

I Am the Gate
April 30, 2023
Pastor Aaron Johnson

Good morning! We're going to be in the Gospel of John, chapter 10, verses 1 through 10. And if you have your Bible with you, I would encourage you to turn to that place and check my work. You don't get into heaven just because you do what Aaron says!

So, this weekend I've been watching my daughter, and we've been fixing my sprinkler system. Last night, as we were getting ready for bed, I asked her what her favorite part of the day was, and she said, "Daddy, not the sprinklers!" She's two-and-a-quarter years old, and she's at that age right now where she can't keep her clothes on. We're picking outfits based on how hard it is for her to get out of them. And when she gets all of her clothes off, she wants to run upstairs to the mirror and stand in front of the mirror and look at her naked body. And it distracts from everything that we're doing. And so my wife started it, we started counting, "One, two, three..." When we get to whatever number, we say, "Okay, that's it. We're done. We've got to go back to what we were doing." And she's been really good, at that moment, about just going back and getting her clothes on and doing that thing. I ascribe to the philosophy of bedtime that if you can exhaust them before you get to bedtime, bedtime is easier. And we were trying to wait for my wife to get home to participate in bedtime. And Adelynn says, "Hey Daddy, it's time for bed." And I said, "Can you wait thirty more minutes?" And seven minutes later she was standing right beside me as I'm sitting in my chair, and she goes, "Daddy, I'm gonna count." And she comes to five, and she says, "Daddy, it's time for bed now!" And there was no argument. I said, "All right, let's go." Now, I share that story because in the Revelation class this morning, in our study, we were hitting some pretty deep things. And a couple of the students in the class said, "Hey, are you going to have an uplifting sermon this morning?" And so, there it was. We've checked that off. Now we're going to spend some time in the Gospel of John. So, if you could sit stand with me, please, as we read from God's Word.

The Gospel of John, chapter 10, verses 1 through 10.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Please be seated.

So, it was a quiet morning, for all intents and purposes, a pretty typical morning for a small-town police officer on a day shift. I had received my shift briefing, sat down with my case log, and tried to contact some people to tie up some loose ends. And now I was on my way to my first call. It was a scheduled Civil Standby. When a restraining order is set in place between two people who otherwise live together, one of those persons has to move out. Often the person who has to move out needs to retrieve items from the house before departing. And to do that without violating the restraining order, they request, through the courts, a police escort. The person gets twenty minutes while the police officer stands by, and both parties have to comply. I had a usual spiel. I would tell them that the tendency is going to be to focus on the things that you don't want that other person to have, or to sell, or to destroy in your absence. Don't think about those things, I would advise them. Don't grab toothbrushes or deodorant or anything you can pick up at the store. If you work for a living, grab those things that you will need to keep working. If you have kids, grab the things that the kids are going to need. And if you have medication, make sure that you grab your medications. If I could, I would try to give them ten or fifteen minutes to just focus on reprioritizing what it was that they were going to grab.

It was a wet morning. It had rained all night, but the rain had stopped and the air was cool and clean. As I drove up to the house the petitioner, a middle-aged male, was sitting on the back of what looked like a pickup that would have belonged to a general contractor. I knew him, but to protect the innocent we will call him Ted. Ted was a good hardworking man. He was married until his wife passed away at an early age, and since then he hadn't had a real interest in any other serious relationships. I said hello and then told him to give me a minute as I talked to the party inside the house. I went to the door and knocked. A young early-twenties female we will call Mary answered the door in a robe with one kid on her hip and two toddlers in tow. She already knew about the petition and allotted time, so I just let her know how it was going to go down. I told her that the petitioner and I would be back at the door in about ten minutes, and that I expected her to stay out of the way for twenty minutes, and that she could expect me to enforce that twenty minutes. Then I went back outside to stand with Ted by his truck. Ted was angry. But Ted wasn't hot-headed. He hung out at the local bar, and several times I had relied on his good nature to help me in some tense situations. As a single tear rolled down his cheek, I asked, "How long have you guys been dating?" He looked at me in astonishment and just shook his head. "I just met her two nights ago at the bar down the street. She told me her and her kids didn't have anywhere to go, so I said they could stay with me for a while. Heck, I've got all this space and it seems she had a need. I even kept my intentions pure and slept on the couch in the basement. When I went to work the next morning, she asked if she could stay another night or two. And before I got off work, I was served with a restraining order. Officer Johnson, it says that I've done some pretty mean things." I said, "Well, what are you going to do?" He said, "I'm going to grab my tools, find a hotel, and get back to work. Looks like she'll be living here for a few months rent-free. I'm just wondering how many times she's pulled this scam."

