

The King Who Guards his Flock

Matthew 15:32–16:12

A little over a week ago I was visiting with Davis Bates, who is recovering at Whittier Rehabilitation in Westborough. He was reflecting on the Shepherd's Psalm, Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. . . ." (Ps. 23:1-3). Specifically, how apt a metaphor it is that God would call us his sheep. They're not exactly the smartest animals on the farm. They're prone to wander off by themselves and get lost. They don't know how to find their own food and drink. They're utterly defenseless if caught in the wild by a wolf, lion, or bear. Nor do they readily recognize the warning signs when a wolf is on the approach.

Praise God that the Lord is our shepherd. He has not left us alone to wander. And one of the central ways he promises to care for his people is by giving them a king to shepherd them.

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew has shown us in multiple ways how Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise. Here is a king who will shepherd God's people faithfully. He has come to seek and save the lost. To bind up the wounded. To *feed* the sheep, as we saw a few weeks ago in ch. 14:13-21, when Jesus, in good Psalm-23-style, made the crowds to lie down in green pasture and fed all 5,000 of them from just five loaves and two fish.

Our passage this morning begins with a similar story—Jesus feeding another crowd of 4,000-plus people, from just seven loaves and a few fish. We see our shepherd in action again, feeding his flock. But as the story moves on, the emphasis shifts to another aspect of what it means to be a shepherd—not only providing for the flock, but *protecting* it. Beating off the wolves, and warning the sheep not to follow them and be led astray by their teaching. So we see here that Jesus is the King who *guards* his flock. That sound doctrine comes from God's Word and points us to the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

The Shepherd-King Feeds his Flock (15:32-39)

Our passage begins with a story that sounds very familiar, if we've been following along in Matthew. Look with me at Matthew 15:32ff.

Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way."³³ And the disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?"³⁴ And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish."³⁵ And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground,³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.³⁷ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets

full of the broken pieces left over.³⁸ Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.³⁹ And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan. (Matt. 15:32-39)

There are several similarities between this story and what we looked at back in ch. 14—so many that some have suggested what we have here is simply a duplicate account of the same historical event. There’s no compelling reason to draw that conclusion, though. In fact, there’s every reason to see that they are in fact two separate events, the chief among them being Jesus’ own words in 16:9-10, where he refers to them individually.

The point is, however, very similar: Jesus is the king who feeds his sheep. Here is a king who, unlike past kings and current religious leaders, provides for his sheep in fulfillment of God’s promises. The Old Testament looked forward to the day when God would “set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ezekiel 34:23). Matthew is telling us again, and again, and again—here he is. This miracle is yet another sign that the true king of Israel is here.

Here is one who isn’t seeking to exploit his followers, but is motivated by a heart of compassion, because they are like sheep without a shepherd (cf. 9:36-37; 14:14). One who, again, as we saw back in ch. 14, shepherds them not only as the Son of David, but as God himself. Jesus does what his disciples couldn’t do, what *no* human could do—he multiplies seven loaves and few fish to feed over 4,000 people. This is nothing less than the hand of God.

Jesus is the king who provides for his sheep. That doesn’t mean, in Matthew, or today, that we will never face suffering. It does mean that we will never face it alone. And that we have a King who is stronger than any trial we face, who is with us in our suffering, and who will be faithful, whether in part now, or fully in the end, to deliver us from all harm and bring us safely home. He is the good shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep by dying on the cross. But, as John 10 reminds us, he also takes it up again in the resurrection (Jn. 10:17-18). It’s through faith in Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection for us that we are forgiven our sin and included in his fold. And if we belong to him, then he will never let us go. Nor can any wolf or lion come along and snatch us out of his hand (Jn. 10:30).

But that doesn’t mean the wolves won’t try. As the story moves on, Jesus faces yet another round of questioning from the Pharisees and Sadducees, who like the false prophets Jesus mentions back in 7:15, come in as wolves in sheep’s clothing. Look with me at ch. 16:1-4.

The Shepherd-King Beats Off the Wolves (16:1-4)

Verse 1: “And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.” We’ve seen both of these groups before in Matthew. They are both groups of religious leaders—the Pharisees known for their expertise in the Law, and the Sadducees who were associated with temple leadership. They don’t often travel together, and hold some pretty irreconcilable differences in theology. But they are united in at least one thing: their opposition to Jesus. And so they come to Jesus asking for a sign from heaven. Some miraculous spectacle to prove his divine power and authority.

