

Grace, Mercy and peace are yours in abundance through faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter,²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.²⁴ The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me,²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.³⁰ I and the Father are one."

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

Dear Members of God's Flock,

There was a sheep in New Zealand by the name of Shrek. He hated to be sheared and so one year he escaped and for the next 6 years he hid out in caves and such around the island. When he was finally caught, his wool had grown so much he could hardly see. When they sheared him, the wool weighed 60 pounds – about 6 times the average when shearing this type of sheep. Shrek was stubborn and disobedient.

At times, the followers of Christ are called sheep but what kind of a sheep are you? **"Are you One of the Good Shepherd's Sheep?"**

I. In the portion of scripture before us, the Jews were asking Jesus to make a public confession. They asked Jesus, **"If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."** Jesus could have simply answered them, "I am," but he knew what was in their hearts and so he asked them, "Who are YOU?" Were they sheep seeking the Shepherd? Did they really want to know who He was? Or were they just imposters? We could say that Jesus poses this same question to us. Who are you? Why are you here? What kind of follower are you?

Jesus helps us figure out the answer to that question when He says, **"²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."** These are specific characteristics of our Shepherd's sheep. The 1st characteristic is that the sheep listen to his voice. We usually like to confirm things with our sight. After all, Seeing is believing. Even in the Bible, the disciples didn't believe Jesus had risen from the dead until they saw him. So why does Jesus place this emphasis on listening to him?

Paul tells us, **"Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word of Christ."** (Romans 10:17). Jesus told his disciples, **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** (John 20:29). The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us, **"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."** (Hebrews 11:1). And a number of times, Jesus himself said, **"He who has ears, let him hear."**

Listening is important! From the beginning of time until Moses led the Children of Israel out of Egypt the scriptures were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth and

the Lord preserved the accuracy of his word throughout those many years. God's Word has always been read or spoken where God's people gather.

So the first key sign as to whether or not you are one of his sheep - is whether you are willing to listen to the Word of the Lord or not. The problem with the Jews who came to Jesus - is that they didn't really come to listen to Jesus' voice. It says they were in suspense - but not to find the truth - rather to find a reason to stone Jesus to death. They didn't come to listen, but to find the words they wanted to hear.

There are times when we are like that too. Instead of listening, we look for God's Word to say what we want to hear and if it doesn't do that, we ignore the parts we don't like or we refuse to listen to it. We quit coming to church or we show up once or twice a year. True sheep listen to all of God's Word - even the parts we don't always like to hear and true sheep do it on a regular basis because they know that God's Word will bring them special blessings.

Hearing God's Word brings the assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Hearing God's Word brings a strengthening of our faith and Hearing God's Word brings us the sure hope of eternal life. Hearing God's Word brings us closer to our Shepherd because it helps us understand who he is, what He has done for us and then we look to him to guide our lives. That's why Jesus said, **"My sheep follow me."**

II. Throughout the Scriptures there are examples of some people who truly did come to listen to what Jesus had to say. The rich young ruler is one example. With some background in the Word of God - he felt like he was on the right path. He truly felt that he had kept all the commandments and yet he knew something was still missing. So he came to Jesus and asked him, **"good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"** (Luke 18:18) This man really wanted to know - he came to listen. He also heard what Jesus had to say - it was loud and clear. Jesus said to him, **"You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** (Luke 18:22) The rich young ruler heard what Jesus had to say, but it was too difficult. So what did he do? **"At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth."** (Mark 10:22) The young man was willing to listen, but not to follow. This is the second sign of a true sheep. **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."**

Sometimes when I am trying to start a conversation I will ask a person if they consider themselves to be a Christian. Most answer yes and then I ask, "What does that mean to you?" Usually they tell me that it means to be a good person or to do the right things. Only once did a person tell me that it means to believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Well, if you don't tie being a Christian to Christ then you will never be able to listen to him or to follow him.

We sang Psalm 23 earlier in our service and it shows us a picture of the Good Shepherd leading his sheep into green pastures with still waters. It's such a tranquil scene. But following the Shepherd isn't always such an easy assignment. One man said to Jesus, **"I will follow you where you go!"** Jesus replied, **"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."** (Matthew 8:20) Jesus was saying to the man, "are you

sure you want to follow me? This isn't going to be an easy path. It's going to be a narrow path, an uphill path, a very difficult path. There will be robbers, murderers, and danger on the path."

Look at the history of the Bible. God led the Israelites into a desert for 40 years. He led Paul on three missionary journeys - where he was shipwrecked, stoned, beaten and imprisoned. Psalm 23 has the Good Shepherd leading his sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. This isn't a good place for sheep to be traveling. No, it's not good at all.

When we were confirmed, we promised to be faithful to God's Word, even to the point of death. In essence we were telling Jesus, "I'll follow you wherever you go!" But then Jesus says, "I want you to be honest so don't cheat." He says - "I want you to take the high road so don't have sex outside of marriage." He says, "I want you to be faithful and set a good example for your children and grandchildren - bring them up in the nurture of the Lord. Have devotions. Be regular in your church attendance." I want you to be kind to others, speak well of them and don't gossip.

And we say, "Are you sure Lord? That's kind of hard." I am willing to do a lot for you but I'm not so sure about some of those things. But that's why we need to stay close to our shepherd and to listen to him. That's why we need to study his Word. A sheep who is truly following the shepherd is always learning and listening and trusting because they need the Shepherd's voice to guide them and comfort them. They're so enamored with their Shepherd's voice that they're willing to follow him ANYWHERE! Are you a sheep? Are you willing to follow?

By now you may be thinking to yourselves, "Maybe being a sheep isn't all that great." But it's the shepherd that makes a difference. We have a shepherd that lay down his life for us, but even more than that, he now lives for us. He knows our wants and our needs. He knows our troubles and our joys and he shares in them all. He comforts us through his Word and guides us along the right path. Sheep are not strong by themselves, their strength lies in their shepherd and our Shepherd is strong, powerful and wise.

He knows us, brings us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. If we stay close to him, we will never perish. No one can snatch us out of the shepherds hand as long as we stay close. So don't wander off from your good shepherd. You and I need him and as we live our lives let us give a faithful witness to who we are - one of the sheep - part of our Savior's flock - and let us do that not only with our words but also with our actions. Today, as you leave worship, Stay close to your Good Shepherd and remember his words, **"My sheep listen to my voice; I Know them, and they follow me."** Amen.