

I AM the Gate for the Sheep

DAVE BAST

Many of the things Jesus said are difficult – either difficult to understand or difficult to accept. To put it another way, Jesus spoke many hard sayings, but some of them are hard because we don't understand them, while others are hard because we understand them only too well. Today on Groundwork let's dig into one of those hard sayings that is hard to accept. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

DAVID DEN HAAN

And I am David Den Haan.

DAVE BAST

And David, welcome once again. David is the pastor of the Fairway Christian Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan, and he is our guest co-host on this series of programs where we are looking at the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

DAVID DEN HAAN

We have looked at a couple of great pictures that Jesus provides to us of Himself: The bread of life; and the light of the world; and today we are going to go a little farther with some of those sayings.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and you know, as we were talking about this, David, somebody on our staff made a great suggestion, and that is that we invite listeners to send, perhaps, or post some images that relate to these "I am" sayings of Jesus. You know, you think about the visual imagery that Jesus employs for Himself: Water and bread and light, and all the rest. You could visit our webpage or you could visit us on Facebook and share some pictures.

DAVID DEN HAAN

You know a great way to be a disciple of Jesus is to be a great image harvester, you know, like He was. He harvested images and then gave them as parables and teachings and sayings, and what a great thing to be able to share those, if you could, with us here at Groundwork.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so if you happen to use Facebook for example, look for Groundwork Radio on Facebook and link to us that way, or go to groundworkonline.com and that will get you on our webpage.

Well today we are turning to John Chapter 10 for another of Jesus' images. This time He draws on pastoral imagery, or the world of sheep and shepherds, and that runs through this tenth chapter; in fact, we will do a couple of programs from this portion of John, but here we are looking at verses 7 and 9, where Jesus again says to them – to the crowd, to the Jewish leaders and others who are surrounding Him:

⁷“Truly, truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁹I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.”

So here is a figure of speech, really, that maybe takes a little background to understand in terms of that culture.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, I think it does because we do not have a lot of shepherds moving around these days.

DAVE BAST

I have not really been close to sheep lately myself.

DAVID DEN HAAN

No, but it was so ubiquitous all over the place in Jesus' day. There were shepherds all over, and everybody knew exactly what Jesus was talking about. The image here is of an enclosure that shepherds would use back then when they were far away from their home village, looking for grazing land that was rich in material for the sheep to eat. They would not have time at the end of the day to get back to town so they would find an enclosure; perhaps one constructed by shepherds long, long ago; or maybe they would find a cave, but some place to keep the sheep safe; some place with a single opening that the shepherd could stand or lie or sit across.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we have to picture a rather crude structure – a simple structure – probably built of dry stones with just walls and no roof and really, you know, low walls for that matter...

DAVID DEN HAAN

Pretty crude.

DAVE BAST

Or as you say, a cave; and when Jesus says, "I am the door," it was even more vivid because the shepherd's body would be the door. He, or she sometimes, because girls would be detailed, I think, to this sort of task as well. Often they were children. Think of young David, the shepherd boy, a thousand years earlier who was exactly in this role.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Well, I remember being in the Holy Land a few years ago, and going into a place that the tour guide said to us: This is a shepherd's cave. So at the end of the day they would come in and bring their sheep; and so he had us all enter this little cave, and it was amazing how much room there was inside, but the entrance was short and small enough where a lot of us scraped our backs trying to get into this thing. So I could easily picture a shepherd seated there, through the course of the night perhaps, and just making sure that nothing that he did not want to get to the sheep, nothing like that got there.

DAVE BAST

So, what is Jesus getting at when He talks about this? Clearly it is a vivid picture, and for His hearers, it would have been very much an everyday figure of speech; so we have to struggle a little bit to imagine our way into this scene; but what is He really getting at?

DAVID DEN HAAN

Well, there are a couple of things that He is talking about. It seems that He is talking about protection for sure, you know; keeping the enemies out; but He is also making a claim that a lot of folks in our culture today really struggle with, don't they? It is the claim that the way to God is through Him. He is the door to salvation – to God; He is the way.

