

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
10:1-9

1. Verily, verily, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. 2. But he who enters in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3. To him the porter opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5. And a stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. 6. This parable Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand the things which he spoke to them. 7. Then Jesus said to them again, Verily, verily, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8. All who ever came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9. I am the door. If any man enters by me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out and find pasture.

1.--[*Verily, verily, I say to you.*] Three things must be carefully remembered if we would rightly understand the first nine verses of this chapter. Inattention to them has caused much confused and inconsistent interpretation.

(a) For one thing, the passage is closely connected with the last chapter. The opening sentence should be read on, without break or separation between, together with the 41st verse of the ninth chapter. Our Lord is still speaking to the hostile Pharisees who asked, "Are we blind also?" and got the answer, "Ye say, We see; therefore your sin remains." It is to them that He goes on to say, "I say to *you*, he who enters not in by the door is a thief and a robber." He is not so much comforting His disciples now, as rebuking and exposing His enemies.

(b) For another thing, the passage is entirely a parable, or allegory. (See sixth verse.) In interpreting it, like almost all our Lord's parables, the one great lesson should be kept in view, which is the keynote to the whole. We must not press every detail and little point too far and try to attach a spiritual meaning to the lesser parts of the picture. Those who do so always run aground in their exposition and get into difficulties. To this parable, if any, the old quaint sayings are applicable: "No parable stands on four legs." "Squeeze parables too far, and you will draw blood from them and not milk."

Calvin remarks wisely: "It is useless to scrutinize too closely every part of this parable. Let us rest satisfied with this general view, that as Christ states a resemblance between the Church and a fold (a sheepfold in which God assembles all His people), so He compares Himself to a door because there is no other entrance into the Church but by Himself. Then it follows that they are good shepherds, who lead men straight to Christ; and that they are truly gathered into Christ's fold so as to belong to His flock, who devote themselves to Christ alone.

(c) For another thing, the object that our Lord had in view, in speaking this parable, must be kept steadily before our eyes. That object was to show the entire unfitness of the Pharisees to be pastors and teachers of the Jews, because they had not taken up their office in the right spirit and with a right understanding of the work they had to do. He is not in this part speaking of Himself as "the Shepherd" but as "the Door"--only as the Door. What Christ is as a "Shepherd" comes afterward; what Christ is as "the Door" is the one point of the first nine verses.

The "progressive" character of our Lord's discourses recorded in St. John is strikingly illustrated in this chapter. Starting from a very simple statement, our Lord goes on to speak of the highest truths. We see the same in the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters.

This is one of the twenty-four places in St. John's Gospel where the double "verily" comes in. Here, as elsewhere, it always prefaces some statement of more than ordinary importance and solemnity.

[*He who does not enter, etc.*] Our Lord here appeals to the common experience of His hearers. They all knew well that anyone who was seen entering a sheepfold by climbing over the wall or fence of enclosure, and not by going through the door, would be justly suspected of being a thief. Every true shepherd, as a matter of course, makes use of the door.

The "door" He afterwards interprets to mean Himself. The latent thought evidently is, that any teacher of religion who does not take up and discharge his office with faith in Christ and His atonement, and with an aim to glorify Christ, is unfit for his business and unable to do any good. Instead of being a shepherd who helps and feeds, he is no better than a "robber" who does harm. Instead of saving souls, he kills them. Instead of bringing life, he brings death to his hearers.

Some, as Chrysostom, Euthymius, Theophylact, and Maldonatus, think the "door" means the Scriptures. Others, as Tholuck and Hengstenberg, think the "door" means a proper divine call to office. Both views seem to me unnatural and incorrect.

Augustine observes: "Christ's fold is the Catholic Church. Whoso would enter the fold, let him enter in by the door: let him preach very Christ. Let him not only preach very Christ, but seek Christ's glory, not his own." He says, again, "I, seeking to enter into your hearts, preach Christ. If I preach other than that, I shall be striving to climb in some other way. Christ is my Door; through Christ I win your hearts."

Language borrowed from the care of sheep and sheepfolds would be much more intelligible in Palestine than it is here in England. Keeping sheep was much more common there than in our climate. Folds, doors, shepherds, thieves climbing over some other way, would be points familiar to most Jews. Moreover, the use of such language in speaking of spiritual things would be peculiarly intelligible to all who had read Jer. xxiii, Ezek. xxxiv, and Zech. xi.