But we have to stop and ask the obvious: Didn't Jesus *just* perform a pretty incredible sign? Seven loaves, *four-thousand people!* Hasn't he been performing signs and miracles all along attesting to his divine power and heavenly authority?

The answer is obviously, Yes. Which shows us that the Pharisees and Sadducees aren't really interested in Jesus proving his power and authority. Jesus knows this, and he calls them on it. Verse 2: "He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times"' (16:2-3).

Jesus is calling attention to their spiritual blindness. And he's doing so in a rather playful way. The Greek word for *heaven* in v. 1 is the same as the word for *sky* in vv. 2-3. The religious leaders have asked for a sign from heaven. Jesus says, you see signs in the heavens all the time, and know just how to interpret them. Red evening, sunny day tomorrow. Red morning, storm's a coming. They have all these theories on how to read the day's weather. Should I wear my sunglasses or grab my umbrella? But, Jesus says, they have missed the bigger signs—the signs of the seasons, or times. They're still living like it's winter in the middle of May. But Aslan is on the move. The winter has ended and the signs of spring are all around—signs of the new work God is doing through Jesus. The religious leaders are blind to these signs.

They've missed them because they're not really interested in them. Even if Jesus did perform another sign, it wouldn't change anything. And so he says in v. 4, "'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' So he left them and departed." Their request for a sign is nothing more than a pious smoke screen to cover their own self-righteous rejection of God and his king. The only sign they'll receive is the sign of God's victory over sin and the grave—the sign of Jonah. Jesus explained what he meant by this sign back in ch. 12:40: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Jonah's story becomes a type or pattern for Christ's death and resurrection. Whether the Pharisees and Sadducees will see and respond to that sign when it happens remains to be seen at this point in the story.

What we can say about them right here is this: there are people in this world who, because of the evil in their hearts, want nothing more than to lead people away from God and his Messiah. The Bible calls them false teachers, and they are a very real threat to God's flock.

When we think of those whose teaching and life pose a threat to God's people today, we tend to think of the irreligious folk. People who openly deny God, who mock Christianity and the Bible, who glory in their sinfulness and encourage others to join them. That is a very real threat. But false teachers are just as likely to carry a Bible and sound spiritual and look religious as they are to mock God. And in some ways, it's the religious false teachers who pose a greater threat to God's people. They dress their doctrine and agenda in biblical phrases, but underneath they are out to exploit God's people for selfish gain. Whether it's money, power, or fame. They would steal for themselves the glory that God alone deserves.

Jesus beats off the wolves here, so to speak. He shuts down their argument and sends them packing. But he also makes sure to warn his flock about them and their teaching. That's what we see in vv. 5-12.

The Shepherd-King Warns his Flock (16:5-12)

Look with me at v. 5: “When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, ‘We brought no bread’” (16:5-7).

You wonder sometimes what was going through the disciples’ heads. Now granted, Jesus’ metaphor is not the easiest one to pick up on, but somehow the disciples interpret a warning against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees as a veiled rebuke for forgetting to pack lunch. It reminds me of when you walk into the room while your child is doing something they know they’re not supposed to, and before you even say anything, they jump, “I didn’t do anything!”

But to think that Jesus is worried about bread is not only to miss his metaphor, it’s to forget the lesson they just learned *again* at the end of ch. 15. So Jesus reminds them: “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (15:8-11).

And then the disciples finally get it in v. 12: “Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” With the exception of Matthew 13:33, everywhere leaven or yeast is mentioned in Scripture, it signals something bad. Here, Matthew specifies it’s the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Jesus is the king who not only feeds his flock, but who guards it. He warns them against following the false teaching of wolves like the Pharisees and Sadducees. And as his apostles, they too will soon bear the responsibility of warning the sheep, even as elders and pastors bear that responsibility today.

When the Bible talks about what it means for an elder or overseer to shepherd or pastor God’s flock, guarding sound doctrine is central among those responsibilities. It’s not the only one. Shepherds must know the flock, feed it with God’s Word, lead it in God’s ways. But they must also protect the sheep from the poison of false teaching. As Paul charges the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:28-31:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

Or as he instructs Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1-4:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will

accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

And so part of my job as a pastor and elder of this church, together with the rest of our elders, is to follow Jesus' model in warning us all against false teaching. And by false teaching, we're not talking about merely misunderstanding a passage or something. We all do that. We want to understand Scripture correctly, of course, but nobody knows the Bible perfectly or exhaustively. There are things that I teach you that are wrong—I just don't know what they are. If I find out, or somebody shows me from Scripture, then I want to correct that and teach what is right. That's simply part of the growth process in our relationship with Christ, and we're all on that journey.

