

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Studies in John's Gospel: The Good Shepherd - John 10

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Lord Jesus very often spoke in parables. One of the many distinctive features of the Gospel of John is that, strictly speaking, no parable is included, in the proper sense of the term. The Son of God depicted by John speaks plainly, as it is His divine prerogative to do, being God. The word parable does appear in the text of some translations in one instance, today's chapter as it happens. As we shall see, it is more accurate if, in this case, the word allegory is used.

An allegory is an extended metaphor, and the opening paragraph of John 10 is certainly that. It introduces a series of images and characters which graphically represent individuals or groups of real people. Their conduct vividly draws to our attention things we need soberly to consider so as to assess our own spiritual position before God. Overall, and most importantly, the chapter introduces us to the Lord Jesus Christ as The Good Shepherd, Who willingly dies for those He calls His sheep, indeed His very own sheep.

Let us begin with a look at the first fascinating section, verses 1-13.

We have to bear in mind that when the Lord Jesus began His public ministry at the age of about thirty years old (as we are told in Luke 3:23), He presented Himself first of all to the nation of Israel. Many Old Testament prophecies had said that He would.

This is clearly indicated at the outset here. The Lord speaks first of all of a sheep fold, a very homely picture of the nation of Israel. You will remember that He speaks elsewhere of having come first of all to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24). He had already instructed His disciples to do the same (Matthew 10:6). In line with that, he refers here in our chapter to His coming into the nation in the proper manner. He did not come in by the back door. Examination of the first three and a half chapters of the Gospel by Matthew will verify the fact that the Lord Jesus came into the world in clear fulfilment of many Old Testament prophecies, seven major ones being quoted.

By way of contrast, he then refers obliquely to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Those who impose themselves on the people of God without having the necessary spiritual qualities and qualifications are referred to as thieves and robbers. Now a thief works surreptitiously, and is spoken of elsewhere as a thief in the night, coming to rob you when you least expect it. In contrast to that, a robber is prepared to attack you openly, and do you positive injury as well as dispossessing you of your material goods. This kind of distinction is confirmed in this very gospel.

As the Lord and His disciples moved about the country in the service of God, they necessarily incurred expenses. Judas Iscariot was charged with the responsibility of paying for these from funds committed to his trust for this very purpose. In 12:6, we are told that Judas Iscariot was a thief, helping himself to these funds. Outwardly, nearly everybody would think what a good man Judas was, devoting himself to being of all possible assistance to the Lord Jesus. Actually, he was helping himself from the group's funds whenever opportunity arose. That is the character of a thief.

In contrast with that, in 18:40, we are told, "Barabbas was a robber". He was a violent man, quite prepared to act openly and viciously to achieve his ends, in his case political. It must be significant that the distinctive characters of the thief and the robber are given in the very Gospel which records this delightful dissertation by the Lord Jesus. The Pharisees would see that the term thief was an allusion to them. They seemed all that could be desired on the surface. Yet, in reality, they were burrowing away under the surface, undermining the spiritual life of the nation. They imposed restrictive behavioural constraints and unnecessary ceremonial practices on the Jewish people. At the same time, they were feathering their own nests from the accumulated assets to which they had access.

On the other hand, the Sadducees, like robbers, were more open in their opposition to the fundamental beliefs expounded in their scriptures; our Old Testament, as we speak of it. They did not believe in the resurrection, nor in angels, nor in spirits. They held that the soul perished with the body. The Lord Jesus warned His disciples against their doctrines.

After this, the Lord makes an additional reference to the presence of hirelings who flee at the first sign of difficulty, deserting those whom they are charged with protecting. This would seem to be a subtle reference to the Herodians. They were prepared to work for the occupational powers of the Roman Empire to improve their own situation, but did not have the moral courage to stand against the Romans in defence of their own compatriots, if that ever became necessary. I personally would take the mention of the wolf in verse 12 to be a reminder that Satan himself is behind all these forces who, directly or indirectly, are opposed to the work of God, whether or not they themselves realise it.

Then, we are informed that not only does the duly appointed shepherd enter in by the formal entrance, but, also, he is properly announced in advance. Hence the reference to the porter, or commissioner, in verse 3. There is no doubt that this was perfectly true of the entrance of the Lord Jesus in taking up the service of God in the nation of Israel. John the Baptist, sent by God, as we are specifically told in John 1:6, was God's duly appointed herald. His privilege was to announce the imminent arrival of the Son of God, to take up His public ministry amongst God's chosen earthly people, Israel. John was then to welcome the Lord Jesus officially when He first identified Himself with the Nation of Israel by presenting Himself for baptism, on the banks of the River Jordan. The record of that is so important that it is included in all four Gospels. The Apostle John, in his Gospel, does not include the details of the actual baptism. Nevertheless, it is in John's Gospel that we read about the dramatic way in which John the Baptist points to the Lord Jesus and says, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). Then again, in verse 36, "Behold the Lamb of God".

It would be lovely to have the time to spell out the wonderful detail included in the narrative, but the main message is this. The Lord Jesus entered into the nation of Israel, to lead them out of the legalistic constraints of Judaism into the spiritual liberty of Christianity. How was this to be done? Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, as he explains what His mission was in coming into the world, and how He would achieve His purpose.