Brentius remarks on the condescension of our Lord in borrowing spiritual

lessons from such humble sources: "What is more low than a shepherd's condition? Every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians. What more dull and stupid than a sheep? Yet here is a picture of Christ and believers!

Sir Isaac Newton (in his book on Daniel) supposes that our Lord, in choosing the subject of this parable, had before His eyes the many sheepfolds near the temple and about Jerusalem where sheep were kept ready to be sold for sacrifice.

The expression "some other way" seems to me purposely very wide. Men may become teachers of the Church from many different motives, and in many different frames of mind. Some may be skeptical, some formalists, some worldly; but all alike are wrong if they do not enter office "through the Door," viz., by Christ.

The word rendered "the same" would be more literally translated "that man."

The expression "thief and robber" is very strong and supplies a striking instance of the use of a parable to convey indirectly a sharp and severe rebuke. Of course, our Lord could hardly have said to the Pharisees, "You are thieves and robbers." Yet by use of a parable, He says what is tantamount to it.

Let it be noted that these strong epithets show plainly that there are times when it is right to rebuke sharply. Flattering everybody and complimenting all teachers who are zealous and earnest, without reference to their soundness in the faith, is not according to Scripture. Nothing seems so offensive to Christ as a false teacher of religion, a false prophet, or a false shepherd. Nothing ought to be so much dreaded in the Church and, if needful, be so plainly rebuked, opposed, and exposed. The strong language of our Reformers, when writing against Romish teachers, is often blamed more than it ought to be.

The Greek word rendered "thief" implies secret fraud and dishonesty. The word rendered "robber" implies more open violence. There are false teachers of both sorts: open Papists and open skeptics, semi-Papists and semi-skeptics. All are alike dangerous.

Augustine observes: "Let the pagans, the Jews, the heretics say, 'We lead a good life.' If they enter not by the door, what does it avail? A good life only profits if it leads to life eternal. Indeed, those cannot be said to lead a good life who are either blindly ignorant of, or willfully despise, the end of good living. No one can hope for eternal life who knows not Christ--who is the life--and by that door enters the fold."

Hammond alone among commentators applies this verse and the four following entirely to Christ Himself, and considers "the door" to mean the proper evidence of miracles and doctrine. I cannot see this at all.

Bishop Burnet remarks that this parable is the passage above all others which both Fathers and modern writers have chiefly used in order to show the difference between good and bad ministers. Wordsworth calls the whole

chapter "a divine pastoral to Bishops, priests, and deacons."

2.--[*He who enters in by the door, etc.*] This verse contains the converse of the preceding verse. He who is seen entering the sheepfold by the one proper entrance, the door, may be set down as a true shepherd. Such a man, being duly commissioned by the owner of the flock and recognized by the sheep as their pastor and friend, has no need to enter clandestinely like a thief, or by violence as a robber.

The word "the" before shepherd is not in the Greek. It should be simply "a shepherd." The omission of the article seems intentional, to show that our Lord is describing true "shepherds of sheep" generally and not Himself.

3.--[*To him the porter opens, etc.*] The whole of this verse is meant to show the character of a true shepherd of sheep in four respects: (1) The porter opens the gate to him, knowing by his step and manner of approach, that he is a friend and not an enemy. (2) The sheep recognize his voice and attend to what he says. (3) He, knowing all his flock individually, calls each sheep by his own peculiar name. (4) He leads them out to feed, desiring daily to promote their health and well-being. In all these four points he is unlike the thief and robber.

The different customs of Eastern countries, as compared to our own, must be carefully kept in mind to understand the expressions of this verse. A fold in Palestine was a space enclosed by high walls, not by low hurdles. It had a gate guarded by a porter at night, since the sheep could not be safely left alone. An Eastern shepherd knows each sheep in his flock and often has a name for each one. The sheep are led and not driven.

