

This is Your Permission Slip wk 1: God at the Gate

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Since Mark talked about Show & Tell last week I thought I'd just do Show & Tell with you this week. Anyone know what this is?



This is my prized Mattel Hot Wheels 1970 Boss Hoss Silver Special.

What made this car special is you couldn't buy it in stores. You had to send away to Mattel and enroll in the Hot Wheels Club, and then, and only then, would they send you one.

And when I see this car, it takes me back--back to playing with Hot Wheels cars and it takes me back to 1970 when I started kindergarten at Palmer School.

When we start school, we really start to get a heavy dose of rules and structure:

1. We all go to the restroom together.
2. We get drinks from the water fountain only when the teacher says.
3. We ask if it's ok to sharpen our pencil.
4. Everywhere we go we do so in a well ordered line.
5. We have a seating chart.
6. We raise our hand before speaking.

And of course we learn about the janitor's mystery dust the first time someone throws up in class because they were too scared to raise their hand to tell the teacher they weren't feeling well ;-)

So we grow up in the way of schools, which is orderly and rule-based.

And not only are schools this way, but our society is that way. And that's ok because a society needs rules and a well-defined orderly process, otherwise you end up becoming Canada ;-)

And the truth is we kinda like that there are rules for school and life.

We like that people can't just jump to the front of lines.

We like that we know the rules and what's expected.

In fact some of you right now are annoyed with me, because I just jumped in and started talking about Hot Wheels and rules and you have no idea where this talk is going and you'd like me to just spit it out, but I won't 'cause I'm not there yet ;-)

Many of you know, I've recently taken a part time job teaching an entrepreneurship class for high school juniors and seniors from all the area schools.

It's an interesting class because we never meet in a classroom.

We meet in businesses and I don't teach like a typical teacher in a typical class--I lead it like I would lead a team in the real world.

And although the students think what we do is really cool, I frustrate them to some degree because they want to know what the rules are and how they're supposed to *do this and that* and I say,

"Gee, I don't know--this class is just like the real world and the real world doesn't come with instructions so let's figure it out."

And every time that happens, I realize how indoctrinated we are as a culture to rules, process and procedures.

SELAH

And somewhere along the line people like you and me, who've been indoctrinated into a culture of rules, process and procedures, decided to go to church. Or better yet, a lot of you grew up in church.

And the truth of the matter is if you grew up in church it was structured eerily like school. Why?

Because working in children's ministry is definitely hard enough, let alone if we said to all the 5 year olds,

"Whatever you'd like to do today is super-groovy...use Mrs Baldini as a piñata? Sure, let me spin you around!" ;-)

And so you and I, we normal Americans, we go to church and just like all of life we've seen outside of church, we say consciously or subconsciously,

"How does this work?
 What's the procedure?
 How do I behave to get the achieved result?
 What do I need to *do* or *say* to make people, the pastor and God happy?"

So we come to church and we say in essence,
 "I'm good at following rules, it's what I'm used to, show me what to do."

And before we know it, we're seeing Christianity as a religion-- and by religion I mean:

acting in the right way,
 following the rules,
 not breaking the rules.

So the big idea about this series is Christianity--the Way of Jesus--is a permission slip.

The way of Jesus is *not* rules and restrictions.
 The way of Jesus is the permission to be who God created us to be,
 permission to be the truest version of ourselves.

And especially for you who are new to faith or if you're looking at following Jesus with a slightly skeptical eye:

I want you to know that following Jesus isn't *becoming like Christians*.
 It's not becoming like Mark Malin or God forbid, *me!*

It's becoming the truest version of who God created YOU to be.
 It's not about rules and regulations--it's about freedom in a loving Christ.

Here are Jesus' own words about Himself:

"...He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind *will* see, that the oppressed *will be set free*," **Luke 4:18 NLT**

Sometimes we see Christianity more like this warped version of this verse:

He has sent me to proclaim that we're now captive to living in a way that pleases other Christians, that the blind will see, *if they do all the right things*, and we'll now be oppressed by lots of rules.

But Luke 4:18 says

"...He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be *released*, that the blind *will see*, that the oppressed will be *set free*," **Luke 4:18 NLT**

The way of Jesus is about freedom--being set free-- *not* restrictions.
That's why we called this series *This is Your Permission Slip*.

Another reason we called it *This is Your Permission Slip* is because we sometimes see Jesus as a rule-based gatekeeper--limiting us and keeping us corralled--but that's *really not* an accurate view of Jesus.

