

Dear Friends,

In every area of His life, Jesus, according to the New Testament, lived a perfect example for us to follow in our discipleship. The closer we walk to His example the more we shall glorify the Lord and not ourselves. In the symbolism of the Good Shepherd parable, Jesus literally lays Himself down between His sheep and any adversary or threat. Are we willing to so lay our lives on the line to serve and protect

our brothers and sisters in the faith? Or do we invest most of our spiritual energy protecting and watching out for our personal interest?

When I read the passage from 1 Peter 2:21-25 this week, the lesson's emphasis on Jesus as our example hit my mind with fertile thought. If we assess our own words, thoughts, and deeds over the last two years--or any past time for that matter--against Jesus' personal conduct as taught in this lesson, how would we measure up? And, if we do not measure up, what is our reaction? Ignore the point, say, "Oh well, no one else measures up either. Big deal." Or do we spend some time in prayer, asking the Lord to give us wise grace to be more dedicated to Him and His example, to practice it more faithfully tomorrow than we did yesterday?

Sadly, the Christian community in our day has drunken deeply the arsenic Kool-Aid of this world's "You hate me--I have the same right to hate you, and I intend to exercise that right. I hate you!" Where is Jesus' "Turn the other cheek"? influence in this community that claims to follow Him? We should soberly consider the long-term implications of this erosion at the heart of American Christianity. Consider the following quote from Alexis de Tocqueville.

"French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, after visiting America in 1831, said "I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests—and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning— and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution—and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!"

I fear we American Christians have fallen prey to the "Tail wagging the dog," to thinking our greatness resides in a political party and not in our churches. So thinking, many churches are rapidly becoming more a political interest group than a Christian Church. And with that shift, they voluntarily surrender the very power that de Tocqueville saw as the key to our greatness.

Lord help us,
Joe Holder

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, Who Died and Arose for His Sheep

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father. (John 10:17-18 KJV 1900)

Every Easter season you will read various ideas regarding the death of Jesus. Did the Jews kill Him? Did the Romans kill Him? Scripture lays guilt on both for His death. (Acts 4:27 KJV) The Jews, captive to Rome, could not execute capital punishment, but they did everything in their power to coerce the Romans to crucify Jesus, and the Romans reluctantly agreed. (Matthew 27:23-24 KJV) However, the debate regarding who was responsible for Jesus' death misses the important point of the crucifixion narrative in Scripture. Jesus ignored the senseless debate in our study passage and took us to the one truth worthy of our study. Had Jesus not intended to give His life for His people, His "Sheep," the Jews and Romans could not have touched Him.

Therefore doth my Father love me. Notice the language carefully. Jesus did not say that the Father started loving Him because of His willingness to die for His sheep. His tender heart for the sheep provided one of an endless series of occasions for the Father to affirm and to manifest His love for Jesus, the Son.

Rather than question who killed Jesus, a more edifying Biblical question might be to ask, "Who raised Jesus from the dead?" Scripture affirms—

1. The Father raised Jesus. (Acts 2:24, 32, 3:15, 3:26 KJV)
2. The Holy Spirit raised Jesus. (Romans 8:11 KJV)
3. Jesus raised Himself. Affirmed by His words in this passage.

Scripture affirms that God in Trinity, Father, Son/Word, and Holy Spirit, is fully and wholly agreed and cooperates in everything that God is and does. In certain activities, each "Person" may appear in the lead, but God wholly works as one in everything which He does. (1 John 5:7 KJV. Any interpretation of this verse that fails to fully affirm both "**...there are three**" and "**...these three are one**," fails to honor the Trinitarian truth of the verse. "Crowned with Glory," Thomas Holland, also defends the KJV wording of the verse based on first century Greek grammar. Among many others, John Gill defends the KJV wording of the verse based on several ancient quotations of it in the Church Fathers)

Occasionally believers depict the Father as a rigid, harsh, and demanding Judge, and the Son as the merciful pleading Advocate for His people. No. Scripture teaches that the Father, no less than the Son/Word or the Holy Spirit eternally loves and provides for His people.

...because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. Jesus directly rejects the various ideas that He was helpless in His death. Had He not chosen to lay down His life voluntarily, all the Jews and Romans in Judah could not have harmed Him.

Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53 KJV)

At no time was Jesus ever a helpless victim of wicked men. He voluntarily did what He needed to do for the ultimate, the eternal security of His "Sheep," His "People." (Matthew 1:21 KJV) Further, He surrendered His life, fully knowing that He would "...**take it again**," that He would rise from the dead.

