

Caring For Christ's Flock

John 21:15-18

There, on the shore at the Sea of Galilee we see our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ eating breakfast with his hungry disciples who had been out fishing all night. He eats with men who just a few days ago denounced, deserted, and turned their backs on Him. But Christ graciously calls his disciples to come and dine with Him. What mercy and faithfulness Christ shows to His people.

The disciples come, and at first, they must have felt awkward and ashamed around Christ because of what they had done to Him. There even seems to be an hesitancy, and a silent nervousness among the disciples at the breakfast table, "And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord."

Perhaps the disciples thought in the back of their minds, "What will Christ say? What will He do? What will the future hold for us?"

After the disciples were fed, Christ then speaks to Peter regarding his denial and his future in the church, “Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, **lovest** (agape) thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love (phileo) thee. He saith unto him, **Feed my lambs.**

He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, **lovest** (agape) thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love (phileo) thee. He saith unto him, **Feed my sheep.**

He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, **lovest** (phileo) thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love (phileo) thee. Jesus saith unto him, **Feed my sheep.**”

Christ repeats three times the importance of feeding *my lambs* and *my sheep* to Peter. The flock of God is always near to the heart of Christ. Christ addresses Peter by his Hebrew name, “Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas.”

John Gill writes in his commentary, “Some have observed, that Christ spoke to him particularly by his original name, and not by that which he himself had given him, with a view to his strong faith, as Cephas, or Peter; but it should be known that Christ calls him by this name of Simon bar Jonah, when he made the most ample profession of his faith in him, and was pronounced blessed by him in Matthew 16:16.”

Peter was grieved in his heart because of the words of Christ. They were a sore and painful reminder of that cold and dark night when Peter denied His Lord three times. We see how Christ was both firm and gentle with his hurting apostle. Christ assures Peter of his service and usefulness in the church. He restores Peter. We learn that Peter’s future work will not be in a boat catching fish but in the gospel saving souls.

Undoubtedly, the words spoken by Christ carved an indelible mark on the heart and mind of Peter. We read later in Peter’s ministry (I Peter 5:2-3), how Peter exhorted the teachers and elders in the church to, “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock.” This was the same charge Peter received from the Lord Jesus Christ years before.

Notice how the text describes the people of God. They are identified as sheep and lambs.

Dozens of times in the Bible, the people of God are referred to as sheep. A few of the more notable passages that come to mind are the 23rd Psalm, Isaiah. 53:6 and John 10. There are good reasons why God's people are called sheep in the Bible and one of them is because of the nature of the sheep. One preacher identifies sheep as having 3 striking characteristics:

1. Sheep are Dumb - In other words, they are not the smartest animals in the world. As a result, they are prone to trouble. They are slow to learn from the Shepherd. There are times when we fail to remember who we are in Christ, we fail remember all of the promises in the Scripture.

2. Sheep are Directionless - If a sheep wanders off from the rest of the herd, it will have a hard, if not impossible time, finding its way back. They have no

sense of direction. So it is with things pertaining to the Lord. There is simply no sense of spiritual direction in our lives apart from Christ. We cannot find our way to the Lord by ourselves. We are prone to wander and leave the God we love.

3. Sheep are Defenseless - Lions have teeth and claws, bears have the same. Snakes have fangs, even the fowls of the air have some type of defensive mechanism. Not so with sheep. They have absolutely no means of protecting themselves from danger. If they are attacked, they are simply helpless! Again, people are the same way. There is no way that anyone can protect himself/herself against the attacks of the evil one. We need someone else to protect us.

By their very nature, sheep need a shepherd and I suppose this is another reason why the figure of sheep is used to describe the people of God. In the person of the shepherd, we see many characteristics that speak of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it becomes clear that this idea of the shepherd and his sheep is a good way to describe the relationship between the Lord and His people.

We see here that these people are no ordinary sheep. Christ says, “They are my sheep.” They hold a special place in the heart and mind of Christ because they belong to Him and not the world.

The question is, Do you belong to Christ? Or do you belong to this sinful world? Could it be said of you that you are Christ’s sheep? Is Christ your shepherd and are you His sheep? Ask the Lord to be your Shepherd today!

Christ is the Shepherd of His people. He promises to feed, to guide, and to protect his sheep.

There was a story of a farmer’s wife who at lambing time would go out in the night to rescue the new-born lambs which were being neglected by the female sheep. She would take them into her kitchen, wrap them in towel and put them in a warm oven, and then she would feed them from a bottle. By taking very good care of these lambs their flock increased.

So it must be true in the church that care and love must be shown to Christ’s flock. Therefore, The title of my message for today is, “*Caring for Christ’s flock*.” There are three things I would like to consider from the text.

1. Care for God's people involves the ability to forgive.

The Lord forgave Peter when he denied him three times. We read of Peter's denial in Matthew 26:69-75, "Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest.

And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.

And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly."

It looked like it was all over for Peter in the ministry. His denial of the Lord appeared to be his end. But it wasn't the last of Peter. The Lord forgave him of his sins, and not just the sin of denial but all of his sins, and so we must forgive because Christ forgives us.

Are you forgiven of sin? Has the precious blood of Christ washed you from all your sins? Is there someone you need to forgive? Maybe you need to forgive a family member? Or someone in the church? Or perhaps at work? Christ forgives sinners and therefore we should forgive those who have wronged us.

We read in Colossians 3:13, "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."

How will we know if we have truly forgiven?
Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian woman who survived a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust, said, "Forgiveness is to set a prisoner free, and to realize the prisoner was you."

