

Gated Communities. They are everywhere in Florida. If I want to visit someone at Stonecrest, I have to drive up to a security gate. The guard will ask me my name, who I am going to visit. They will check if I am on the list of potential guests, who can visit this person. They will write down my time of entry and license plate. I'd better have a good reason to see a person there. Not real easy to get into Stonecrest. But if I want to get into a community in the Villages, Florida, I drive up to this small gate, and either press a button, or wave my magic white card, which is my pool and clubhouse entry card at Lakeside Landing, and I can enter any Village community, without any further research done on who I am. Not all gated communities really provide you protection. Some like in the Villages, Florida are just for show. To give the appearance they are classy neighborhoods. There are so many ways that the Villages or a gated community with a guard like Stonecrest, really don't protect you from smart criminals. Jesus informs us today that He is overseeing a gated community. He provides a wall around this community that cannot be tunneled under, or hopped over. In addition, He is the only gate to this gated community. He does not provide you with free golf, a swimming pool, pickle ball courts, dog park and playground. But he provides you with something much more valuable. Entry into the family of God. A meaningful life on earth, and eternal life in heaven. Let's be sure today, that all of you today are "Secure In the Ultimate Gated Community!"

On September 19, 2014, **Omar Gonzalez**, jumped the fence from the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the White House and entered the White House through the North Portico doors. Upon entering he overpowered a Secret Service officer and ran through most of the main floor before he was tackled by a counter-assault agent. Omar was intent on doing harm to our President. Fortunately, he was caught and arrested.

So in the days of Jesus, there were individuals who were intent on doing harm to not just the president, but common everyday people. They were called the Pharisees. Jesus talks of them as fence jumpers. He refers to them as thieves and Robbers. The Pharisees were a religious group who felt that you needed to keep various laws, to get to heaven oneday. They had added a bunch of commandments to the 10 commandments. They had just criticized Jesus for healing a blind man on the Sabbath Day. What always amazes me about Jesus is how much time and effort he puts in to reaching out to the religious leaders who wanted nothing to do with him. But then that should not surprise us. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who wants even his worst enemies to come to him and be dependent on him for their survival from the judgment to come.

The Pharisees knew Jesus was talking about them. They were destroying people by teaching them they could be accepted by God on the basis of how well they performed certain religious ceremonies such as not working on the Sabbath day. In another place Jesus called them blind guides who were leading people astray. He called them cups that looked clean on the outside but were dirty on the inside. They wanted the people to depend on their works to be saved. They did not want them to depend on Jesus as their Good Shepherd.

It breaks my heart to see how many people are being misled by false teachers who want to steal them away from depending on Jesus for their survival. There is in Texas a church that claims to be Christian with over 45,000 worshipping every Sunday. Their web page had slogan a few years back, "Finding the champion in you." That's what the false teachers taught at the time of Jesus. You have the capabilities within yourself to enter into God's gated community.

What is the litmus test of a pastor who is a good shepherd? It is not how many thousands have joined his church. It not his personality. It doesn't matter if you like the robes he wears or not. It doesn't matter if he picks modern songs or old German songs. It doesn't matter if he's eccentric or old or young. God does not care whether he uses an overhead projector or not. The

litmus test is not even HOW MUCH Bible he uses. There are pastors who go thru chapters of the Bible in their sermons. Jehovah's Witnesses use plenty of Bible passages - and so do the Mormons and many other false teachers. The crux of the matter is - is he leading you to Christ? Is he showing you your sins and your only way of salvation? Is he feeding you with the green pastures of God's Word. Is he using Law and Gospel?

See the faithful shepherd bring his sheep into a sheep pen to keep them safe at night. The sheep pen is made of stones and wood. It has a gate where the sheep enter at night. See the Shepherd guarding the gate of the sheep pen. He has his body right in front of the entrance. Any enemy that tries to hurt his sheep has to face him first.

Several years ago some sheep decided that they were going to go off in the hills east of Santa Maria, California. They climbed to the top of the cliffs along highway 166 and they could not get down. As cars drove by, they could see the sheep stranded on the cliffs without food and water. They tried to get water to the sheep and some food, but it would only be a matter of time before they died. Do some of you remember how the sheep were rescued? The owners of the large crane company took their biggest crane, parked it along the road. With the long arm full extended, they were able to rescue the sheep.

