

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Are you eating healthily: Feeding the flock of God - John 21:15-17

A rather pompous Sunday school teacher was teaching his class about the Good Shepherd. Pointing at each child in turn he bellowed, "You are His sheep". Then, with a self-satisfied smile upon his face, and palms outstretched, he asked them who they thought the shepherd was. One small boy put up his hand: "Please, sir, Jesus is the Shepherd". Rather nonplussed by this answer, the teacher further questioned the boy: "So who am I then?" After thinking about this for some time, the boy replied, "Well sir, you must be the sheep dog!"

We may smile at the somewhat unorthodox nature of the boy's belief, but he did have one thing absolutely right. Jesus is the good Shepherd, and there is only one flock. So as we come to conclude our series of talks on "Are you eating healthily?" with a look at feeding the flock of God, it is with a need to remember that we are under shepherds, responsible for His flock.

Let us start this morning with a look at the tremendous commission given to Peter, by the Lord in resurrection, in John 21:15-17: "So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."

How tenderly we see the Shepherd restoring one of His sheep. Jesus' first question to Peter cuts right to the heart of his self belief; "Do you really love Me more than anybody else does?" for he had boasted that though none other might be ready to, he, Peter, was prepared to die for Jesus. Peter responds, but uses, perhaps, a weaker word for love – "an affection for", unsure of how his love compared to that of Jesus' love for him. How often we may have felt like this! Now Jesus gives Peter the command to feed His lambs - those young in the faith, who knew so little, yet needed so much. This was to be Peter's task.

Some of us would feel that this was a big enough job for anyone. It is so important when we are dealing with the lambs, young believers, that we remember that they are young. They are not able to take in the food that older ones take in. Nor do they behave in the same way as older sheep. They waste so much time running around, jumping and chasing shadows. And yet that is what makes them so adorable. As we deal with young believers, we do need to feed them with suitable food, presented in a way that they are able to take in, judging them according to their age, rather than our age. But lambs soon grow up, and we need to remember this too!

So Jesus, a second time, questions Peter as regards his love for Him, but this time does not compare him to others - "Do you love Me at all?" Again, Peter responds that he has an affection for Jesus. The good Shepherd wants so much more from us, and is never satisfied with second best. So He adds to Peter's commission: "Tend my sheep". So often we think that so long as we provide the right food for all believers then we have done our job. But tending goes far further than just providing spiritual food. It is no good at all providing some wonderful message of teaching if the sheep are so exhausted from other activities that they are unable to take it in. So perhaps our first task is to lend a practical hand, so that a sheep can rest. As believers, of course, we have a spiritual dimension, which is vitally important to feed. But we do not lose our human dimension either. We do need to laugh, to enjoy, to play. If we are to join Peter in the work of tending the sheep, we too need to ensure that these vital ingredients are there in the lives of those we care for, if the sheep are to flourish. I well remember one of the most vital services done for me as a young man was being taken out for a meal. Of course, there was a spiritual element to the time spent together. Thanks was given for the meal, and inevitably the conversation included spiritual matters. But more than that was just knowing that I was not on my own, and that that night I could just relax and enjoy the meal.

Finally, Jesus asks Peter the third time, using Peter's own word for love. Obviously making the link between his own three denials and Jesus' three questions, Peter is grieved. He realises his own weakness and can do no better than throw himself upon the omniscience of God – "Lord, You know all things." So Jesus gives Peter his third commission: "Feed My sheep" We are not to forget that older ones as well as younger ones need to be spiritually fed. Whilst it is true that we are all individually responsible before God as to what we know and do, the true shepherd will ensure that

all members of His flock are provided for. In a society which is continuously dumbing down, this will take particular effort on the part of the shepherd. The work that Jesus gave Peter to do was to last for the rest of his life. It changed him from the inside out. So it is that 30 to 40 years later as an old man, Peter would write, in 1 Peter 5:2-4: "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."

Gone was the me-first, self sufficient Peter. Here he would shepherd the flock as a servant and example, freely giving himself to those who were in need, knowing that in this work he was never alone. For as an under shepherd, rather than a sheepdog, he was engaged in the same work as Jesus Himself. Nor was this a thankless task, for when He appears, special reward is promised for those who, at cost to themselves, have undertaken the care of others. For we should be in no doubt at all that to shepherd the flock truly will involve the whole of our lives. This is no 9-5 job. As we try to address the question then of what the job involves, we can do no better than to look at the perfect example we have, in the words of the greatest shepherd in the Bible.

In Psalm 23, David gives us at least 6 features of the shepherd's work; they are all instructive for us.

