

The Church's Reliance on Christ

“Without me ye can do nothing.” **IN THE CLOSING MONTHS** and days of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he sought especially to prepare his disciples for the impending fact that he would soon depart from their presence. At the same time, he taught them that, although he would be leaving them, they would still need to rely on him—more so, in fact, than when he had been with them in person. To more fully explain this to the disciples and his footstep followers throughout the Gospel Age, Jesus gave two important parables—The good shepherd and his sheep, and the vine and the branches.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The parable of the good shepherd is recorded in John 10:1-16, and was most likely given by Jesus three to six months prior to his crucifixion. Unlike many of his earlier parables, there is no particular story line given in this account. Rather, Jesus uses

commonly known circumstances and practices of his day to illustrate the intended lessons for his disciples. Indeed, the symbolisms of a shepherd and sheep, as used in the Bible, go back to Old Testament times.

Sheep, as spoken of symbolically in the Scriptures, generally are used to depict and emphasize certain characteristics of God's chosen people, and their relationship to him. Not all the qualities of sheep enter into this symbolism, but some do. A sheep is a docile animal, and readily led by a shepherd with whom it is acquainted. It is also very dependent upon the care of the shepherd. This was particularly true of sheep in the Middle East during Bible times.

David, who had been a shepherd, recognized the beauty and power of this symbolism. In the 23rd Psalm, he referred to the Lord, the God of Israel, as "my shepherd." Because the Lord was his "shepherd," David knew that he would be bountifully cared for in the "green pastures" of God's love. This was true of all the faithful of the nation of Israel. Together they were the Lord's flock, daily experiencing the tender care of their heavenly Shepherd.

It is proper, then to think of Almighty God as the great, Chief Shepherd of his people. When he sent his only begotten Son, Jesus, into the world at his First Advent, God represented him as the Good Shepherd. However, there were not many in the nation of Israel who received Jesus as sent from God, nor as their shepherd. "He came unto his own, and his own," as a nation, "received him not." (John 1:11) Some did, however, and these, being separated from the others, became the nucleus of a

new “little flock,” recognizing Jesus and following him as their “shepherd.”—John 1:12; Luke 12:32

OUT FROM THE LAW

Over a period of many centuries, these “sheep” of the Israelitish fold had become restrained by the terms of the Law Covenant. For Jesus to become their “shepherd” and lead them forth into the green pastures of the Father’s love, it was necessary that a release from this bondage be attained. Jesus accomplished this by giving his life for the sheep—by dying as their Redeemer and Savior. He says in the parable, “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.”—John 10:11

Jesus, by virtue of his sacrifice on behalf of the sheep, became the “door of the sheep.” (vs. 7) He was the means by which one would now enter the sheepfold of God, rather than by the old Law Covenant arrangement. By giving his life for the sheep, Jesus redeemed them from death, something the Law could not do, and thus he released them from bondage to the Law. In addition, he demonstrated his love for the sheep and his genuine interest in their welfare. To the sheep this is very important, for it proves to them that they can have confidence in such a shepherd. By contrast, one pretending to be a shepherd, but not willing to lay down his life for the sheep, is not to be trusted.

In the parable, Jesus explains that when the “good shepherd” calls to his flock, “the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, . . . for they know not the voice of strangers.” (vss. 4,5) It was true in Jesus’ day that sheep had this keen awareness of their shepherds. Not only

did they know the shepherd's voice, but the shepherd knew the name of each sheep in his flock. Under this intimate relationship, the sheep had full confidence in their shepherd and would follow him at all times.

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

The "voice" of the "good shepherd" in Jesus' day was the voice of truth. The truth then was the great fact that the promises of God pertaining to the coming of a Redeemer and Messiah were being fulfilled through Jesus. While the scribes and Pharisees argued over trifles, and displayed their hypocritical holiness by long prayers on the street corners, Jesus was preaching that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and demonstrating the coming blessings of the kingdom by his many miracles. The wholesomeness of his message inspired confidence in the hearts of the "Israelites indeed" of his time, and in that message they recognized the voice of the Good Shepherd.

The voice of the "good shepherd" today is still the voice of truth, which is found in the great fundamentals of God's great plan of the ages. This "voice" speaks of the wisdom, justice, love, and power of the Creator, and gives assurance of his design to bless all the families of the earth through Christ and his faithful consecrated followers of the Gospel Age, the church. It is a glorious message, and we feel secure in being a part of the "flock" that hears, recognizes, and follows it as we journey in the narrow way toward the heavenly kingdom.