SELAH

I want to get to where we understand an accurate view of Jesus as a gatekeeper in John 10, but first, before we understand Jesus, we first need to understand US.

And to understand you and me I want to take us into the **Wonderful World of SHEEP!**

I want us to better understand sheep because there are a ton of references to sheep in the Bible that are metaphors for us.

So if God compared us to sheep that many times, we should understand what sheep are really like.

I want to share some sheep characteristics published by Prof. Ron Parker at the University of Wyoming.

As you hear these, if you don't think they're true of you, consider if they're true of humans, generally speaking.

1. Sheep are not sheepish.

Sheep don't get embarrassed or bashful.

They either look you in the eye or they turn around and run. But they're not bashful.

In the same way, we're not bashful.

We're easy to tell people where we stand on topics,

And we're proud of whatever we are whether we're a redneck or a PhD.

Whatever we are, we'll proudly slap a bumper sticker on our car. Either,

"My son is an Honor Student" or

"My Redneck son beat up your honor student."

Sheep aren't sheepish and neither are we.

2. Sheep instinctively flock.

Except for a few high mountain breeds, sheep will always huddle up. You don't have to tell them, they just do it.

Sheep are social animals. And we are too.

We're naturally social and move into
 communities together,
 hang out together,
 party together,
 have small groups together.

Look at humans all over the globe and except for a few outliers, we're all huddled together in flocks

3. Sheep follow other sheep.

In every pocket of how we live, there are *some* leaders and *a lot* of followers.

(eg) Most of us do not want start a fashion trend, we'll follow suit.

We won't paint our house some crazy color that stands out;
 we'll paint it the color that other people have already painted theirs.

There are *some* innovators, but the vast majority of us are *following*, in many and various ways.

Sheep follow and so do we.

4. Sheep are naturally fearful.

So are we. I'll show you:

Whenever you're called into your supervisor's office do you first think, "*Sweet, they caught me doing something really well!*"

Or do you think, "*Oh crap, what'd I do (wrong)?*"

How many of us are fearful that:

We won't have enough retirement?

Will have an unhealthy child?

You'll get horrible germs from a public restroom?

We'll get cancer?

Ebola?

Social Security will run out?

You won't find the man/woman of your dreams?

You'll never figure out what you're going to be when you grow up?

Like sheep, we're fearful.

5. Sheep are naturally aggressive.

Sheep (like humans) can show aggression when they establish social rank, settle their differences or get attention.

Humans can be easily aggressive politically, socially and virtually any time we're really annoyed.

Read the headlines: we're naturally aggressive.

6. Sheep like the familiar and resist change.

I'll just say that the same way: people like the familiar and resist change ;-)

7. Sheep welcome the shepherd especially during painful times.

When we go through times of extreme pain: childbirth, death, loss--those are times we most welcome someone we can look to for comfort--someone whose voice we trust who can guide us during painful times. When do people most want a pastor? When the bottom has fallen out.

Like sheep, we most want the help, care and guidance of a shepherd during painful times.

8. Sheep are not very intelligent.

Before you fight me on this one, I'll just ask this question,

"How common is common sense?"

Another way to see it is how many of us know what's bad for us, physically, nutritionally, socially, medically, spiritually--but do it anyway?

How many times do we know the right thing,
but choose the wrong thing?

That's not intelligent.

But even though sheep aren't that intelligent, like us, they're simple creatures that are quick learners and have good memories.

And that's all we need to know about sheep.

SELAH

And now just a little about a 2,000 year old sheepfold or a sheep pen:



It was usually a rough stone or mud-brick structure or it was a cave in the hills. It had a single opening that the sheep went through when they came in for the night.

The pen protected them against predators and a pen usually held several flocks of sheep.

At the time the Bible was written shepherds named each sheep and could call them by name.

And interestingly, in the morning, each shepherd would call his flock with his unique call and voice, and only *his* sheep would come out.

If someone else tried to use that shepherd's call, the sheep would KNOW it was a false shepherd, and they'd panic and scatter!

And when the shepherd led the herd into the pen for the night, he'd tend to any wounds the sheep had and give water to the thirsty sheep.

And after he counted every sheep, the shepherd would lay down across the doorway so that no intruder could get at his flock--the *shepherd was the door*, the actual line of defense and protection.

Ok, so after aaaaaaaaall that back story on
sheep, shepherds and sheep pens,
let's look at this passage of what Jesus is really like:

John 10:1-10 NLT

"I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! ² But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize *his* voice and *come to him*. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice."

⁶ Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn't understand what he meant, ⁷ so he explained it to them: "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. ¹⁰ The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."

