

“I AM THE GATE”: WHY THERE’S ONLY ONE WAY TO TRULY BELONG

You see him every day as you pass through the streets of Jerusalem.

A beggar, blind from birth, living in squalor in a country without a welfare state. He depends on the compassion and loose change from those who pass by.

Then *suddenly*, news spreads that *he can see*—the latest miracle performed by Jesus of Nazareth. It’s hard to believe—but, yes, his normal spot is empty. In fact, you think you glimpsed him in town the other day, walking around with fully-functioning sight.

This is a real incident that John records in Chapter 9 of his Gospel.

You’d think that such a life-changing miracle would be a cause for celebration. In fact, it becomes a massive point of division.

Why? Because Jesus gives the man his sight *on the Sabbath*, the Jewish day of rest.

No work was to be conducted on the Sabbath. So, in the minds of the religious leaders, Jesus has broken the law. To them, Jesus is an anarchist, with outrageous disregard for the religious code.

As word spreads, the religious leaders become increasingly hostile towards both Jesus *and* the newly-healed man, understandably his new biggest fan.

Eventually everything boils over. The religious leaders condemn Jesus and expel the man from the synagogue. In their eyes, the man’s healing *isn’t legitimate*. It hasn’t come in the right way. And they simply *cannot tolerate* his view that this “law-breaker” has come from God.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day saw themselves as shepherds, with the nation of Israel as the sheep they’d been given to lead and protect. *This situation* is a challenge to their leadership.

So they stand in the man's way.

The religious leaders have positioned themselves as gatekeepers—or, better still—*gates*. They will admit only those *they* consider worthy. They believe that the nation's health hangs on them admitting the right people... and keeping others out.

All this provides the backdrop for Jesus' latest 'I am' claim:

I am the gate for the sheep.

The leaders who denounced the once-blind man are still in earshot. So can you sense how pointed Jesus' claim is?

He is saying, "*I am the gate, not you. I am the one who rightly decides which sheep enter the pen, not you.*"

Jesus is alluding to a scene his hearers would have known. In many towns, there was a stone pen in which sheep would be kept overnight. A pen had only one opening, with a gate placed across it.

According to Jesus, the gate allowed sheep to:

come in and go out and find pasture.

So a gate does two things.

It acts as an *entrance*. When sheep *come in* through the gate, they enter the safety of the sheepfold. But the gate also acts as an *exit*, allowing sheep to go back out to pasture, where they can be cared for and fed. A *good gate* ensures both safety and sustenance for a flock. The sheep are protected, but not restricted.

The religious leaders see themselves as gates, offering protection and leading the nation to life. But, says Jesus, they're not *good gates*. Their treatment of the once-blind-man indicates that the very sheep needing welcome and safety are being harmed and excluded.

In fact, this is what every human system—religious or not—is prone to do. There are people who act like gatekeepers: people who decide who's in and who's out. If you have enough in common with the gatekeepers, or you meet their standards, they might let you in. If not, it's likely you'll find the gate slammed firmly shut.

Yet here's the truth. *All* of us operate with gates. *All* of us place doors over our lives. Other gatekeepers encourage us to let certain people in. So we might let through, for example, those who have similar political opinions, those from a similar background, those as fun as us.

But the gatekeepers warn us to keep others *out*.

Though we watch with horror as the religious leaders bar the once-blind-man, each of us does the same, every day.

Our world is full of unkind and exclusive gates.

But Jesus says that, with him, it's different. Did you notice the language of his claim?

I am the gate; *whoever* enters through me will be saved.

Whoever enters through Jesus—*anyone at all*—whoever they are, wherever they're from, however they've lived—can enter his sheepfold.

There's only one gate, but *everyone* is invited to come on in.

Indeed, says Jesus, anyone who enters through *his gate* will be saved.

Saved. Saved from the judgements and opinions of others. Saved from the contempt that people like the once-blind-man received from powerful gatekeepers.

And saved from the penalty of death each of us rightly faces.

Jesus is *bothered* when people like the once-blind-man are unjustly excluded. He contends for justice on their behalf.

And because we have unjustly excluded others, *none of us* possesses the entry standards to enter into God's flock. We face his justice too, his active displeasure at how we've lived, forever shut out from life.

Yet, says Jesus, approaching through him, we may come in.

Why? Because, in his love, Jesus will lay down his life for the sheep.

None of us can reverse the pain we've caused in excluding others. We can never undo the damage we've done.

Yet, as he dies, Jesus bears our penalty so we can be welcomed in. We don't deserve to be there but, through in dying in our place, Jesus has done what's necessary for us to know life to the full, the nourishing pastureland of being shepherded by the living God.

So none of us can look down on each other. We're only here because of Jesus' goodness. We can't look down on those outside the flock either, because that's *where we rightly belong*.

So let's commit to open gates in our CUs.

After all, Jesus isn't a begrudging night-club bouncer. He offers himself—with an invitation for everyone to know his welcome, hospitality and love...

And that's an offer extended even to those other gatekeepers might exclude.