John 10: The Shepherd and the Sheep Gate

If they do not follow Jesus, it is not because he's not a shepherd, but because they're not sheep.
— John Chrysostom

❖ Chapters 9 and 10:1-21 come some time between *Tabernacles* (the Sep/Oct harvest festival) and the feast of *Dedication* or *Hanukkah* (a Dec festival commemorating the rededication or consecration of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus). This context would have called to mind the wicked high priests who betrayed their office by allowing the Syrian desecration of the Temple.

❖ The cycle of liturgical readings leading up to Dedication was filled with passages concerning sheep and shepherds. The single most important such passage was Ezek 34.

1. *Read Ezekiel 34.* Ezekiel was prophesying from exile in Babylon sometime after 587. Who were the bad shepherds referred to in Ezek 34? What did they do wrong? What remedy did God promise? *(Who was meant by "David"?)* When, if at all, did it come to pass? *Note also that Joshua, who had the same Hebrew name as Jesus, was referred to as a shepherd for his people (Num 27:16-17) by Moses; like Jesus, he took his people into the promised land.*

❖ Parables are a simple illustrations having a single point, and analogies an expanded series of metaphors where the various details and persons involved all have a figurative meaning. The distinction between parable and analogy was part of Greek oratorical training. In contrast, the Hebrews had one word for both— the word *masal* covered all figurative illustrations: parable, allegory, proverb, maxim, simile, metaphor, etc. *So while these probably aren't strict one-point parables, it isn't necessary that every part of their analogies have meaning (the way the medieval interpreters tended to read the "parables").*

2. *Read John 10:1-3a, 6-10 (see handout).* Who was Jesus calling the "thieves & robbers"? What would it have meant for them to enter by the gate? How does this parable apply to the healing of the man born blind in chapter 9?

3. *Read John 10:3b-5, 11-18.* What makes the good shepherd good? Jesus later (esp. 15:13-15) will command his followers to love one another, the expressed in self-sacrifice, even to the point of martyrdom. In our culture, spirituality is often expressed in terms of a personal journey, and little emphasis is placed on self sacrifice. Ask yourself how your life entails sacrifice for others. How much or your time or resources are given to nurturing those sheep God has brought your way? How would you characterize RCRC in this respect?

4. Why does John suggest people followed Jesus? Why did you first believe Jesus was the Messiah? How comfortable would you feel attesting to an interesting unbeliever about Jesus based on his miracles? *Regarding the sheep recognizing his voice, quote Jer 23:29, "'Is not my word like fire,' declares the Lord, 'and like a hammer shattering a rock?'"*

5. *Read 10:19-42.* Why doesn't Jesus give a direct answer in 24-26? What would have happened if he had? *Note that, in the words of Raymond Brown, the Christian understanding of the Messiah was completely revolutionary.*

❖ In 10:34+, Jesus uses a rabbinic hermeneutical principle called *qal wa-homer*, literally "light and heavy" *(also referred to as "a minori ad maius")*, in which "what is true in an instance of lesser importance is surely true in one of more importance" (Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature,* IVP, 2002*).*

6. In 10:34, Jesus quotes from Ps 82, which is a condemnation of unjust judges who, it reminds us, were traditionally referred to as "gods". Read Ps 82. Bearing in mind John 9:39, what is the essence of Jesus' defense here against the charge of blasphemy? How would this parallel have been taken by the spiritual authorities? *It seems at first unreasonable to generalize from a colloquial term for OT judges to a claim on Jesus' part for divinity. The essence of his argument is <gods:God::judges:Judge>, or <gods:God::words of God:Word of God>. In doing this, he once again is condemning the ruling authorities, by referring to a Psalm which condemns corrupt judges.*