnessed within the hearts of those they lead.
- 3) Just as the people must recognize a God-appointed leader, so the leader must also recognize those God has asked him or her to lead. He or she will know them "by name." Though they may lead many, they value them as individuals. They feel a deep sense of responsibility for those entrusted to them. They relate to them as family members.
- 4) A God-appointed leader will lead God's people by example, not drive them. People will trust them and freely follow them because they recognize they genuinely love them and are submitted to God.



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Signs of a false shepherd

Jesus also gave us signs to watch for that will expose a self-appointed leader:

- 1) Because the doorkeeper (the Holy Spirit) does not welcome that leader, he or she must pretend to be someone they are not; he or she must seize a leadership role God has not given them. They climb in over the wall.
- 2) Those who love God and are familiar with His Word will grow agitated and frightened by what they are hearing. They will feel an inner tension between what is being spoken or decisions that have been made and what their heart tells them is true. They will not trust that person or willingly follow their lead.
- 3) A self-appointed leader will not know God's people "by name." They will not love them or value them as individuals; they will value them only by the size of the crowd.
- 4) A self-appointed leader will see God's people as a source of funds. There will be a high emphasis on giving money. They will steal their resources, kill their walk with God and destroy their relationships with one another.
- 5) A self-appointed leader will abandon God's people when trouble comes. They will flee and let the people fend for themselves.

The Good Shepherd

With these criteria in mind, the difference between Israel's spiritual leaders at that time in its history and Jesus becomes very evident. The high priest's family had climbed into God's sheepfold over the wall. They had paid the Romans money to buy that position, and once they got it they used their authority mercilessly to extract resources out of the people. They didn't love God or the people but fiercely defended their position. No one trusted them to lead them closer to God. They obeyed only because they feared them.

But when Jesus came, the Holy Spirit miraculously opened the door to welcome Him. One divine appointment and miracle after another made it possible for Him to speak to the nation, and though His message divided people, many followed Him willingly. Even if they didn't understand everything He said or did, they knew in their hearts He had been sent by God. They recognized His voice.

A word of caution

You and I have a responsibility to be very careful about who we follow. So much damage occurs when we follow the wrong leader. But if we'll watch for these signs that Jesus gave us we won't be misled, at least not for long.

However a word of caution is needed: There are no perfect human shepherds. There is only one completely Good Shepherd, and that's Jesus. Even the best human leaders make mistakes, have moments of weakness, or struggle at times with their attitude toward those they lead. But in spite of such imperfections, the signs of a good shepherd will still be there. There is a huge difference between a God-appointed leader who is struggling and a self-appointed leader who is abusing God's people. Prayer and much grace need to be directed toward a good shepherd who is struggling in a season of weakness, but a self-appointed leader must not be followed.

Ask the right questions

So once more, how do I know if I'm following the right person? Based on what Jesus taught us, ask these questions:

- 1) How did that person get into that position? Did God open a door for them or did they climb in over a wall? Is there evidence that God guided that person to this position? Is the Holy Spirit present when they minister?
- 2) When I listen to this person do I have a sense that God speaks through them, or are they simply good at what they do? Does my heart often confirm what they say, or do I feel confused or worried?
- 3) Does this person lead us or drive us? Do I follow out of respect or only out of fear or a sense of duty? Do I feel I'm being manipulated to fit into this person's personal agenda? Do I admire their walk with God and want to become like them?
- 4) Does this person love us enough to die for us? When there was crises or trouble, how did they respond? Did they protect us or instinctively move to protect themselves? Have they made costly sacrifices in order to care for us?

An appeal to scattered sheep

Faced with an example of severe religious abuse, Jesus gave His followers a set of guidelines to protect them from following self-appointed leaders and reveal those whom God had sent. Some of us who are listening to this message, right now, have been abused by church leaders, and may have walked away from God's people and even God Himself because you are afraid that might happen again. While there is no guarantee that you will not encounter bad leaders, armed with these guidelines given to us by the Good Shepherd Himself, you will not be deceived for long, if at all. He has given us the tools to separate the genuine from the false. So please try again. Come home. God's family needs you, and you need us.



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Questions

- 1) Have you ever been in a situation where your mind said, “This makes sense,” but your heart said, “No, it’s wrong!”? What did you feel inside? At the time, did you follow your head or your heart? What was the result?
- 2) Have you ever experienced a situation where Jesus protected you from following the wrong leader? How did He warn you? How long did it take for you to obey?
- 3) Who do you lead? Who looks to you to teach them or care for them? Have you been a “good shepherd”? How might you improve?