

This morning we begin a new journey for the next few weeks where we will be looking at some commonly held ideas about Jesus, and seeing if they are true or not. **In the language of the day, we are “fact-checking” our knowledge about Jesus in this series.** Let me take a moment to introduce the series concept, because this is super-important for anyone who follows Jesus or is seeking God in their lives, because the truth matters. We don’t want to follow, or make a decision about whether or not to follow, Jesus based on a false conception of Jesus that we have in our heads. Unfortunately, people turn their backs on Jesus all the time because of a misunderstanding of who he is and what he stands for.

This is true in general about decisions we make in life. For instance, you may have seen a couple weeks ago or so some articles or video footage about a rarely seen, deep-sea fish that made it’s way to the surface of the ocean, and then apparently died. It’s like it decided to come to the surface and experience the sun and the light of day just once, though scientists don’t know for sure why it came to the surface. Here’s a news report about it from CBS: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0IrIjYXtS8>.

Sermon series slide. So, you watch that and it’s like, “I’m not sure I want to go swimming anymore.” It’s a “monster” based on its name (also called “seadevil” which is worse), and it “usually eats seafood.” Which, to me is a really dumb statement because I don’t know what else it would eat since it lives in the sea...but it sounds like the door is left open for it to eat something besides seafood, like you or me. And the thing looks huge, too. Like, the size of a basketball, at least, and then those spikey teeth that look several inches long. And of course: if *that* creatures is out there, who knows what *else* is out there that I didn’t know existed and might also like to eat me for lunch, right? Aren’t you glad I showed you this video?¹

But as they said, it normally lives a few thousand feet below the surface. And, the real kicker: it’s actually only about 6 inches long. It’s not going to take off your hand or foot in one bite. So, getting the truth about this thing

really matters. And the truth about Jesus matters too. **We don't want to make a decision about following Jesus based on hearsay or rumors or anything like that.** And so the aim of this series is to get at the truth of who Jesus is.

One thing that a lot of people – including a lot of Christians – have floating around in their head is that if you've got a relationship with Jesus, you're missing out on all the fun in life. They see Jesus as a moral policeman trying to block stuff from our lives in order to prevent us from living lives that are full of joy, and adventure, and fun; that following Jesus and being a Christian is all about rules, regulations, and limits on life. That's what we're considering today. So, let's look at what Jesus himself says about this. This morning we're in the **Gospel of John, chapter 10**, beginning in verse 1. This is God's Word to you and me this morning...**(First six verses).**

Let's pause here for a moment. **Before this, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind.** Jesus does this on the Sabbath, and as many of you are aware, that constituted "work" in the eyes of the Jewish religious leaders of the day. So those leaders, called Pharisees, start an investigation about the healing, taking a critical approach to it, and part of their investigation is talking with Jesus. The verses we just read are part of that conversation.

While John tells us in verse 6 that the Pharisees did not understand what Jesus was telling them, the problem wasn't with understanding how a shepherd and sheep work together, and the threat of a stranger and how the sheep won't follow a stranger. They know about that. And if you want to see this played out in real life, there are some great videos online of sheep not listening to some people, but then following their shepherd's voice (Link to a 2-minute one here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e45dVgWgV64>). The Pharisees also knew the importance of protecting the sheep, including having a gate for proper entrance in and out of the sheep pen. And in their day, the shepherd himself would frequently be that gate, laying down in the entrance to the sheep pen. So, the nuts and bolts of what he's saying was common knowledge of the day. They understood that.

What they didn't grasp was the spiritual implications of what Jesus said.