The voice of truth spoken by our Good Shepherd should both give us confidence in our standing as

sheep, and also serve as a unifying influence among the flock as a whole. Complicated interpretations of obscure portions of God's Word may intrigue some of the sheep for a little while. However, they can easily lead to a spirit of separation in the fold, with certain ones feeling that they have perhaps advanced beyond others. The voice of the "good shepherd" never leads in this direction.

"HIRELING" NOT A TRUE SHEPHERD

The "good shepherd" is more interested in the welfare of all his flock than in himself. This is why Jesus laid down his life for his sheep. Undershepherds who do not have this same interest are not true representatives of Jesus. One who is desirous of securing a following for himself, regardless of the needs of the flock as a whole, is not a true shepherd. He is serving for his own gain, and is styled by Jesus a "hireling."

In verses 12 and 13 of John 10, Jesus explains that a "hireling" shepherd is one who flees when the sheep are in danger of being scattered and destroyed by wolves. He does nothing to protect his flock in their time of peril, because he "careth not for the sheep," but only for his own interests. A true shepherd will do all he can to protect the sheep. He will lay down his life doing this, even as Jesus did, if necessary. As an undershepherd, representing Jesus, his own interests will always be secondary to those of whom he serves.

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

In the parable, Jesus states that the reason he would lay down his life for the sheep is because, "As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the

Father.” (vs. 15) This implies that he knew the Heavenly Father’s plan of redemption, and how divine love was manifested therein. Jesus and his Father were in complete accord in the carrying out of this plan of salvation.

Not only so, but Jesus’ love for the world was also the same as his Father’s love. With such a love motivating all that he said and did, he could be nothing less than a “Good Shepherd,” who would lay down his life for the sheep. The greater our knowledge of the Heavenly Father and of our Lord Jesus, the more firmly we will trust them, and the more enthusiastically we will follow the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Jesus further explained that the Father loved him because he laid down his life for the sheep. (vs. 17) During the centuries prior to Jesus’ First Advent, there had been many who alleged to represent God as servants of his people. However, for the most part these had sought their own interests, and had persecuted those prophets whom God specially sent to his people. These were, in Jesus words, “thieves and robbers” who had appeared as shepherds. (vs. 8) Once again, what a contrast was the attitude of Jesus, who gladly laid down his life for the sheep. It can be no wonder that the Father loved him.

OTHER SHEEP

Near the end of the parable, Jesus explained that he had “other sheep . . . which are not of this fold.” These also were to be gathered so that eventually there might be “one fold, and one shepherd.” (vs. 16) It has been suggested that this might be a reference to the Gentile “sheep” that later were to

be brought into the one fold with Jewish believers. While this explanation would seem to fit the circumstances, we believe that there is a larger application.

So far as the Gospel Age is concerned, there is just the one true flock, which is the “little flock” to whom it is the Father’s good pleasure to give a position of rulership with Jesus in his kingdom. (Luke 12:32) The previous nationality or other fleshly differences of any of these is unimportant to the Lord. To him there is “neither Jew nor Greek, . . . bond nor free, . . . male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”—Gal. 3:28

Jesus said, though, that there is to be another group of the Lord’s sheep, “not of this fold.” We might speak of this as the Messianic Age flock, in contrast to the Gospel Age flock. The Messianic Age flock is brought prominently to our attention in another parable of Jesus—the sheep and the goats, recorded in Matthew 25:31-46. This parable will be treated in a future article in the “Parables of Jesus” series. It is sufficient for our present consideration, however, to state that many things with respect to this “flock” are different, particularly with respect to the reward which they will receive at the end of the Messianic Age.

The “sheep” of Matthew 25 are “to inherit the kingdom” prepared for them “from the foundation of the world”—the earthly dominion given to Adam. However, as we have seen, the “little flock” of the present age is to receive a position of rulership in the Messianic kingdom. This kingdom will function for the purpose of restoring the willing and obedient of the human race to at-one-ment with their Creator. The reward of the Gospel Age “little flock”

will be spiritual, or heavenly, while the reward of the Messianic Age flock, the “other sheep” of John 10:16, will be earthly.