No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. Two words in first century Greek language were commonly translated "Power" in the New Testament. One word refers to raw power or ability. The other refers to authority. In this verse, the word for **authority** was used. Jesus made that point in the verse. "*This **commandment** have I received of my Father.*" What Jesus did throughout His "Incarnation," His time as a man on earth, was fully agreed between Him and the Father.

In the two verses highlighted in this study, Jesus states that He lays down His life and that He shall reclaim it. Even death cannot hold Him in its grip. In the verses, He said nothing about why He chose to do this, but He clearly stated His reasons in the context of the lesson.

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. (John 10:11 KJV 1900)

Whatever Jesus did He did with a selfless motive, for others, not for His personal gain. His motive for doing what He did was never His emotions, sadly the pattern with so many broken humans who think they can chase their fleshly emotions and still please the Lord. The idea of a caring shepherd literally lying on the ground across the doorway of the sheepfold so that no sheep could escape, and no one could harm the sheep unless they dealt with him was never more exhibited than at Calvary. A shepherd who dies for his flock saved them from a devastating loss. However, a dead shepherd offers no ongoing protection to the sheep. Our study passage anticipates that problem. Not only did Jesus die for His sheep, but He also arose from the dead to continue His personal care of them.

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. (1 Peter 2:21-25 KJV 1900)

Not only is Jesus our "Good Shepherd," but He is also our perfect example, "...*that ye should follow his steps.*" Does it matter if we follow His example or choose to ignore it and act in the opposite manner? Study Hebrews 12:5-15. Can you tell the difference between the Lord's blessings and His chastening? If you ever experienced chastening, you know the answer to this question.

In the very act of dying for His people, Jesus leaves us, His "Sheep," a godly example for how we should interact with other "Sheep" in our spiritual family. What is this example that Jesus set for us? Not only did He die a selfless death, but He suffered on behalf of others. First, how much are we willing to do for others without any benefit for ourselves? Are we even willing to consider such suffering? And in Jesus' example, how much are we willing, literally so, to suffer on behalf of others and not for any personal gain to ourselves? That is the precise measure of His example. Will we follow it or ignore it?

Secondly, He "...**did no sin.**" How do we define sin? Do we limit sin to those gross sins of fleshly indulgence? Scripture does not so limit the meaning of sin. Consider this Old Testament example.

Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way: Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king. (1 Samuel 12:23-25 KJV)

When should we pray for each other? Or a better question; when should we **not** pray for each other? Have you ever neglected such prayer for your brothers and sisters in the faith? If so, according to this passage, you not only sinned against them, but you also sinned against the Lord by that neglect. The scope of this thing called sin is far broader than we'd like to make it. Consider this New Testament lesson.

*And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for **whatsoever is not of faith is sin.** (Romans 14:23 KJV, emphasis added)*

How can you measure what is of faith and what is not? Simple. Anything we do or consider doing that is **not** taught in Scripture, or anything we say or do that contradicts what Scripture does teach cannot be of faith. Faith only obeys and respectfully submits to the Lord. It never rebels or ignores His ways for our own.

...neither was guile found in his mouth. What is "Guile"? The word refers to dishonest or subtle conduct intended to mislead or to deceive. For believers in Jesus any representation of our convictions that are not honest and transparent contradict Jesus' example of refusing to allow communications of any kind with guile.

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again. In today's hate-filled culture, many professing Christians have followed the hate example of this world and ignored Jesus' example. Disagree with them, and they immediately feel justified in hating you—and often in openly showing that hatred. I pray for a day when professing Christians will respect their Lord and His example more than they enslave themselves to the hatred and sin of this world.

...when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously. How do we react when we experience any form or degree of suffering, especially if it relates to our faith? Sadly often, we respond with our fleshly character and with our own threats. What did Jesus do? He did not threaten at all. Instead, He used the threats and anger of this world to commit Himself all the more to the Father. **He trusted the ultimate judgment of the Father far more than He reacted to the temporary and superficial judgment of sinful men.**

In today's twisted culture of contention and divisiveness over grace, **what is the impact of your life and actions on your corner of this world?** Do your actions and words contribute to healing, forgiveness, and grace? That is the Jesus example.

Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man. (Colossians 4:6 KJV)

So someone disagrees with you regarding a vaccine, a mask, or contemporary political issues. None of this—nothing whatever—justifies our ignoring Jesus' example and responding with ungraceful anger or resentment. We need this verse daily.

Elder Joe Holder