Ok so let's draw some real life application of everything we know about sheep, shepherds, sheepfolds and Jesus ;-)

First, there's the concept that just like the shepherd pulls the flock together, when we come into a relationship with Jesus, He enfolds *us* into his flock.

Again, we're prewired to want to be with other people.

Jesus isn't coercing or forcing us to be together, it's what we naturally do. So God is saying, "*Come together, in me and through me.*"

So this metaphor of a flock is the image of people who've been saved through Jesus, the ultimate Shepherd's death on the cross, coming together.

And in the first verse it says, "...Anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber."

At the time it was written "thieves and robbers" were the false messiahs who were trying to gain control over God's people. Today, what are the things trying to gain control over God's people?

Evil one?

Busy-ness?

Addiction?

Over indulgence of all kinds?

Envy?

Insecurity?

Greed? (How many more could we list?)

There are all kinds of "false messiahs" trying to gain control of us. And so Jesus wants us in the pen--wants us with the flock of Jesus followers,

not because He's on a *power trip*,

but because He's on a *protection trip*!

In *verse 3* it says: "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

This is a verse of relational and spiritual intimacy. Even though there are millions of us, we aren't just numbers to Jesus. *Jesus knows our name.*

When we've been beat up by life, Jesus picks us up, personally tends to our wounds and restores us. Does this sound like a cold rules-oriented paradigm to you?

Verse 9-10 says: "Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. ¹⁰ The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a *rich and satisfying life.*"

Jesus says, those who find new life in Him, will come and go freely.

In other words, does He save us so we can live a life of rule-keeping where we stay in a holy huddle with other sheep? (No!)

We're saved so that we can be *freely on the move*--so that we can BLESS people in the coming and going of our days!

SELAH

This series topic--this idea of seeing God and our faith as a rules-based, straight-jacketed way of living, versus the love-based freedom-releasing life that it is, breaks my heart a little.

Because somehow God gets a bad rap, when the truth of verse 10 crashes in on us every week:

Verse 10 contains this insidious truth:

"The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy..."

How many marriages have you seen destroyed?

Have you seen people's self-esteem destroyed?

Have you seen the freedom of a simple normal life destroyed by the chains of addiction?

Have you seen people's hope destroyed?

Have you seen a fallen world *hurt* people who in turn blame God instead of turning to a Shepherd who died *so that*

He can anoint their wounds if only they'd embrace Him instead of blame Him?

Jesus said, "The thief's purpose is to kill and destroy.

My purpose is to give a rich and satisfying life."

Jesus said in essence, I'll make you an eternal deal:

“In exchange for a life of bondage to all kinds of evils, addictions, and challenges you’ll have to face all by yourself,

I’ll exchange your earthly life with a permission slip for an eternal, rich and satisfying life with Me, the Shepherd who’ll never leave your side while you have the freedom to go wherever you want--and guess what?

I’ll pay for this deal with My life.

It won’t cost you anything

and this permission slip will grant you everything.

What do you say, sheep--will you come into my sheepfold?”

SELAH

The heart of this series is about living in a loving relationship with Jesus instead of trying to live by the rules of religion.

It’s about a relationship, not religion.

And I want to give you 3 simple signs that *you might be religious:*

(opposite is true on these)

1) Comparison game with other Jesus followers.

If you are comparing your inner world, thoughts, stresses, and doubts, with what people look like on the outside at church, you might be religious.

If you think that people here on Sundays or people in your small group are so much more together than you, you might be religious.

And what that really means, is you’re into the habit of looking at other sheep--instead of the relational habit of looking at and interacting with the Shepherd whose laying across the doorway.

2) Guilt

If God has forgiven your past, your sin, your bad choices,
but your mind still stew on guilt, you may be religious.

If you won't let someone else off the hook for something bad they've done, even though God has forgiven you--you might be religious.

And what that means is, you're so preoccupied with looking at your own scars--whether *you* caused them, or *someone else* did--that you can't see the Shepherd who brought you into the sheepfold, saved you and has anointed those same scars.

3) Critical of others

If you think *other* Christ followers aren't doing it right;
 if you think the church isn't doing it right,
 if you simply get irritated because people aren't doing life like
 you, you may be religious.

I love this quote by the great Oswald Chambers:

"Let God be as original with other people as He is with you."

And what that means is that even though most sheep look pretty much alike, you're forgetting that the Ultimate Shepherd uniquely created each sheep to HIS great design.

And that Jesus thought that one of you was enough ;-)

(Response card...)

♪ Come as You Are ♪