From the divine standpoint, however, these two groups of sheep will eventually be as one. Paul wrote of the “dispensation of the fulness of times” during which God would “gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth.” (Eph. 1:10) Thus, at the close of the Messianic kingdom work, there will be, as Jesus promised, “one fold, and one shepherd.”

THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

Whereas the parable of the good shepherd was spoken by Jesus a few months prior to his crucifixion, the lesson of the vine and the branches was given less than a day before his death, and is recorded in John 15:1-11. This account is not specifically identified as being a parable. However, similar to the parable of the good shepherd, Jesus used a well known occupation of his day—vineyard husbandry in this case—to bring important lessons to his disciples. Thus, being in harmony with the teaching method Jesus had used on many previous occasions, we feel it is not improper to speak of this lesson as a parable.

The parable of the vine and the branches was related by Jesus to his disciples in the “upper room” the night before he was crucified. The reports by Matthew, Mark, and Luke of Jesus’ final message to his disciples that night do not contain this parable. Indeed, John reports much which was omitted by the others. Thus, in the Lord’s providence, we have a number of precious truths brought to our

attention which otherwise we would not have had the privilege of enjoying.

The portions of Jesus' sermon in the upper room which are recorded by John emphasize his love for, and closeness to, those who have covenanted to walk in his footsteps of self-sacrifice. Jesus knew that a severe test was just ahead for his disciples, and he endeavored to prepare them for it by assuring them of his love and care, and also that the Heavenly Father loved them. Jesus knew that soon he would be leaving the disciples, but he assured them that he would return and receive them unto himself. He promised that in the meantime the Holy Spirit would be their comforter.—John 14:1-3,16,17

We may think of the parable of the vine and the branches as a further assurance of the Master's oneness with his disciples, his love for them, and their need to rely on him as the source of their spiritual strength and vitality. The importance of fruit-bearing is also a particular lesson emphasized by the parable.

Jesus begins with these words: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." (John 15:1,2) By referring to the Heavenly Father as the "husbandman" who cares for both the "vine" and the "branches," Jesus reflected his true spirit of humility, and emphasized that he came into the world, not to do his own works, but his Father's. Later in the parable, Jesus explained that it was the Heavenly Father who would be glorified by the fruit-bearing of the branches.—vs. 8

The branches cannot bear fruit of themselves, unless they “abide in the vine.” (vs. 4) Jesus clearly explained this symbolism: “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” (vs. 5) Thus, the footstep followers [branches] of Christ Jesus [the vine] who continually abide in him, are cared for by the Heavenly Father [the husbandman], to whom properly goes the credit and glory for the fruitage.

It is not essential that we consider every detail in connection with the growth of a vine and its branches as being pictorial. In this lesson, however, the importance of fruit-bearing is particularly stressed by Jesus. We might think of the sap and life-giving nutrients which flow through the vine and out into the branches as representing the energizing power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples. That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, and all who have come into Christ since that time by means of full consecration have received of this same power and influence which enables them to “bear much fruit.”

SPIRITUAL FRUITAGE

Paul wrote, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22,23) These righteous qualities are those possessed by our Heavenly Father, and by our Lord Jesus. As we permit the Holy Spirit to flow through our lives, this same fruitage should become evident in us.

If the Holy Spirit does not transform our lives, and we “beareth not fruit,” then, as Jesus declares in the parable, the Heavenly Father, as the husbandman, will remove us from the vine. If, however, we bear a measure of fruit, the husbandman prunes, or purges us that we might “bring forth more fruit.” (John 15:2) This pruning is accomplished by the various experiences which the Heavenly Father permits to come into our lives.

Such pruning may be the removal of certain earthly advantages, friendships, comforts, popularity, wealth, or other things which might tend to keep our minds and hearts from being centered on the Lord as they should be. Our Heavenly Father knows just what is needful and best for us. He knows what to “trim away” from our life, and what to leave, that we may bring forth the greatest amount of fruit.

FRUIT-BEARING TO GOD’S GLORY

The branches of a natural vine do not bear fruit for their own benefit, and this is also true of the branches of the vine which are in Christ. Jesus explained that the Heavenly Father is glorified by the fruit-bearing of the vine. To glorify God is the ultimate motive in all Christian endeavors. We can glorify God only by continually striving to do his will. An important facet of the divine will was expressed by Jesus when he said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”—Matt. 5:16

Here Jesus declares that we glorify God by letting our light shine. Actually, it is not our light, but the

Father's. It is his truth—his light. He has shined into our hearts by the Gospel message, and we have made this glorious truth our own. However, we are not to hold it selfishly merely for our own enjoyment, but to tell it out for the blessing of others. As we do this, motivated by love, it brings glory to our Heavenly Father.