"I am the door: by Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture." That, in itself, is a marvellous summary of what John's Gospel sets out to teach.

"He shall be **saved**" - read Chapters 3 and 5 for the detail of that.

"and shall go **in**" - what a happy summary of the teaching of chapter 4: "in Him shall be a fountain of water, springing up into eternal life" (4:14). And, again - "they that worship the Father must worship Him in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him" (verse 23).

"and shall go **out**" - think of chapter 7, particularly verse 38 - "He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, **out** of his inward parts shall flow rivers of living water".

"and shall find **pasture**" - a lovely summary of chapter 6, which spells out the truth that the Lord Jesus is The True Bread, that is, the true spiritual food for the soul, The Bread of Life.

On what basis could this wonderful sphere of blessing be brought into being. The Lord Jesus goes on, in verse 11, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep". Show me a verse in the Bible that emphasises the availability of blessing, and you will be showing me also a verse where, somewhere in the context, there will be a reference to the cost of such blessing being secured. That is, all blessing, and all justice, has its basis and foundation in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ at Calvary. This is clearly no exception.

After this, the Lord moves on to make a plain statement. Because Israel, as a nation, would not accept Him as their long-promised Messiah, He would open the door to His being received by many people of other nationalities, on the basis of their personal faith and trust in Him as Lord and Saviour. That brings in you and me, simple believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, who believe that 'Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the scriptures.' (1 Corinthians 15:3 and 4). This is how He put it. "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd."

Inevitably, the implications of this statement brought about an immediate schism in those who heard it. Verse 19 tells us, 'There was a division therefore again among the Jews for these sayings. Now, this statement must be taken alongside two other similar ones. In 7:43 we read, 'So there was a division among the people because of Him'. Then in 9:16 we are told that there was a controversy about what He did, His mighty works in performing miracles. 'And there was a division among them.' Now, here in 10:19, it crops up again. 'There was a division therefore again among the Jews for these sayings.'

Putting these three important remarks together we learn this. There are three important respects in which the claims of the Lord Jesus are absolutely crucial and must be considered with great care. They have eternal implications. It is also true that each has the potential to produce not only controversy, but actually a sharp division, a clear line of

demarcation, among people who would otherwise have almost everything in common. As the Lord Himself said, "I came not to send peace, but a sword." Our attitude to Him is all-important.

In chapter 7, it is a question of His holy person: Who He is. He is none other and none less than The Son of God. In chapter 9, it is a question of what He has done; His works, in particular the work of the cross of Calvary, where He shed His precious blood that our sins might be forgiven. Here in chapter 10, we learn that our response to what He said is also vital. As He said, as recorded in 12:48, "The word that I have spoken, the same shall judge you in the last day."

You will probably have seen, or might indeed possess, what is called a Red Letter Testament. In it, the personal statements of the Lord Jesus are highlighted in red so that the reader cannot miss them. If we had no other scriptures than these, there is sufficient in them to bring about our eternal salvation, if we read them honestly, accept them for what they are, the word of God, and act upon them.

John Newton was rightly famous on at least three counts. First of all, before he was converted to Christ he was notorious as a slave trader. What a terrible occupation for any man! Secondly, he was the composer of that universally popular hymn:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

Not quite so well known, perhaps, is another hymn of his, the first verse of which has this to say:

*"What think ye of Christ?" is the test
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest
Unless you think rightly of Him.*

How right it is, and we cannot say it too often, that our attitude to the Lord Jesus Christ, Who He is, what he has done and what He has said, these are the fundamental issues which shall determine our eternal destiny.

The rest of the chapter proceeds to draw attention to the varying response that followed the Lord's exposition. As always, there was a handful who were most happy to receive Him for Who He is, the Son of God, bringing God's message to them in person. For those who do so, He emphasised the assurance of eternal security that is theirs. "I give unto My sheep eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand." (verse 28). Furthermore, there is this double security. "My Father which gave them Me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of My Father's hand." (verse 29). This double clasp, the Son's hand and the Father's hand, gives the Christian wonderful composure and serenity as to His eternal security. I do trust it is the assured possession of every listener.

This latter statement, a clear claim to equality with God in Deity, was enough for the furious Jewish leaders. This was their excuse to attempt once more to put Him to death. They took up stones to kill Him, the Jewish way of executing blasphemers, as they considered Him to be. Having drawn their attention to the fact that they had no righteous charge that they could lay against Him, He quietly withdrew Himself from their company and went on His way. This confirmed in them their rigid determination to find some way of plotting His arrest, mock trial and, in their eyes, lawful execution for the sin of blasphemy.

The chapter ends with a glowing tribute to John the Baptist. The apostle John records the comment of many of the observers. "John did no miracle; but all things that he said of this man were true." The result was that many believed on Jesus.

Fellow Christian, would it not be a wonderful thing if such a testimony could be given about you and me? At this stage in the dispensation, none of us is likely to perform a physical miracle in the service of God. But, think of it! What a wonderful effect for good it would be if this could be said about you or me. "He did no miracle, but all things he said about the Lord Jesus Christ were perfectly true." May the Lord help us to do that very thing, first of all believing the truth for ourselves, and then witnessing faithfully to the truth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. He is certainly worthy of it. He loved us, and gave Himself for us. Blessed be His Precious Name!

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