But there is also teaching that is not just incorrect, but deadly. Teaching that if you believe it, it threatens to come between you and Christ, cutting you off from the Savior. This is what we mean by false teaching, or as it's often called, *heresy*. And it's poison. It threatens to choke off the flock.

There are plenty of examples of it today. So how do we guard against it?

Guarding Sound Doctrine in the Church

If we look at our passage again, there are two problems with the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, which provide two specific applications for us. The first problem with the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees was that they both departed from the Scriptures, each in their own way.

In some of the preaching workshops that I participate in, we use a helpful illustration that's called "Staying on the Line."¹ (We talked about this last week in our Sunday School class.) There is a line of Scripture, and the goal of the reader or the preacher is to neither go above the line, adding to Scripture, or below the line, taking away from Scripture, but to stay on the line—saying, believing, obeying only what Scripture says, which is what God says. God's Word is the standard; we hold to that standard. We test all things against that standard; we don't add to it or take away from it.

The Pharisees had a tendency to go above the line. We saw this a couple weeks ago at the beginning of Matthew 15: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? . . . for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God" (15:3, 6). They took their tradition, their "authorized" interpretation and application of God's Word, and made it more binding than God's Word itself, which was not only to add to Scripture but to actually replace the Scriptures, nullifying God's Word.

The Sadducees had a tendency to go below the line. In Acts 23:8 we read, "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all." They take away from Scripture, denying spiritual power and the spiritual realm itself.

Whether you depart from Scripture by going above the line or below it, this is the first warning sign in false teaching. And so our first application is this: *test all things against God's Word*. Sound doctrine comes from God's Word, the Scriptures.

¹ This is one of the "Principles of Exposition" from the Charles Simeon Trust. See https://www.simeon.org/cst/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=125&Itemid=327.

The second problem with the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, is that because they departed from Scripture (in their case, the Old Testament), they missed the one to whom the Scriptures were pointing, Jesus. Jesus says to the Jewish leaders in John 5:39-40, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” If you stay on the line of Scripture, you will see Jesus and the saving work he’s accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection. It’s the heart of the Bible’s message. The Old Testament anticipates it; the New Testament proclaims it and applies it. But the Pharisees and the Sadducees missed it. They missed the whole point of the Law and the Prophets, where the whole story was going—the sign of Jonah, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so here’s our second application: we must *test all things against the cross and resurrection of Jesus*. Sound doctrine comes from God’s Word, and points us to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And you have to have both. Any doctrine or teaching that holds up the Scriptures without Jesus, or Jesus without the Scriptures, is a false teaching. The two can’t be separated.

Following a Jesus who bears no resemblance to the person revealed to us in God’s Word isn’t following Jesus. It’s following some cheap, blasphemous imitation. The Jesus who looks more like a New Age mystic than the crucified and risen Son of God. The Jesus of nominal Christianity, or what’s been called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” where Jesus is “like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.”² This is “Jesus the way I like to think of him.” You hear people say that a lot. “I like to think of Jesus as . . .” You know what: God doesn’t care how you *like* to think of his Son—he wants you to know and think of him *as he is*. Try that one on your spouse: “I like to think of my wife as a blonde who brings me breakfast in bed every morning . . .” We all know the trouble that’s going get me into. So if we know that we dishonor our spouse by imagining that they’re someone that they’re not, why are we so flippant about doing this with God’s Son? We must test our ideas and doctrine against God’s Word.

There are any number of false religions that claim allegiance to Jesus, but the person they follow or worship is not the Jesus revealed to us in Scripture. Mormonism, Unitarianism, Jehovah’s Witness, even Islam claims Jesus as their own. But does their portrait of Jesus line up with Scripture? Jesus as fully God and fully human, the eternal Son of God who came into this world to die for our sins and rise again? The only name under heaven, Acts 4 tells us, by which you must be saved (4:12)? You cannot know Jesus apart from God’s revelation of who he is in the Bible.

Neither can you follow the Bible without submitting to Jesus and trusting in his life, death, and resurrection for you. The only way to claim to follow God’s Word without holding fast to the gospel of Jesus is to go above the line or below it. To add to or take away from the Bible. And when you do that, *you make yourself the savior*.

² Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), Kindle edition.

This is what happens when you go below the line. Take *theological liberalism*, for example. The kind of theology that claims to follow the Bible but denies its power, just like the Sadducees. The goal is to “demythologize” the miracle stories—to remove the “myth” part of them (by which they mean anything supernatural or miraculous) and explain it in naturalistic terms. So the miracle of feeding the 5,000 wasn’t really a miracle; it was a mass of people inspired by the generosity of the little boy who was willing to share his loaves and fishes, such that everyone else decided to share what they had too. Jesus is no longer the hero or the Savior—you are. Jesus is just a good example; the future salvation of humanity lies in our hands instead. The gospel is no longer good news of what God has done; it’s good advice of what we are to do, which sounds spiritual and religious but actually cuts us off from our only hope of salvation—faith in Jesus.

This is also what happens when you go above the line and add to Scripture. As with *legalism*, where like the Pharisees, we add commands in order to earn God’s acceptance. We become our own savior—it’s all up to our performance. Or take the *prosperity gospel*, for another example. The so-called “health and wealth” gospel, which is really no gospel at all. The teaching goes like this: God doesn’t want his children to suffer. That’s not part of his plan. If you’re a child of the king, then you should live like royalty. And the only thing that’s keeping you from having the health and the wealth and the prosperity and the happiness that you deserve is your own lack of faith. This teaching goes below the line of Scripture by ignoring the role of suffering in the Christian life, and then goes above the line by taking promises that God has made for the end when Christ returns, and demanding that God grant them in the present. But he’ll only grant them if you demand them. The prosperity gospel teaches a weak and puny god, whose hands are tied unless *you* show up. And so once again, you’re your own savior. The only thing standing in between you and the victorious Christian life is *you and your lack of faith*, the fruit of which isn’t so much reconciliation with God, or satisfaction in God, but *stuff from God*. Friends, this is poison in a hundred ways, not least because it exploits Jesus’ death and resurrection for selfish gain.

Sound doctrine comes from God’s Word, and points us to the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It’s not about how zealous we are for our convictions, or how sincerely we hold them. It’s about whether or not they are *true*. Do they line up with Scripture and point to Jesus’ death and resurrection?

One month ago the snake-handling pastor who starred in National Geographic’s *Snake Salvation* died, tragically, of a snake bite. As one commenter reflects, “Jamie Coots was sincere. But sincerity will not protect us from peril if we are sincerely wrong. Mark 16:18 does not instruct, nor does the New Testament anywhere enjoin, believers to handle poisonous serpents in worship services as proof of their faith. Coots’s devout convictions were based on a text he *misread*. He had ‘a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge’ (Romans 10:2). And his end was sad.”³

We must stay on the line of Scripture, testing all teaching against the Word of God, and against the death and resurrection of Jesus. If it fails to line up with the Bible, or if empties Jesus and his death and resurrection of their sufficient and unique power to save, it is false teaching. Poison.

But the gospel is food. It’s so much better—because *it’s true*, and because it actually deals with the problems of this world and fulfills the longings of our hearts *in a way that nothing else can*. The gospel takes seriously the sinfulness of sin, the brokenness of this world, the evil and

³ Jon Bloom, “The Dead Snake Handler and the Dead Poet’s Society,” *Desiring God Blog*, March 12, 2014, italics mine. Available at: <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/the-dead-snake-handler-and-the-dead-poet-s-society>.

injustice that fill it. And then it does something about it, because it declares to us that God's eternal Son, Jesus, entered into this broken world to take all that's wrong with this world on himself—all the brokenness and pain, all the sadness and sorrow, every sin and rebellious act against God—he bore *all of it* on the cross, even as he bore *his Father's holy anger* against that sin and rebellion, in order that he might break winter's curse and bring forth the summer of his new creation by rising from the dead. A world made new—the world as it was meant to be. The hope of all who trust and follow him.

The summer of new creation is not yet here. But with Jesus' resurrection, spring has dawned. It may not look like it outside. But the signs of its advent are everywhere for those with eyes to see. Lives that are being changed. Relationships being mended. Marriages being reconciled. Sins being repented of. Hope restored. Significance found. Sinners reconciled with God.

Only Jesus can do that. And as we live out our days in the meantime, he will be faithful to guard his flock in all truth. He is our mighty fortress. Sound doctrine comes from God's Word, and points us to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.