1. He makes me to lie down in green pastures.

Four things are necessary if the flock are to lie down. There must be an absence of fear, of friction, of torment from flies, and hunger. Even the smallest rabbit, rushing out from a bush can startle one sheep. It in turn will alarm its neighbour, until the whole flock is disturbed. We live in a rapidly changing world, full of pressures and distractions. So often it may be only the smallest thing that robs us of a sense of peace in Christ. Fear of growing old, of job security, of expectation, of exams, of failing, all keep us from enjoying the peace of God. If we are to shepherd His sheep, then we really need to know them, to see beforehand what is likely to cause alarm, and to head it off. Nothing less than the presence of the shepherd amongst the sheep is likely to bring calm. This is not something that can be done on a one day a week basis. Amongst a flock of sheep there is a "pecking" order. Friction can so easily arise if one feels they have not got their due. How often friction may arise among believers, usually when they do not have enough to do. External influences, flies and parasites, are enough to drive a sheep to distraction. The Devil is busy trying to rob us of our enjoyment of Christ. Yet by choosing good ground for the sheep, these external influences can be minimised. By a rich use of the word of God, applied in the power of the Spirit, the external damage that the Devil can cause can be guarded against. And there must be a well fed sheep, no longer in need of grazing. Central to the shepherd's job must be to provide suitable grazing for the sheep. In shepherding the flock of God, we need to provide the word of God, and all of it, to His people. A sheep that particularly liked dandelions, and was allowed to eat only dandelions, would soon be a sick sheep. All the word of God is necessary, Old Testament and New Testament, prophet and epistle, if a believer is to thrive. We do need to guard against over emphasising our particular favourite truths, of sticking to our favourite books.

2. He leads me beside the still waters.

Two things will just not do here – either a raging torrent or a stagnant pool. Neither will quench the thirst of a sheep. Indeed, in the latter case, it may well introduce parasites to the sheep. One of the most undervalued characteristics today is that of quietness. It is seen as boring and unappealing. And yet true serenity in the life of the believer can only come from quiet time spent with God. The greatest gift a parent can give their child is time to spend each day with God. If mowing your grass in the summer is what it takes to enable you to find time to read His word, and meditate on what has been read, then that is what the shepherd must do. But this thirst quenching water must not be stagnant. It needs to be fresh each day, each week. To be a help to others, I need to have had a fresh experience of God for myself. Digging out a sermon that worked last year, or reciting a prayer that seemed to fit last time, is a sure recipe for spiritual ill health.

3. He restores my soul.

Sheep can easily become cast down, or "cast". They roll on their backs, and their weight, and that of their fleece, make it a struggle if not impossible to get back up. It can be fatal, and the shepherd must always be alert to this danger. Only by individually accounting for each one can the shepherd act before it is too late. How do you think the shepherd with a 100 sheep knew there was one missing? Very often it is not the sick and struggling sheep that suffer this indignity. It is the content, well fed, perhaps too well fed, sheep that start to take their ease, gradually rolling over, that end up in difficulty. How often a believer who is seemingly going on well, who has been active for God, suddenly hits a crisis. For the spiritual shepherd there must be a constant watching and readiness to intervene, to get a believer back on their feet. If each believer we care for is busy, but not too busy, in the Lord's work, well fed, but not thinking that they know it all, then we shall go a long way to avoiding this danger. How gently Jesus got Peter back on his feet, as we saw at the beginning. The Chief Shepherd knows His sheep and is never so disgusted with us that we can

never get back onto our feet, to walk in His way. Gently, but firmly, the shepherd must lift a cast sheep up and get it back on its feet.

4. He leads me in the paths of righteousness.

Just like us, sheep are such creatures of habit. Left to their own devices, they will follow the same tracks day after day, until they are deeply rutted, and the grass sparse and the water contaminated from their own waste. How easy it would be if the Bible had a rule for every situation! We could just carry on on our own, with no need for thought or reliance upon the Holy Spirit for guidance. But right living can only come from daily dependence on the Spirit. That is why Peter said that a shepherd must be an example to the flock. Simply put, if I can see that relying upon the Spirit works for the shepherd, then I am more likely to do so myself. We fear doing something that we do not see others doing, in case it does not work. Perhaps the greatest service a shepherd can do is to live a life that is so obviously lived in dependence upon Him.

5. [He] prepares a table before me.

Now we might well like the idea of a table laden with tasty treats set before us. However, I'm not sure that is what the shepherd David envisioned. This Psalm shows the care of the shepherd throughout the year, from the winter lowlands to the summer highlands. The expansive green fields that were higher up, away from the winter fields that in summer were humid, and sparse after a winter of being grazed, were referred to as tablelands, or simply "tables". But before the shepherd could safely take the sheep to these rich pastures, he had to go first, to clear them of poisonous weeds and predators. Manual, backbreaking work was required so that the sheep could flourish. For us the parallel is clear. The shepherd must not be content to allow the sheep to remain on the one level. There needs to be a continuous going up, a walking closer and closer to God. How often we may have had a "mountain top" experience, only for it to be followed by a return to our old ways. Perhaps a week at summer camp has really changed a young believer. But by October, they have gone back to their previous ways. How much we need the shepherd to look ahead, to see and prepare the way to a closer walk with God, and then to go with us to that place.