DAVE BAST

Well, He says that explicitly here in John 10:9: "If anyone enters by Me," or we could say, enters through Me, "He will be saved and find pasture and go in and out." Now I do not think that means that we are saved

and lost and saved and lost – we are in and out and in... That is just part of the image. This is where you find life. This is where you find safety and security. We talked about that in the last program when He says He is the bread of life and the light of the world who gives life – the light of life to those who follow Him. It is all about finding life, being saved; and it is only through Him.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Exactly; and I wonder if later on when Jesus has ascended and the disciples gather for worship in the Temple courts and Peter has to explain the healing of the blind beggar there in Acts Chapter 4 to the Pharisees who are questioning him about that; and he says this amazing thing in verse 12:

Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved. I wonder if he was remembering Jesus' word picture here in John Chapter 10 as he said that.

DAVE BAST

I think that is a great point; and certainly the substance of what Jesus consistently taught was quickly absorbed by the first Christians; and if there was one thing they were definite about – I mean, they loved everyone, they welcomed everyone, but they absolutely refused to compromise on the exclusive nature of salvation through Jesus Christ.

DAVID DEN HAAN

And it was not as if there were no options out there; I mean, this was a world in which there were many gods to send your devotion to.

DAVE BAST

You know, you mentioned Peter, and I think, too, of the Day of Pentecost when he preaches this great sermon that Jesus is the one – He is the Messiah – and the crowd says, “What shall we do to be saved?” And he says, “Repent and be baptized,” which expresses exclusive commitment to the Lord Jesus. That is what you need to do, you need to turn to Him. You need to come through Him, He is the door; and this is probably among the most difficult things for people today to accept about the Christian faith, including many Christians struggle with it; but it is not the only place in the Gospels where Jesus uses this picture, and we will look at another one of those passages next.

Segment 2

DAVID DEN HAAN

Welcome to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am David Den Haan, and I am hosting here with David Bast, and we are talking about the passage in John 10, wherein Jesus describes Himself as the door or gate for the sheep. He uses this image of the door in another passage near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:13, 14. He says:

¹³Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction; and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

You know, Dave, I am not sure I want to believe this.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I know; that is a hard one, isn't it? Because the common perception today is that there are many paths, many ways – we often hear this and maybe even talk this way ourselves – many roads up the mountain and they all lead to God or they all lead to the same destination in the end; and Jesus says: No, actually, there are only two ways, and only one of them leads to life, and that is the narrow way through the narrow gate, which, as we have seen already, is Himself.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right.

DAVE BAST

Not something I like to think about either.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Particularly if I think about people in my own life who do not know Jesus – who are not church-ed – have no relationship to God; and I have to think hard about what their future might look like if they do not become a believer – if I do not speak to them about Jesus and they make their way to faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a particularly tough one when I think about them. It is not hard when I think about folks in my church, but it is tough when I think about people in my neighborhood, across the backyard, or wherever else.

DAVE BAST

Right; and again, it is picture language; so, it is important I think not to make maybe too much or press too far on details, but certainly one thing that He is implying is that it takes a conscious decision to enter the narrow gate because that is what He says. It is in the imperative – it is a command: Enter through the narrow gate. We are sort of all automatically... The default position is the broad way leading away from life, and it takes some effort, some choice on our parts...

DAVID DEN HAAN

It is not an accident.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

DAVID DEN HAAN

It does not just happen.

DAVE BAST

You know, I remember seeing a bumper sticker once that said: I am straight, but not narrow; and I thought about that for quite a while. It is drawn from this passage. We talk about “the straight and narrow,” but it is not S-T-R-A-I-G-H-T, straight...

DAVID DEN HAAN

There is another way to spell that one?

DAVE BAST

Yes, and those of us who are from Michigan know about straits because we have the Straits of Mackinac; S-T-R-A-I-T; in the old King James Version what Jesus said is: Strait is the gate and narrow the way, and what He was really doing was doubling Himself. They are both narrow. They are constricted. You cannot be a Christian without being narrow; now obviously I think we all need to strive not to be bigoted or narrow-minded; but there is a sense in which we have to follow this way.

DAVID DEN HAAN

It is a pretty exclusive claim – it is a very exclusive claim...

DAVE BAST

And very offensive to many today.

DAVID DEN HAAN

And we all like to be liked, you know. I would rather go to my neighbor and say: If you just believe anything you want sincerely, then you are fine. And that is not the truth at all that Jesus is giving to us. I remember Roger Greenway, a professor of mine at Calvin Seminary, talking about this becoming one of the biggest hurdles or challenges that the Church will face in the 21st Century – the challenge of pluralism.

