

Unit 1: The Gospel of John

Lesson 5 | January 4, 2026

Jesus: The Good Shepherd

Study Text

John 10:1–30

Central Truth

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus leads and provides for us.

Key Verse: John 10:11

I [Jesus] am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep(KJV).

“I [Jesus] am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep”(NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will learn to listen to the Good Shepherd’s voice.
- Students will thank Jesus for willingly sacrificing His life for the sheep.
- Students will recognize God’s ultimate purpose of creating “one flock with one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Introducing the Lesson

Leadership is something we all encounter every day—whether we’re employees, students, volunteers, church members, or even just citizens of a certain city or nation.

Excellence in Leadership

What are some characteristics of excellent leaders?

Jesus’ description of himself as the Good Shepherd is set within a context of contrasting leadership models. On one side: the Jewish religious leaders, who had just expelled from the synagogue a man who had been born blind. On the other side: Jesus, who had healed the man, searched him out again later, and offered the opportunity for belief and restoration.

In John 9, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. The Jewish religious leaders raised objections about Jesus’ method, since making mud violated their traditional understanding about working on the Sabbath. When the healed man questioned their logic, the religious leaders threw him out of the synagogue. Jesus revealed His identity to the man, who believed and worshipped Jesus. Some of the religious leaders heard their conversation and began to question Jesus. His discourse in John 10 about true and false shepherds was part of His response to them. He called out their lack of care for God’s people, including the man who had been healed, contrasting their indifference with His own sacrificial love.

Part 1—The Shepherd’s Voice

Jesus, the Good Shepherd

John 10:1–6

Using a real-life illustration His listeners could easily understand, Jesus contrasted the self-sacrificing leadership of a good shepherd with the self-serving leadership of someone who is only out to steal, kill, and destroy.

In John 9 and 10, Jesus was in Jerusalem, having just attended the Feast of Tabernacles with His disciples. Because of the special sacrifices offered during the festival, there may have been pens of sheep nearby. These sheepfolds were enclosures where sheep were kept for safety at night. During the day, their shepherds would lead them to fields where they could graze and streams where they could drink. Jesus used the familiar imagery of shepherding and sheepfolds—and drew on Old Testament passages like Psalm 23—to teach His listeners a powerful lesson about himself, the Good Shepherd.

Jesus explained that a legitimate shepherd enters a sheepfold through the gate, while a thief has to sneak in so he isn't seen. He also described the nature of the relationship between shepherd and sheep. A good shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out of the pen. Recognizing his voice, the sheep follow him to safe pastures and streams where they can eat and drink. If someone besides their shepherd calls the sheep, they refuse to follow. Instead, they run from any stranger whose voice they do not recognize.

Considering the context of John 10, Jesus was clearly pointing to the religious leaders as thieves and robbers. With their treatment of the man who had been healed, they showed that they did not really care for the sheep. Jesus, on the other hand, is the true shepherd of the sheep. Verse 6 shows that the people were not picking upon Jesus' analogy. Maybe they chose not to understand, since a similar comparison in Ezekiel 34:1–15 would have been familiar to them.

One commentary notes, “In the Middle East shepherds do not drive their sheep. They lead them; they go before them... It is natural for sheep to follow the shepherd. They have learned to know his voice and his watchfulness on their behalf.”¹ Jesus, our Good Shepherd, calls each of us by name. We can trust Him and follow wherever He leads us, knowing He will provide everything we need.

? How would you explain the process of recognizing Jesus' voice?

? What are some other voices calling out for us to follow them? What should be our response to those who would lead us away from the fold (see John 10:5)?

Jesus, the Door

John 10:7–10

Jesus described himself as not only the shepherd but also the gate of the sheepfold. Through Jesus, we find security, provision, and freedom—“a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10).

¹*The Complete Biblical Library: The New Testament Study Bible*, ed. Ralph W. Harris, Stanley M. Horton, and Gayle Garrity Seaver (Tulsa, OK: Empowered Life, 1994–2000), Accordance.

As the door or gate of the sheepfold, Jesus is the only way to enter God's flock. Entering the sheepfold through the gate would ensure the flock's safety and rest; likewise, entering God's kingdom through Jesus brings salvation and abundant, rich, satisfying life—the eternal life only Jesus can give. This is why Jesus came to earth.