We will know the work of forgiveness when we experience the freedom that comes as a result. We are the ones who suffer most when we choose not to forgive. When we do forgive, the Lord sets our hearts free from the anger, bitterness, resentment and hurt that previously imprisoned us.

We read in Matthew 18:21-22, “Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.”

This answer by Jesus makes it clear that forgiveness is not easy for us. It's not a one-time choice and then we automatically live in a state of forgiveness. Forgiveness may require a lifetime of forgiving, but it is important to the Lord. We must continue forgiving until the matter is settled in our heart.

The message of Christ to Peter was, “there is a way back to God from failure and that is through the blood of Jesus Christ.”

We read in 1 Peter 1:2, “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.”

1 Peter 1:19, “But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:”

Caring for God’s people requires forgiveness.

2. Care for God’s people includes both young and old in the flock.

“Feed my lambs”, Jesus said. Caring for children, caring for those who are young in the faith, is what Jesus calls us to do.

But Christ also says, “Feed my sheep.” Caring for those who are mature in the faith is also part of feeding the sheep because you and I need to have a faith that grows to meet the situations in which we find ourselves.

A farmer was pointing out to his friend his thriving crops and healthy livestock. His companion was especially impressed with the beautiful and healthy

sheep in the pasture. He had seen the same breed before, but never such attractive animals. Curious he asked the farmer how he had managed to raise such out-standing sheep. The answer was straightforward, “My friend, I just take very good care of the lambs.” Christ takes very good care of His lambs.

You and I are called to share in the task of taking good care of the lambs and sheep of God. The lambs of God makes you think of children.

They are indeed Christ’s lambs. The question is are we as parents feeding our children Christ? Is the Word of God taught in the home? Is prayer a habitual practice? Are we feeding their bodies but starving their souls?

We read in Deuteronomy 6:6-9, “ And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.”

“The lambs of God” describes those who are not children but are young in the faith. You may be older in age but young in the faith. You may be young of age and older in the faith. We are all at different levels in our sanctification.

You, who are more mature in the faith of Christ Jesus, are called to walk with those whose journey with Christ is just beginning. We must care for the flock of Christ.

Is there someone you are sharing the Christian journey with? Do the two of you meet weekly to discuss God’s work in your life? Do you find that ministry is an encouragement to both of you?

Care for God’s people includes both young and old in the flock

3. Care for God’s people involves feeding the sheep.

Feeding the sheep is to take them to graze on a hillside or mountain where there is fresh grass for them to eat.

Sheep will graze for an average of seven hours per day, mostly in the hours around dawn and in the late afternoon, near sunset. In order to maintain a good and healthy flock, the sheep must eat the right kind of food.

So it is true in the life of God's people. We must feed our souls. This includes following diets that will nourish and strengthen us in the Lord. Junk in will lead to junk out and lead to scrawny and sick sheep. Sermons that focus on man and entertainment starve the sheep and leave them anemic and weak.

Charles Spurgeon saw the evil of not feeding on Christ. He wrote an article entitled, "*Feeding Sheep or Amusing Goats?*" Spurgeon observes, "An evil (amusement or entertainment) is in the professed camp of the Lord, so gross in its impudence, that the most shortsighted can hardly fail to notice it during the past few years. It has developed at an abnormal rate, even for evil. It has worked like leaven until the whole lump ferments. The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the church that part of their mission is to provide entertainment for the people, with a view to winning them.

We read in Ephesians 4:11-12, "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers .., for the work of the ministry." Where do entertainers come in? The Holy Spirit is silent concerning them. Were the prophets persecuted because they amused the people or because they refused? The concert has no martyr roll.

The mission of amusement fails to effect the end desired. It works havoc among young converts. Let the careless and scoffers, who thank God because the church met them halfway, speak and testify. Let the heavy laden who found peace through the concert not keep silent! Let the drunkard to whom the dramatic entertainment has been God's link in the chain of the conversion, stand up!

There are none to answer. The mission of amusement produces no converts. The need of the hour for today's ministry is believing scholarship joined with earnest spirituality, the one springing from the other as fruit from the root. The need is biblical doctrine, so understood and felt, that it sets men on fire."

The food that enters the mind must be watched as closely as the food that enters the body.

Paul echoes this truth in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

What are we feeding our minds? What are we watching on television? What are we surfing on the internet?

John MacArthur writes, “People no longer ask “Is it **true?**” but “**Does it work?**” and “**How will it make me feel?**” Those latter two questions serve as a working definition of truth in our society that rejects the concept of absolute divine truth. Truth is whatever works and produces positive emotions. Sadly, such pragmatism and emotionalism has crept even into theology.

The church is often more concerned about whether something will be divisive or offensive than whether it is biblically true...Too many people go to church not to think or reason about the truths of Scripture, but to get their weekly spiritual high; to feel that God is still with them. Such people are spiritually unstable because they base their lives on feeling rather than on thinking...Salvation involves the transformation of the mind.”

I would add that many people in the church are spiritually starving themselves to death because they are not feeding their souls with Christ and His Word.

Care for God’s people involves feeding the sheep.

In closing, Christ tells Peter to care for my flock. Care for God’s people involves the ability to forgive. It includes caring for both young and old in the flock. And it involves feeding the sheep. Is your soul healthy? Are you feeding your heart and mind with Christ and His Word? Or are you feeding the flesh and your sin? May the Lord help all of us to take care of our souls. Let us pray.