Those who want to say: If you are sincere in your belief, it does not matter what that belief is in, as long as you are sincere in it; and that is something that we face, I think, across our culture today.

DAVE BAST

Sure. Well, you know, that brings to mind another passage from John's Gospel, in Chapter 4 where Jesus is talking to the Samaritan woman. She wants to talk religion with Him, and asks, you know: Well, You worship in Jerusalem in the Temple; we worship here in this mountain, you know...

DAVID DEN HAAN

Fascinating conversation.

DAVE BAST

Who's right and who's wrong, and she is kind of, I think, trying to draw Him into this sort of pluralism, and His answer to her is: You worship what you do not know. In other words, your religion is ignorant. Wow, I would not dare say that to anyone, but Jesus said it.

Again, often then you will hear the charge: Well, you think your religion is the best? You think yours is the only true religion? And I guess I would try to say something careful in response to that. It is not that we think our religion is the best, it is just that we think Jesus is the way, and that is a little different.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, and what did He say at the end of that conversation: Those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth. The truth, that is the hard thing. It is much easier if we can just say we all have a grasp on something related to truth, and whatever is true for me is fine, whatever is true for you is fine, and they might be different, but as long as they are truth for me then we are okay; but Jesus is talking about truth as a person...

DAVE BAST

Himself, right, yes: I am the truth. I think, though, I can imagine two different reactions to this statement of Jesus: Enter through the narrow gate. I am the gate. I am the door. I am the only way. On the one hand, we have been reflecting on the fact that many people do not like that today; many reject that, including many in the Church...

DAVID DEN HAAN

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

Wow, I mean, if you are a church member and want to say this, I want to say: Read the New Testament again; you know, read these passages that we are struggling with because this is Jesus. This is not our opinion. On the other hand, though, I can imagine many people who would say: Yes! Give it to them! Tell them... They are all damned. They are all going to hell. You had better repent, and all that. There is also a mystery and a wideness to the mercy of God, and I do not think this gives us the right to draw conclusions about any individual.

DAVID DEN HAAN

You know, and I always wonder what lies behind that kind of, would you say belligerence about the Gospel? That it has to be that I am in and you are out. Yes, there is some truth to that, absolutely; but to celebrate that truth, there is a spirit there that I am not comfortable with. It is almost the same thing that we often do in other arenas of life, where we make our way into a select group or into a club or whatever, and then close the door behind us so nobody else can get in.

DAVE BAST

We keep it nice and cozy for ourselves; and frankly, there is another place, at least, where Jesus in the Gospels uses this image, and He uses it to sort of rebuke that kind of thinking, that we are the select group; we know that we are in with You – we are tight with You, Jesus, and all those other people are on the broad

way to destruction; they are all going to hell, and let's make sure we tell them that; and Jesus does not necessarily endorse that way of thinking either.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Jesus has a way of standing absolutely for the truth, that He is the way, and being wide open to a wide variety of people. It was shocking to the Pharisees who this guy hung out with.

DAVE BAST

Yes, this man welcomes tax collectors and sinners; people who were clearly on the broad road to destruction, in their mind; and He was consistently turning the tables on them and saying: You had better not be too certain about this.

So let's look at that last passage where Jesus uses this figure of speech next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome to Groundwork. I am Dave Bast.

DAVID DEN HAAN

And I am David Den Haan.

DAVE BAST

And we are talking about Jesus' claim to be the door or the gate through which people enter to find salvation – the *exclusive* way – the *only* way to be saved, to come to God.

DAVID DEN HAAN

One of Jesus' hard sayings, right?

DAVE BAST

Right; the narrow door. You get through one at a time, you might say, as well. You do not kind of automatically stroll in; and there is one more passage where He uses this because, as we were saying just a few moments ago, some people react to this with a kind of relish, and they say: Well, we're in, you know, and they are all out, and we want to hammer this point home and make it absolutely clear; and somebody like that came up to Jesus one day – the story is told in Luke 13 – I will pick it up at verse 22:

Then Jesus went through the towns and villages teaching as He made His way to Jerusalem. ²³Someone asked Him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" I take it the questioner assumed he was one of the few.