Why do the wicked prosper? My story this morning is even relatively benign, but I'm not naïve. Ancient, modern, and contemporary history is replete with those who have stolen,

killed, and destroyed. In our humanistic and political search for saviors, our Hitlers, our Stalins, our Maos, and our Pol Pots, we only too late learn that they blatantly confiscate personal property, ruthlessly trample human life under foot, and contemptuously savage all that is valuable. And just in case your perspective isn't as rosy as mine, and in the recognition that no one in this room is a Hitler or a Stalin or a Mao or a Pol Pot, and not to mention that most of us here are long past the days in which we are picking up strangers at the bar, we need to remember that none of us would have to throw a rock very far to hit a murderer, a thief, or a destroyer who is prospering at the expense of others, or even at our expense. How many husbands or wives are ruthlessly exploiting their spousal relationships for their own best interests? And how many parents? I was a child sex abuse investigator. The things that are taken from children for the gratification of the parent would turn your stomach and curl your toes. Siblings, too, are not exempt from that reality that all of us, apart from God, are murderers, thieves, and destroyers. Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. It is deceitful and sick beyond understanding." The reality is that we've all encountered the wicked, the murderer, the thief, and the destroyer, who seemingly prospers despite the evil that they perpetrate. One of King David's musicians wrote what I have felt often: "I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked, for they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in troubles as others are. They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. They often sleep peacefully at night." Why do the wicked prosper?

In chapter 9 of John's gospel, Jesus had healed a man born blind from birth. When the community saw that this man had been healed, there was some confusion about his identity. Was this the blind man, or have we confused him with someone else? So they asked him, and he answered, "Hey, you know what, just this morning a man named Jesus made some dirt into mud and used it to cure my blindness." Of course, I'm not conveying the excitement that he was probably conveying. But their response was, "Hey, you can't make mud on a Sabbath! Who do you think you are?" Again, there was confusion as they argued over whether or not a man of God would violate the Sabbath. Naturally, the Pharisees figured that a man of God would not violate the Sabbath, and so this must not be the man born blind, because it takes a man of God to cure the blind. So, they went to his parents. "Is this your son?" They said, "Yeah," but at that time everyone was afraid to profess that Jesus was a man of God. So the parents, in fear, said, "Yes, he's our son, but he's of age. Don't ask us, ask him." Being afraid of the Pharisees, they said, "He knows what happened. Talk to him." The once-blind man, growing tired of the interrogation, chides the Pharisees, and it's one of my favorite passages in the Bible. And it concludes with, to the Pharisees, rhetorically, "Do you also want to become his disciples?" At this, the Pharisees feign ignorance about their knowledge of Jesus, and when the once-blind man calls them out, the Pharisees cast this man out of the synagogue. This man, born blind, surviving on the mercy of his parents and community, has just been healed. You would think that everyone would be ecstatic, but the very ones who claim to care, who claim to be shepherding this community, have cast him out of everything that he knows and is. He likely has no trade, not that it would matter. Who would trade with him now? Could he put his new eyes to work and become a scribe? Who would let him handle their sacred texts? Likely, even cured of blindness, he would remain at the mercy of his parents, and now at the

mercy of the fringe of his community. And why were the Pharisees interested in truth? Were they worried that error would creep into their midst? No, they were protecting their own interests, their own ability to retain their control, power, and influence; the control, power, and influence that granted them unfettered access to the temple coffers.