This aspect of the Christian life is very closely associated with the matter of fruit-bearing. Like Paul, the Apostle Peter also admonishes us to add certain types of fruitage to our foundation of faith: virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. Then he adds, "If these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren [Greek: inactive] nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."—II Pet. 1:4-8

If we have developed the character qualities mentioned by Paul and Peter—summed up by love in all its various aspects—we cannot be inactive or unfruitful in the use of the knowledge which we have received from the Heavenly Father. The resulting fruitage will manifest itself in an unselfish desire to impart blessings to others, and our best means of doing this is through the proclamation of the Truth. Such activity thus becomes evidence that as branches in the true vine we are bearing fruit—the fruit of the Spirit—which will not allow us to be idle as light-bearers in a dark world.

The Apostle Paul, in commending the brethren at Philippi for sending him gifts, added, "Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account." (Phil. 4:17) Here the good works of the Philippian brethren in ministering to the needs

of Paul are referred to by him as “fruit.” From this we see that while activity in the Lord’s work is not in itself the fruit of the Spirit, it is very closely allied to it, for the branches that bear fruit will inevitably be active in the Lord’s service. They will be doing good unto all as they have opportunity, “especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”—Gal. 6:10

ABIDING IN CHRIST

One of the most essential lessons of the parable of the vine and the branches is that we must abide in Christ if we are to bring forth the fruits of righteousness. Jesus said, “Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.” (John 15:3) We had to be cleansed in order to become a branch in the true vine, and Jesus said that this was accomplished through the word which he had spoken. This is a reference to the truth of God’s plan, and it is through the acceptance of this message—including the consecration of ourselves to do the Heavenly Father’s will—that we become “clean,” or “justified by faith” in Jesus’ blood, and therefore acceptable to God.—Rom. 5:1,9

While it is thus through the full surrender of ourselves to do God’s will as it is expressed through Christ that we become branches in the true vine, this spirit of full consecration must be maintained if we are to “abide” in the vine. We cannot bear the fruits of righteousness by doing God’s will today and our own will tomorrow. There must be an abiding surrender to the divine will in order that the Holy Spirit may have free direction in our minds and hearts. Only thus can we bring forth “much fruit.”

According to the parable, the branches which lose their place in the vine are gathered up and “cast . . . into the fire” to be burned. (John 15:6) This could refer to the possibility of being destroyed in the second death. In any case, it denotes destruction as branches. It may be similar to the “wood, hay,” and “stubble” Paul refers to as being burned in the day of the Lord, which represents a destruction of human works, but not necessarily of individuals. —I Cor. 3:11-15

ABIDING IN LOVE

To abide in Christ means to continue in his love, and in the Heavenly Father’s love. Jesus said, “As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.” (John 15:9) He then explained what it means to continue in his love, saying, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love.”—vs. 10

Jesus’ commandments are exacting, including the one that we are to love one another as he loved us. This calls for the laying down of our will, preferences, and life in the service of the Lord, the Truth, and the brethren. How wonderful is the return for doing so! It is to be loved by the Heavenly Father as Jesus was loved by him. To our imperfect, finite minds this is incomprehensible. How could the Heavenly Father love us as he loved Jesus? It is only because he views us, not as members of a fallen and dying race, but as branches in the true vine, which have been made “clean” through the blood of Christ.

Later that same night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed on behalf of his disciples that they

might be one with him, even as he was one with the Father. He prayed also that eventually the world might know that the Father loved his disciples as he loved the Son. He prayed that his disciples might ultimately be with him, even as he had promised, that they would behold his glory.—John 17:20-26

The Apostle John was evidently greatly impressed by the wonderful things which he heard the Master say that night in the upper room. Later, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John wrote, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.”—I John 3:1-3

In conclusion, let us continue, as sheep, to dwell under the care and guidance of our Good Shepherd, and also daily abide, as branches of the true vine, in Christ Jesus. In so doing, we will ever appreciate the need for reliance on the assistance and example of our Lord and Master each day, and in every experience. Accordingly, we will gain the approval and “well done” of the Heavenly Father, our loving Chief Shepherd and caring Husbandman. ■