DAVID DEN HAAN

I think he thought he was in, didn't he, right?

DAVE BAST

And Jesus replied, ²⁴"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door because many I tell you will try to enter and will not be able to." And then He goes on with some very sober language about weeping and gnashing of teeth, and those who are on the outside. So here is this questioner who kind of assumes because of what Jesus has been saying: Well, we are part of the select group. We are the saved, and all those others will be lost.

DAVID DEN HAAN

I think he left that conversation a little less sure of himself.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and Jesus says: You had better be sure. You know the old Sunday school question, you've got it, I've had it asked of me: What about all those babies, you know, in China or all those Muslims in the

Middle East? So, we are assuming they are all... You are saying they are all going to hell because they do not know Jesus.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Right; so this guy who has this conversation with Jesus leaves certainly less sure of himself. Do you think he leaves sad or disappointed or...

DAVE BAST

I think Jesus' intention was that he leaves a little bit shaken out of his complacency.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Kind of like that old phrase we use for preachers. Our job is to comfort the uncomfortable and to make uncomfortable the comfortable.

DAVE BAST

Yes, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, right; because we are always wanting to turn this question of salvation into a speculative one about the masses out there in the world; and that is none of our business in that sense.

DAVID DEN HAAN

On some level it is easier that way, isn't it? I mean, if we can do the conceptual work without having to meet Jesus personally, that is always easier.

DAVE BAST

Right; and Jesus always wants to cut through that speculating about *them* out there, and say: What about you? Are you sure of yourself? You who assume so much, you assume you know that all those people are damned, and you assume you know that you are saved. Well, are you sure? That is why He asks this very challenging question. You had better strive to enter the door yourself.

DAVID DEN HAAN

He does that so often. He really brings the truth home to the person in front of Him: Who do *you* say that I am?

DAVE BAST

Right; or all these things I have kept from my youth, says the rich young ruler; you know, all these commands; I am righteous. And Jesus says: Oh, okay; one more thing; go sell everything and then come and follow Me.

DAVID DEN HAAN

That is the tough one.

DAVE BAST

Yes; let's not speculate about the fate of the masses. Another thing I am tempted to say to people when they raise this question is: Well, if you are so concerned about them, why don't you do something to give them the Gospel?

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes, which is what I was thinking about earlier, you know, as we said, it is easy to have that kind of exclusive or belligerent perspective on this, especially if you do not know anybody who is outside the Church. If you have a relationship with somebody who has no relationship with Christ, and you are getting to know this person, you know where they are from, you know their pets' names – I mean, these details about life – and then you have to reckon with this truth – this truth that Jesus proclaims: I am the way. And you know this guy or this woman does not know Jesus, that is a sobering reality, and it is a lot less tidy to say:

We are in and you are out.

DAVE BAST

Yes. I just think as a general principle the Lord does not want us to make judgments about other people's spiritual state because we do not know enough. It is not our business to judge like that.

DAVID DEN HAAN

We do not have that kind of eyesight.

DAVE BAST

He wants us to bear witness to the One who is the way – to the One who is the gate – to the door through which we must strive to enter; and then, in this passage in Luke when Jesus says: You better try to go through the door yourself, or make sure that you have done that, He goes on, and then some very sobering language about those who will be on the outside.

DAVID DEN HAAN

What about that claim that that will be a small number?

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, He almost then turns around and smashes that to bits because at the end of this passage, listen to this:

²⁸There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. When you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves are thrown out – people who thought they were in, who assumed they were in – and then He adds this: ²⁹People will come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Ah, there is the Revelation 7 picture, right?

DAVE BAST

Just when you are sure, okay, nobody is going to make it – almost nobody – He says: There is this huge breadth of mercy in God and all these unexpected people...

DAVID DEN HAAN

Every nation, tribe, and language...

DAVE BAST

Yes; wow.

DAVID DEN HAAN

You know, I think about this quotation from John Newton; at the end of his life he said, "There will be three surprises in heaven: (1) To see how many there are that he did not expect to see; (2) he will not see some there that he did expect to see, (3) to find himself there at all.

DAVE BAST

That is the biggest surprise. I can resonate with that, and I think that is a great and healthy spiritual position to be in.

DAVID DEN HAAN

Yes. Thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future Groundwork programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/i-am-the-gate-for-the-sheep>

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