About "the porter who opens" in this verse, opinions differ. Most commentators hold that the "porter" means the Holy Ghost, who calls true ministers into the Church and "opens hearts". The sense is: "To a true pastor, the Holy Ghost gives a call to his office and makes a way into the hearts of hearers." This, no doubt, is excellent divinity, but I cannot think our Lord meant anything of the kind. The "porter" here is not said to call the pastor but to open when the pastor comes; nor yet to open hearts but the door of the fold, through which the true pastor enters. The view of Wordsworth, also held by Augustine, Rupertus, Bullinger, and Flacius--that the "porter" is Christ Himself, who is not only "Door" but "Porter" also--does not appear to me necessary. I prefer, with Glassius, Grotius, Hutcheson, and Bloomfield, regarding the whole sentence as a subordinate feature in the parable, signifying that a true shepherd of sheep not only enters by the lawful door but that every facility is made for his entrance.

Some, as Chrysostom, Euthymius, and Theophylact, think the "porter" may mean "Moses."

Others, as Ecolampadius, Lampe, Webster, think the "porter" means the ministers and teachers of the Church, who have the power of the keys and the right to admit pastors.

Others, as Gomarus, Brentius, Maldonatus, Hall, Whitby, Bengel, and

Hengstenberg, think the "porter" is God the Father.

The expression "his own sheep" must not be pressed too far. It simply means that a real shepherd, according to Eastern custom, knowing *his own flock* individually by name, calls them at once by their names and proves his relation to them by so doing. If not his own, he could not do so.

4.--[*And when he brings out, etc.*] This verse is simply a continuation of the description of a true and faithful shepherd of sheep. Whenever such a one takes his flock out to pasture, he walks before them (as an Eastern shepherd always does), never requiring them to go where he does not first go himself. Such a shepherd the sheep follow with implicit confidence, and knowing his voice, go wherever he calls them.

The words of Moses should be read: "Let the Lord set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and who may go in before them, and who may lead them out and who may bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd." (Num. xxvii.16,17.)

That Eastern shepherds "lead" their sheep is clear from Exod. iii.1, "He led the flock," and Psalm xxiii.2, "He leads me."

5.--[*And a stranger they will not follow, etc.*] This verse concludes the picture of a true shepherd and his flock. It was a fact well-known to all our Lord's hearers that sheep accustomed to one shepherd's voice would not obey a stranger's voice, but would rather be frightened at it. Just so, true Christians have a spiritual taste and discernment by which they distinguish a false teacher and will not hear him. "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things." (1 John ii.20.) The poor and illiterate believers often illustrate this in a very extraordinary way.

Brentius observes here the singular faculty which sheep possess of always knowing and recognizing the voice of their own shepherd. He also notices the extraordinary knowledge that the lamb has of its own mother's bleat among a thousand others, as a curious characteristic of an animal in many respects dull and stupid.

Scott observes that this verse justifies true Christians in not listening to false teachers. In leaving their parish church, perhaps, under these circumstances, many reproach them. Yet the very men who reproach them would not trust their worldly affairs to an ignorant and dishonest lawyer, or their bodies to an incompetent doctor! Can it be wrong to act on the same principles for our souls?

Besser observes: "Sheep flee from a false shepherd. They will not say, it is enough if we do not follow this strange preacher in those points in which he holds forth unsound teaching. They will have nothing at all to do with him. They will flee from him as from a contagious disease." (2 Tim. ii.17.)

Bickersteth observes that this verse, and the third, throw light on the pastoral office of ministers. "How much of ministerial influence depends on personal knowledge. Great is the hindrance to the influence when an

overgrown population renders it impossible."

6.--[*This parable Jesus spoke to them.*] The word rendered "parable" here hardly bears the sense of the expression. It is rather "allegory," or figurative picture. However, it clearly settles that the whole passage must be taken as a picture of spiritual things, and must be carefully handled and not interpreted too literally. The Greek word used by John for "parable" is not used in any other Gospel.

[*But they did not understand, etc.*] The Pharisees appear to have failed in seeing the application of the parable. This is curious when we remember how quickly they saw the application to themselves of the parable of the husbandmen who killed the heir of the vineyard. But nothing seems to blind men's eyes so much as pride of office. Wrapped up in their conceit of their own knowledge and dignity, they did not see that they themselves, who pretended to be leaders and teachers of the Jewish flocks, were not shepherds but "thieves and robbers" doing more harm than good. They did not see that the fatal defect in their own qualification for office was ignorance of Christ and lack of faith in Him. They did not see that no true sheep of Christ could be expected to hear, follow, or obey their teaching. Above all, they did not see that in excommunicating the poor blind man whom our Lord had healed, they were just proving themselves to be "thieves and robbers" and injuring one whom they ought to have helped.