What do you think of when you reflect on these sheep that wandered off and put themselves in danger? I think of myself and what the Bible says of me. "We all like sheep have gone astray each of us has turned to his own way." I think of the words of Ezekiel 34, "My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched for them and looked for them." I think of the stubbornness and foolishness that exists in my heart. Billy Graham used to show our need of being rescued by pointing to the words of Jeremiah 17, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" The crane company went to a huge expense to set up its crane to rescue those foolish, stubborn, independent sheep.

Think of the expense that Jesus went through to rescue us. He knew that we were all infected with a deadly pneumonia called sin. No malaria drug or antibodies, or social distancing could help us out. This was a guaranteed deadly virus. It was airborne and everybody who breathes caught the virus. The best way to deal with this virus would be extermination. The flock was unfixable, and really, should have been exterminated. There was only one solution to this problem, and that solution was this - if the shepherd wanted to keep his flock, he would have to sacrifice himself for the sheep. This would be the only vaccine that would be 100 percent effective.

And so that's what Jesus did. Think of the sacrifices Jesus made for you! He gave up his throne in heaven. He gave up the praise of angels, and became a peasant who endured the insults of man. He gave up the use of his divine power. He gave up his honor, his glory, and finally, his life. He refused to abandon you, no matter how much it would cost him. No matter how great the sacrifice. That's what Jesus is talking about when he says in verse 14: "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Because you know the voice of your Shepherd, you don't want to listen to the voice of stranger that calls out to you. "But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them." A voice calls out "Find the champion in you." A voice calls out "Jesus is not Lord and God from all eternity." A voice calls out "You need to add your works to what Christ has done for you to make it real and genuine." A

voice calls out, “You don’t need to hear the Word of God about Jesus. You know all that stuff.” The sheep hear these voices calling out in these last days and they want nothing to do with the stranger’s voice. They will run away from it.

Perhaps the most well-known symbol of the shepherd is the shepherd’s crook. The shepherd would use this staff, this crook, to bring in the straying sheep, and to fight off the wild animals. What would the staff of Jesus Christ look like? Well, perhaps, instead of having a curved end, it would have a line drawn across the top – the shape of a cross. That’s the tool that Jesus used to save you, to rescue you, to get rid of that sin in your life, to earn for you God’s forgiveness. The cross – that’s what Jesus endured. He refused to run away. He refused to abandon you. He made the ultimate sacrifice, to keep you as his own.

But after they buried him, you know what happened next. Look at verse 17: “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.” After laying down his life, Jesus took up his life again, rose from the dead. Nothing, not even death, could keep him from being your Good Shepherd.

Look at how much he loves you. He compares himself to a shepherd who calls his sheep by name. How does he do it? I have only 3 grandsons, Everett, Easton and Edison, but I already have called Everett Easton and Easton Everett. My mom used to call me Bert at times, even though my name is Mark. Even though billions of sheep are in Jesus’ flock, he knows each one of our names. He also knows our fears. He knows our needs. And like a good shepherd he will provide for those needs.

There is another lesson here for us to learn, and that lesson is this – since Jesus has risen from the dead, he is still your shepherd today. He is still watching over you today, still feeding you, still protecting you, and he will never, ever abandon you.

There will be days when you will feel abandoned. Satan will bring all kinds of problems into your life. Whether it is a medical problem, or a personal problem, or a job problem - there are all kinds of problems the Devil will send your way. Just when you feel that you have your life together, something will happen. And then you feel alone. “Where is God?” you ask yourself. “Where is the Good Shepherd?” You feel like a sheep that has wandered into the woods where there is no food, no water, and you can hear the wolves howling and see the glow of their eyes in the darkness, and you feel all alone, and utterly helpless.

But then to that sheep’s surprise, the shepherd is right behind it, and lifts it up on his shoulders and carries it back to the flock and back to safety. When you feel abandoned, when you feel like you are in the woods and the wolves are closing in on you, remember that your Good Shepherd is right behind you. He will never abandon you. He lifts you up on his shoulders and he carries you to safety. And on the way, you pass by an empty cross, and an empty tomb, proof that Christ, the Good Shepherd will never abandon you.

Today you are safe in the sheep pen. Jesus is your Shepherd. You can joyfully say, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” That means I lack nothing in my life to be accepted by God. I don’t want to listen to false teachers who tell me my life is hanging in the balance and I need to try and save myself. I want to listen to the voice of Jesus who says, “I am the gate for the sheep; who ever enters through me will be saved.” You want to be really safe. Let me tell you Keep listening to the voice of Jesus. With Jesus you are: Secure in the Ultimate Gated Community. Amen.