And this is the context in which Jesus delivers this parable. In those small, Jewish villages, most village families owned a few sheep. The houses of the villagers had small, walled courtyards where the sheep were kept, and sometimes these walls could be six feet high. So, at my house, there would be a six-foot walled pen where my sheep were, and I would have one or two sheep, not enough to hire a shepherd for myself. And so, we would work with the community, and we would hire one shepherd that we would share amongst us. And when that shepherd would show up in the morning to take my sheep out to pasture, I would know that shepherd, and I would say, "Yep, here's the gate. I'm opening the gate." And that shepherd would call my sheep, and my sheep, knowing his voice, would go out to that shepherd. Jesus uses this context to identify the Pharisees as the thieves and robbers whose only intention is to steal, kill, and destroy. They are wicked men, prospering on the backs of their community. Sound familiar? I think everybody knew it. I don't think this was a surprise to the crowd at the time. Everyone knew it, and Jesus often called it out. In fact, he once said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, who shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces and neither enter themselves nor allow those who would enter to go in." And there's five other woes that go along with that one. So this, I think, is general knowledge. The wicked are prospering in Israel, and Jesus is calling it out. And as I pored over this passage, do you know what struck me the most? There's something missing in Jesus's response. Now I'm a crusader by nature. I come from a long line of crusaders, and we were often beat up and battered as we fought injustice around the world. I'm pretty sure that's why I became a police officer and a soldier. And from that picture, what is amazing to me is there's no call to rise up against the oppressor and throw off the oppression. There's no call for justice. Jesus does not call for a rebellion or judgment. Instead, he makes an offer. He offers life. And if you don't know Jesus, he isn't offering you something that is better than what you already have. He's offering something that, apart from Him, you cannot receive. That's what it means to be the gate. He's not offering you a better life; he's offering you life instead of death.

Every one of us stood dead in our transgressions. We did not have life. What we had was the hope of the next day, that life might come. Jesus, standing before the wicked and prosperous of his day, instead of judgment, instead of rebellion, instead of justice, offers them life. But wait, there's more! Jesus offers life, and life more abundantly. He's not just offering life over death. He is offering you abundant life. One of the sweetest assurances that Jesus ever gave to His followers was that he had come, not merely to save men, not merely that they should have life, but that they might have it more abundantly. Do you want to know how to have that abundant life? Look upon some narrow, self-centered life where the first question is always that of self-gratification, and then look at the life that is pouring itself out on the world, a stream of blessing, and you will begin to catch his meaning. "For whoever will save his life shall lose it, and whoever will lose his life shall find it." It seems so counterintuitive, that we have a hard time doing it. That you have life is the result of something that Jesus has done for you. That you

have abundant life is found in what you do with that life. And here Jesus sets the example. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The abundant life is found, then, in a life of service to the wicked. And this is the service of Christ, that while we were still sinners, while we were still wicked, Christ died for us. It changes the perception of the question: Why do the wicked prosper? But to ask that question is really to be asking: Why am I not prospering? It's a self-centered question.

One of the greatest things about moving to Arizona was that the house that Sarah and I bought was the last house right next to one of the highest-rated, mountain-biking trails in southern Arizona. I could get on my bike at the end of a workday, ride an exhausting, grueling workout for one hour to the top of the hill, and then have a thirty-minute descent that was just to die for. On the ride up, I passed one of the most beautiful homes in the area. It was distinct because it wasn't, you know, when you move down to Arizona you'll find a whole bunch of what I call the Fred Flintstone houses. But this was a normal house. It was two stories, and it had gabled windows on the second story, and I think the attic could have even been a really good man-cave, but I was never inside to verify that. But as I rode past this house I often thought, "Why was that not my house? Did I not deserve that house? I worked hard. My house was smaller, and by far too close to my neighbors. I worked hard." The more I focused on how much I deserved this house, though, the more bitter I became. Then one day I had an epiphany. The truth be told, I couldn't afford that house. Now don't get me wrong. I know a whole bunch of lenders who would have given me a loan to buy that house. And if you've ever done that, then you know you live in this perpetual state of angst trying to figure out how to make the payment every month. And then I started to worry about the guy that owned the house. Was that how he was living? Was it affecting his relationship with his wife? Was he having to work so much to make that payment that he didn't get to spend any time with his kids? And I started praying for this person every time I would ride by the house. "Lord, I hope he can afford this house. Lord, I hope he can enjoy this house. Lord, I hope his kids are having as much fun with the access to this mountain-bike trail as I would."

Why do the wicked prosper? So that they might have the opportunity to receive life. They don't even know that they're dead. Do you, who have been given life, want life more abundant? Take the life you have been given and give it to the wicked. Or as Jesus put it, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

Let's pray.

Lord, we just thank You for today. It's a beautiful day. And every day is a day in which we get to offer the life that You have so graciously given to us, through Your work on the cross, to a lost and dying world. Our prosperity is tied eternally to You. Help us to focus on that and not on the prosperity that this world has to offer. In Your precious name we pray. Amen.