If even One who "spoke as never man spoke" was not always understood, ministers cannot be surprised if they find they are often not understood now. How little of a sermon is understood, few preachers have the least idea!

Ferus remarks that our Lord's hearers must have been blind not to see that their own prophet Ezekiel had already shown the application of the parable. (Chap. xxxiv.)

Lampe thinks they knew that our Lord was speaking of them, but could not fully comprehend the application of the parable.

7.--[*Then Jesus said to them again.*] Here we see the condescension and patience of our Lord. Seeing His hearers not able to understand Him, He proceeds to explain His meaning more fully. This is an example for all teachers of religion. Without frequent repetition and simplification, spiritual lessons can never be taught.

[*Verily, verily...you.*] Once more this solemn expression is used and again to the same hearers, the Pharisees.

[*I am the door of the sheep.*] Here is plain exposition. Jesus here declares that He Himself is the Door through whom, and by faith in whom, both shepherd and sheep must pass if they would go inside God's fold. "Every single sheep must enter through Me if he would join God's flock. Every teacher who wishes to be a shepherd over God's flock must enter his office looking to Me."

This high claim of dignity must have sounded startling to the Pharisees! A

higher claim we can hardly conceive. None but One, even the Divine Messiah, could have used such an expression. No prophet or apostle ever did.

At first sight it seems strange that our Lord says, "I am the Door of the sheep" and not simply "the Door." But I think it is meant to teach that the Door is for the benefit of the sheep more than the shepherd, and that He Himself is given more particularly for all His people than for His ministers. Ministers are only servants. The flock might possibly do without them, but they could not do without the flock.

Bullinger calls attention to the many beautiful figures under which our Lord represented Himself and His office to the Jews in St. John's writings. The Bread, the Living Water, the Light of the World, the Door, the Shepherd, are all in five chapters of this Gospel.

Musculus observes that the simple view of Christ being "the Door" is that He is the Mediator between God and man.

Webster observes: "It is worthy of remark that in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. vii.13-17), the description of the strait gate and narrow way immediately precedes the warning against false prophets and ravening wolves." The same also may be seen here.

8.--[*All who ever came before Me, etc.*] These words, "All, before Me," must evidently be limited or qualified. They cannot be taken in their fullest sense. The prophets and John the Baptist were not thieves and robbers. It cannot well be taken to mean "All who have claimed to be the Messiah." There is no evidence that many claimants did appear before our Lord, if any. Besides, the word "are" in the present tense seems to exclude those who lived before our Lord's time.

The great knot of the difficulty lies in the words "came before Me." The Greek word rendered "before" has only four meanings: (1) before in point of time, (2) before in point of place, (3) before in point of dignity and honor, and (4) before in the way of substitution. Of these, the first two seem out of the question, and we are shut up to the last two. I can only conjecture that the sentence must be paraphrased in this way: "All who have come into the Church professing to be teachers, claiming honor for themselves instead of Me, or honoring anything in preference to Me, such as you Pharisees--all such are not true shepherds but thieves and robbers." I can see no better solution, and I admit that the sentence is a difficulty.

Some, as Chrysostom and Theophylact, think "thieves and robbers" mean Theudas, Judas of Galilee (Acts v.36,37), and others like them.

Euthymius remarks that "all" here must not be taken literally, but is a Hebraism meaning, "Anyone who does not come by Me is a thief," etc.

Theophylact observes that the Manichean heretics wrested this text into a proof of their fanatical view that the Old Testament prophets were not sent by God!

Luther says: "These thieves and robbers form at all times the great majority in the world, and nothing better can they be as long as they are not in Christ. In fact, the world will have such wolf's preaching, and indeed desires no better, because it hears not Christ nor regards Christ. It is no wonder that true Christians and their pastors are so few."

Calvin remarks: "That no man may be moved by the consideration that there have been teachers in all ages who gave themselves no concern whatever about directing men to Christ, Christ expressly states that it is no matter how many there may have been of this description, or how early they began to appear. There is but *one Door*, and all who leave it and make openings or breaches in the walls are thieves."

Lightfoot thinks that our Lord refers to the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, who had long misled the Jews before Christ came, and that they were the three false shepherds whose final casting off is foretold in Zechariah xi.8.