Following the good shepherd's voice would lead the sheep to good pastures. Again, the imagery of Psalm 23 comes to mind: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters" (verses 1–2, NIV). What a contrast to the Jewish religious leaders, described again as thieves and robbers (John 10:8–10). Jesus' sweeping language in verse 8 ("all who came before me") may broaden the reference to false messiahs, deceivers who appeared from time to time and led their followers to destruction. But the contrast here is chiefly with these Jewish religious leaders who had failed to care for God's people. Like the man who had been healed, disciples of Jesus are the "true sheep" who "did not listen to them" (verse 8).

Just as in that time, many voices call out to Jesus' followers today. Our souls' well-being depends on how well we discern and obey Jesus' voice above all the others. He is the Good Shepherd, the One who leads us to life, and He is the door, the only way to enter that life. As Jesus would later tell His disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

? Why do you think Jesus described himself as both the Good Shepherd and the gate of the sheepfold rather than choosing just one of those analogies?

? What does it mean for a follower of Jesus to have a "rich and satisfying life"? What does it *not* mean?

Part 2—The Shepherd's Self-Sacrifice

Shepherd vs. Hired Hand

John 10:11–15

Jesus returned to His primary illustration by repeating, "I am the good shepherd." He also introduced the concept of His self-sacrifice. As the Good Shepherd, He was prepared to give His life for the sheep.

Jesus next describes the qualities of the good shepherd by contrasting him with another negative character: the hired hand. The imagery may be different, but the point is the same: not everyone is willing to put the sheep first. Only the good shepherd, the true owner of the sheep, would sacrifice his life to protect them (John 10:11). In Jesus' case, this was not hypothetical: He did, in fact, lay down His life for the sheep.

A hired hand would not show the same degree of care. Instead of being motivated by love, he would be motivated by a paycheck. So when the wolf came, he would abandon the sheep, protecting his own life instead (verses 12–13). This is precisely the leadership critique found in Ezekiel 34:8: "As surely as I live, says the Sovereign Lord, you abandoned my flock and left them to be attacked by every wild animal. And though you were my shepherds, you didn't search for my sheep when they were lost. You took care of yourselves and left the sheep to starve."

John 10:14–15 echoes the relationship between sheep and their shepherd described in verses 3–4. They know each other so well that when the shepherd calls them by name, the sheep recognize and respond to his voice. What a powerful image of Jesus and His flock! The prophet Jeremiah had described this kind of new-covenant relationship between the Lord and His people (Jeremiah 31:33–34). Jesus also compares His relationship with His sheep with His relationship with the Father. He revisits this theme in His prayer for His disciples in John 17:21: “I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.”

Showing Christlike love requires sacrifice. Just as Jesus laid down His life for us, we must put others first. Jesus said it this way in John 15: “This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (verses 12–13).

? In what ways do modern-day false teachers behave like hired hands?

? What are some practical ways we can show sacrificial love—both for God and for people?

One Flock, One Shepherd

John 10:16–21

Next, Jesus looked ahead to His global Church and the day when the nations would worship Him as one. God’s promise to bless the earth through Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 12:3) would continue on a bigger scale. Jesus’ sacrificial love created the channel of blessing by which the whole world could come to know the one true God.

What a beautiful picture of God’s reconciling work through Jesus: “one flock with one shepherd” (John 10:16). Jesus’ words cast His vision of one Church, diverse and united, in perfect harmony, following the Great Shepherd. Revelation 7:9–10 portrays the fulfillment in this way: “I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, ‘Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!’”

Jesus’ sacrificial death (John 10:17) is what unifies the flock (Ephesians 2:14). And because of His resurrection power, He not only laid down His life, but He also took it up again (John 10:18). Jesus’ victory over death and ascension to the right hand of the Father authenticated His redeeming sacrifice. The crucifixion—and all the conflict that led to it—were entirely under Jesus’ control (verse 18). He was in complete authority when He triumphantly proclaimed from the cross: “It is finished!” (19:30).

Reactions were divided among the people who heard Jesus’ declarations (10:19). Some were scandalized, attributing His words to insanity or demonic influence (verse 20). Others pointed out that Jesus had just healed a man who was blind from birth, which “doesn’t sound like a man possessed by a demon!” (verse 21).

- ? Why do you think unity is such an important factor in following Jesus?
- ? How should a believer react when someone has a wrong opinion about Jesus (see John 10:19–21)?

Part 3—The Shepherd Knows His Sheep

Not Jesus' Sheep

John 10:22–27

The setting now shifts from the Festival of Tabernacles to the Festival of Dedication, which we know as Hanukkah. Although a few months had passed, the controversy and questions about Jesus remained.