6. [He] anoints my head with oil.

Perhaps, if you have ever seen a flock of sheep in the summer, you will remember how their faces are continuously surrounded by buzzing flies. How irritating as they land upon the moist noses seeking to lay their eggs. By pouring oil (we would call it sheep-dip today) over their heads the flies are repelled and all the irritations are dealt with. So often it will be that as sheep we are frustrated by events around us, or our own limitations. This may lead us to take it out on others as we become hard or bitter. The wise shepherd needs to pour on the head of each sheep the oil of the Holy Spirit, to enable each sheep to rest in His strength. There are no problems that He cannot deal with. He will make all things perfect in His time. As our minds are wholly given over to Him, we are better able to accept the faults we have, and those of others. It is then and only then, that "brethren can dwell together in unity" (Psalm 133:1-2). If only we were more filled with the Spirit, how many of the divisions that have so besmirched the honour of Christ, and stumbled so many lambs and sheep, might have been avoided!

What a hard life, the life of a shepherd! Year round vigilance and preparation for the future is required. But before we throw in the towel, or think that this job is not for us, we need to realise that to some degree we are all to do this work. Though doubtless some are particularly called to this work, we all have those we know for whom we can serve as a shepherd. And we know that, if God calls us to a task, He will also enable us to be able to do that work for Him, in His strength. But before we leave our considerations as regards feeding the flock of God, we must take note of the solemn warnings given to Israel, by the prophet Ezekiel, in Ezekiel 34:2-4, though it would be profitable to read the whole chapter at your leisure. "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.'"

In this challenging, yet ultimately comforting chapter, we see how God would indict the leaders of Israel, because of their failure to shepherd His flock. There were five things they had failed to do, and two things they did, that they ought not to have done. Firstly, they had not strengthened the weak. When the father came to Jesus, in Mark 9, and cried "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief", Jesus did not send him away with a command to come back when he had sorted out his doubting issues. He accepted him as he was, and built on what was there. How much we need eyes to see what is there, rather than finding fault with what is not. Secondly, they had not healed the sick. But when Jesus healed the leper, He did not just speak a word of healing, but touched him (Luke 5:13). Perhaps for the first time in many years, the leper felt the touch of another human being. Jesus was not afraid to fully identify with him. How truly he was healed outside and in. Thirdly, they had not bound up the injured. Yet Jesus, as He passed through Jericho, in Luke 19, stopped underneath the sycamore tree, to care for Zacchaeus. Injured by being associated with all the other

crooked tax collectors, how much Zacchaeus needed to know that not everyone thought he was dirt. In the words of the story of the good Samaritan, "He came where he was." Next, they had not brought back the strays. As we saw at the start of our talk this morning, Jesus most beautifully found Peter and re-commissioned him. It would have been all too easy to cast him off. Peter had failed the Lord once, and so hurtfully. Jesus could have turned to someone else instead, as we might do. Yet Jesus correctly read Peter's heart and persevered with him. Then, they had not searched for the lost. In John 4:4 we read that Jesus needed to go through Samaria. Geographically, he didn't. But in pursuit of the lost soul of the woman by Sychar's well, Jesus could go no other way. How much we need to have an outward, evangelistic vision. As soon as we become inward looking, we find fault with one another, and problems arise. Whilst we maintain a healthy pursuit of lost souls, we retain a freshness and energy to our mission.

Sadly the poor shepherds of Israel had fed themselves. Now there is nothing wrong in that, except that it was at the expense of feeding the sheep. As we look at the lives, whether individually or collectively, of other believers, are we interested only in doing things to keep ourselves happy, or do we have the needs of others at heart? Is the word of God taught in a way that all today can take in and grow by, or does it rely on what worked a hundred years ago, that some enjoyed when they were young? Finally, they were harsh and brutal with the sheep. One needs only to think of the excesses of the inquisition, to realise that it has not been just the shepherds of Israel that this charge could be levelled against. But before we are too quick to condemn others, the church today must take a long hard look at itself to see if it is harsh and brutal. As soon as someone says or does something wrong, is the first reaction one of judgement? Am I so bothered about keeping myself just so, that I want nothing to do with others, who might contaminate me? Shepherding was hard, dirty work. How many souls there are today who criticise Christianity, who in the past have had some bad experience with one who claimed to be "like Christ". Today, more than ever, we need to display the gentleness of the Good Shepherd.

Feed My lambs! Tend My sheep! Feed My sheep! Simple words, but oh! So hard a work. A work that will consume all our life. May God grant us the vision and the strength to undertake this most valuable work for His sheep.

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