The expression, "The sheep did not hear them," must mean that true believers, when our Lord came on earth (such as Simeon, Anna, and others), had ceased to put any confidence in the commissioned teachers of the Jews, and were like sheep without a shepherd.

The word "sheep" in this explanatory verse must evidently be taken in a spiritual sense and can only mean true believers. Mere outward members of the Church, without faith and grace, are not "sheep."

"Sheep," says Hengstenberg, "in the discourses of Christ are always the faithful members of God's kingdom, the company of believers."

Alford says: "The sheep throughout this parable are not the mixed multitude of good and bad, but the real sheep--the faithful, who are what all in the fold should be. The false sheep, the goats, do not appear."

Brentius remarks that we must not hastily assume, from our Lord's saying "the sheep did not hear them," that godly people will never be led away temporarily by false teachers. They may be deceived and seduced, but will return to the truth at last.

9.--[*I am the door, etc.*] This verse is one of those wide, broad, grand statements which our Lord sometimes makes, stretching far beyond the subject of which He is immediately speaking. It is like, "I am the Bread, I am the Light, I am the Way." The primary meaning is, "I am He through whom and by whom alone true pastors must enter the Church. All such pastors, entering by Me, shall find themselves at home in the fold and enjoy the confidence of my flock, and find food for the souls of my sheep, their hearers." The secondary or fuller meaning is, "I am the Way of access to God. All who come to the Father by Me, whether pastors or hearers, shall find through Me safety and liberty, and possess continual food for their souls." Strictly speaking, the sentence appears to belong specially to the true ministers of the flock of Christ. But I dare not confine it to them alone. It is a grand, wide promise to all who enter in.



Melancthon sees, in this verse, a most excellent picture of a true pastor in four respects: (1) he shall be saved personally, (2) he shall go in to close and intimate communion with God, (3) he shall go forth furnished with gifts and be useful to the Church, and (4) he shall find food and refreshment for his own soul.

Musculus observes that our Lord does not say "If any learned, or righteous, or noble, or rich, or Jewish man enters by Me," but "any man"--no matter who, great or small, however wicked in times past--"any man" that enters by Me shall be saved.

The expression "go in and out" implies a habit of using familiarly a dwelling and treating it as a home. It is a Hebraism. It expresses beautifully the habitual communion and happy intercourse with Christ which a true believer enjoys. (See Acts i.21, ix.28, John xiv.23, and Rev. iii.20.)

Augustine suggests that "go in" means entering by faith, and "going out," dying in faith and the result of it having life in glory. He says, "We come in by believing; we got out by dying." But this seems far-fetched.

Euthymius thinks that "going out" refers to the Apostles going out into the world to preach the Gospel.

The "finding pasture" implies the satisfaction, comfort, and refreshment of soul which everyone who uses Christ as his Door into heaven shall experience. The latent thought is evidently Psalm xxiii.1,2,etc.

Burton remarks: "The concluding words describe the security and enjoyment which are the privilege of Gods people. To go in and out is to transact the business of each day's life: its rest and labor, the beginning and end of every work. The Hebrew phrase denotes a man's whole life and conversation. The promises connected therewith seem to imply that in their daily walk (it may be in the world's dusky lane and crowded mart), the people of God will find spiritual support and consolation, even meat for the souls which the world knows not of. Elsewhere the phrase is often 'go out and come in.' Here, not without meaning, the expressions are transposed. The former is the order of nature, the latter the order of grace."

In leaving this difficult passage, it is well to remember that though our Lord is not speaking of Himself as a Shepherd here, and is only giving a descriptive picture of a good shepherd, there is a latent application to Himself. There is no one to whom the various features of the picture apply so literally, clearly, and exactly as they do to the great Shepherd of believers. "Every expression," says Burton, "has a marked reference to Christ; yet it is plain that it is not of Himself that He is primarily speaking."

Throughout the passage it is noteworthy how much stress is laid on the "voice" of the shepherd and on hearing his voice. I cannot but regard this as intentional. It is the "voice in teaching" which makes the great difference between one earthly pastor and another. "The shepherd," says

Burton, "must not be silent while among his sheep." It is hearing the voice of the Chief Shepherd which is one great mark of all true believers."