Hanukkah

“Festival of Dedication” in John 10:22 refers to the Jewish celebration we now call Hanukkah.

The Festival of Dedication, or Hanukkah, commemorates the rededication of the temple under the Hasmoneans in 167 BC, when the Jews won their independence from the Greek Seleucid dynasty. Because of the historical details, messianic expectations were kindled during this festival. This could be part of the reason the people asked Jesus at this time to tell them plainly if He was the Messiah (John 10:22–24).

This was a loaded question. Most Jews expected the Messiah to be a political and military figure, like Judas Maccabeus almost two hundred years before. They thought his top priority would be overthrowing the Romans, like the Maccabees’ top priority had been overthrowing the Greeks. But Jesus knew His true messianic destiny: overthrowing humanity’s greatest enemy by way of the Cross. Although the people wanted a “plain” answer, Jesus did not yet provide it.

If the people had eyes to see and ears to hear, they would have grasped the significance of what Jesus had already said and done (verse 25). His miraculous signs announced His identity as God’s anointed one. His words and actions at the Festival of Tabernacles had pointed the way. His straightforward “I AM” statements had already answered their questions. His authority clearly came from God the Father. He had already provided all the proof that was needed by those who were genuinely seeking the truth. The problem was not a lack of information, but with the people themselves. Jesus clearly told them, “You don’t believe me because you are not my sheep” (verse 26). The sheep recognize the Shepherd’s voice, and that is reason enough for them to follow Him (verse 27).

- ? Many people today do not believe in Jesus despite the testimony of God’s Word and Christians throughout the ages. How do these unbelievers resemble the crowd in John 10?
- ? How do you think the people might have reacted if Jesus answered their question by announcing He was the Messiah? (See John 6:15.)

Following the Good Shepherd

John 10:27–30

The sheep who belong to the Good Shepherd hear His voice and follow Him. They live in the most secure of all sheepfolds: the Father's hand.

John 10:27 continues the sheep-and-shepherd imagery and echoes the themes of intimacy and discipleship. Jesus clearly connects the safety of the sheep to the eternal life He offers (verse 28). By the time John wrote this Gospel toward the end of the first century, many of Jesus' followers had already died, including almost all of the apostles. So physical death was not what Jesus was referring to when He promised, "They will never perish." Rather, He referred to what John later called "the second death" (Revelation 2:11; 20:6). Eternal life begins when someone is born again from above. It involves a higher quality of life on earth (the abundant life of John 10:10) and leads to eternal life in God's presence.

Jesus makes it clear that no one can snatch the sheep from the Father's hand (verse 28). No enemy—whether world, thief, robber, or hired hand—has any power to remove a single sheep from the security of Jesus' flock. But we sheep must always remember that this security only lasts if we, by God's grace, remain in His loving care. If we willfully desert the Good Shepherd, walking away from the safety of His sheepfold, we remove ourselves from His protection.

In verse 30, Jesus provides another clear answer to the question from verse 24. "How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly," the people had asked. Jesus answered, "The Father and I are one." Not only is Jesus the Messiah, but He is God.

? Jesus said His sheep listen to His voice. How do you practice listening to Jesus' voice? What has helped you improve your listening skills?

? Why do you think people remove themselves from Jesus' flock? How can we make certain that our faith remains strong and we stay true to Jesus?

What Is God Saying to Us?

We are immeasurably blessed to be part of Jesus' flock. We can walk in abundant life because the Good Shepherd gave His life for us. We can have full confidence that no one can destroy that eternal, abundant life or remove us from the Father's hand. We are secure in the Shepherd's protection and His faithful care. Let us make every effort to guide others toward the shelter of this sheepfold. And let us ask the Shepherd to give us a clear vision of the "one flock" He desires.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Thank God for the abundant life we have in Jesus through His sacrificial death. If you have a Christian friend who is feeling discouraged or doubtful, remind them of the "rich and satisfying life" (John 10:10) available to Jesus' followers, regardless of their circumstances.
- Practice listening to the Good Shepherd's voice.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to people who need to be reconciled to God. Listen for the Spirit's direction and then speak or act as He directs.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

The Shepherd of Israel.

Psalm 80:1–3

Tuesday:

The Shepherd's Flock

Isaiah 40:9–11

Wednesday:

The Shepherd Is Smitten.

Zechariah 13:7–9

Thursday:

Compassion of the Good Shepherd.

Matthew 18:10–14

Friday:

Imitate the Chief Shepherd.

1 Peter 5:1–4

Saturday:

The Shepherd's Comfort.

Revelation 7:13–17