And just a few verses before this, in their investigation, Jesus made the statement that because of him, “the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” It’s a spiritual seeing and blindness he’s talking about. And what we see in these first few verses of chapter 10 is that indeed, the Pharisees, even though they are spiritual leaders and in theory have “sight” they are completely blind to Jesus and what God is doing in him. They don’t see nearly as well as they think they do. And so they just aren’t getting it, as John points out in verse 6. Let’s read the last few verses, **John 10:7-10...**

So now Jesus clarifies, though he still stays in the metaphor. And **Jesus is saying: He is the gate into the sheep pen.** He seeks to protect his sheep – meaning, the people who follow him and listen to his voice. He works to keep them safe and save them from harm...he protects them from the thief who only comes to steal and kill and destroy. Instead he wants his sheep to “have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

That phrase “to the full” is the Greek word perisos (peri-sauce), and it means “exceeding some number or measure or rank or need; over and above, more than is necessary.” This is the kind of life that Jesus, as the gate, wants to bring to us. And really, it’s not just him as the gate. In the following verses he talks about being the good shepherd, but shepherds frequently functioned as the gate, and it’s this role as the gate that he’s talking about here. And it’s not about keeping the fun out of life; it’s about protecting from harm, and experiencing life abundantly and joyfully – exceeding our need. Earlier in John 8, again talking with some Pharisees, perhaps the same ones as in today’s passage, Jesus says that his disciples are truly free. **He’s not restricting and confining: Rather, there is freedom and safety with Jesus.**

I think of it like a fenced in yard. If you’ve got kids, and your yard is fenced in, like a lot of back yards are, that fence makes for a safe place for your kids to play. Inside that fenced in area, they have a lot of freedom and safety: they can play with toys, balls, climb trees in the yard, or whatever. There are rules to follow within that, but again, those rules are for their safety and for protecting the house – like no throwing rocks. True story: one of my kids once tried to throw a rock over our house, and it hit our living room window.

Fortunately, we were going to replace it shortly anyway, but it reinforced the rule and why we have it. So there's freedom and safety in that fenced in yard.

Jesus is saying here, he wants the same thing for us in life. He wants us to have life to the full, to have it abundantly. In fact, he not only wants us to have it, but he wants to *give us* life to the full. And the way to most fully experience that life is to know the one who has created it all, and given you the opportunity to experience life.

He wants us to fully experience what it means to know God and what it fully means to be human: the full range of emotion, relationships with other people, a relationship with God, a healthy family life, artistic creativity, tranquility, beauty, satisfaction, purpose...I can't even begin to cover the full range of life that Jesus wants us to experience, because the possibilities are endless. And yet still, this "abundance of life"...this "more than is necessary life" extends beyond this world, into eternity. Jesus' resurrection is the proof of it, but his teaching, and the teaching of Scripture makes it clear that this life is not all there is. There's more. **There's such an abundance of life that it cannot be contained in creation, and Jesus is the gate to that eternal life as well.**

But we need Jesus as a gate here and now to start with. Why? What is it about life that necessitates a gate? Well, according to what he says, and we all know this from experiencing life: there are thieves and robbers that seek to come in and wreck what Jesus offers here and now. They'll break in over the fence. This last week, our 7-year old son was out playing by himself in our fenced in back yard, and I heard him yelling at one point. So, I went out the back door to see what was going on, and he said, "Dad, I just saw a raccoon jump off of our shed roof onto the hillside right here!" So, a raccoon had gotten into our back yard, and our son came within like 10 feet of this thing. That's a potential to steal some joy right there, right?

And in life: the things that seek "to steal and kill and destroy" might look cute, cuddly, attractive, or fun like a raccoon, but also like a raccoon: they can cause you hurt, pain, and damage. In the parable Jesus tells here, the sheep run when they hear the stranger's voice. It's not the

stranger's appearance that scares them away...it's not his size, or his demeanor. That would be too obvious. The thief does everything he can to look like a shepherd. The same is true with the things that kill, steal, and destroy: they are deceptive. They are like a wolf in shepherd's clothing. They don't come looking like another sheep, they come looking like a shepherd, and they seek to lead you and me astray, stealing our freedom, joy, and abundant, full life that Jesus gives.

We frequently are bombarded with messages telling us that if you just have enough money, enough stuff, enough power, enough prestige - then you'll be happy...life will be good. Drink this, inject that, read this, look at this, accomplish that, go this party, hang out with these people, get that job...and you'll be living a fuller life...a more abundant life. The book of Proverbs gets at this in a number of places. For instance:

**Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding,
for she [wisdom] is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her (Proverbs 3:13-15).**

Wisdom, in the Proverbs and throughout Scripture, is always rooted in knowing God. And it's not just knowledge of or about God – it's *lived knowledge*, which is what makes it wisdom. Like we've all heard: It's like knowing that a tomato is a fruit, but wisdom is not putting tomatoes in a fruit salad. And true wisdom is rooted in knowing God, and then acting on that knowledge...putting that knowledge into practice in our lives. And this wisdom is compared here to one of the things that is so seductive: silver, gold, possessions...and then covers them all by concluding that “nothing you desire can compare with [wisdom].” In other words, nothing that might seek to seduce you and falsely promise joy and fulfillment compares to living in relationship with God, because that's the beginning of true wisdom.

But the things that would seek to distract us and draw us away are presented to us in an attractive, deceptive way. Some of these things can get such a foothold that they control us and they become the thing to which

we bend the knee. They become our master, as people become essentially addicted to drugs, alcohol, pornography, sex, hobbies, hobbies, sports, social media, politics, the news, power, money, possessions, screens, and so forth. A lot of these things are not sinful for us in and of themselves. Money, for instance, is not sinful. Power is not sinful. Alcohol is not sinful – Jesus drank wine. Sex is not sinful – God created it. Possessions are not sinful. But these things, and so many others, are a slippery slope, or they get twisted and distorted from how God intends them to be, and any of them, among so many others, can become your master. Really, anything has the potential to control us and become lord of our lives and seek to be the shepherd whose voice you listen to and who leads you, rather than the voice of Jesus. The Bible calls that idolatry, and they lead to slavery rather than freedom: Alcoholism, greed, lust, coveting, over-booked schedules, financial debt...there's no freedom in those places...there's nothing safe to be found there. It's why we have to keep Jesus first, and follow only his voice as we navigate life.

You see, Jesus is not a moral policeman, keeping out the good stuff...Jesus wants to keep stuff out of your life that will steal, kill, and destroy the abundant life that you were created to have. He wants you to have joy, peace, contentment, satisfaction, wisdom, healthy relationships, forgiveness, love, and more in your life. So, two questions. First: **Who or what are the robbers and thieves in your life?** We've all got them seeking to get our attention and devotion. Notice that Jesus doesn't say "if" the thieves and robbers come...it's assumed that they do. He simply says, "the one who enters by some way other than through the gate," is a thief and a robber. They are real and they will come. Who or what is trying to steal the abundant life away from you that Jesus offers, in an effort to pull you away from him?

And a second: **Are we in an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ with him as our shepherd and our gate?** Are we filtering life through his word, the Bible, so the things we're engaged with line up with him and his values and what he has created us for? It's utterly important that Jesus be that gate for us, so that we can be sure that what we're doing, who we're associating with, what we're reading, what we're saying...is in line with his word and is values. Only Jesus Christ can give you, can give me, the life of fullness that we're truly looking for.

If you've previously viewed Jesus as the moral policeman, keeping you from joy in life, I want to challenge you and encourage you to consider what Jesus says here: that yes, he wants you to keep some stuff out of your life, and he seeks to be that gate...but it's not the good stuff he wants to keep out. Jesus wants you to live an abundant life in relationship with God, just as you were created to experience. And you can have that here and now, and in eternity where the life is so abundant it can't be contained in creation as we know it. He wants you to have an abundant life.

You can have that abundant life beginning today by confessing to Jesus your sin, and trusting Jesus as Lord and Savior. You can confess the places you've followed thieves and robbers, and confess the need for his forgiving and saving presence in your life. Doing that opens your life to Jesus, and allows him in to your heart, and your daily living, as your Lord and Savior.

And for those of us who already know Jesus as Savior and Lord, make sure that "Jesus as Lord" really is true, and that there's not a counterfeit in his place, stealing the abundant life he gives. We have to stay alert – all the spiritual practices we looked at the last several weeks really help on that front. Filter life through the gate of Jesus, through Scripture, so nothing gets into your heart, your soul, or your everyday living that doesn't belong there and might lead us down a slippery slope away from him. Instead, let's follow him, and nothing else: here, now, and right on into eternity. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ This whole thing inspired a wave of publicity for the fish, with people really getting into it. A great summary of it can be found here: <https://www.today.com/life/anglerfish-viral-video-explained-rcna192570>