

WHEN THE WORLD IS ON FIRE

And Other Evangelistic Messages

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Feeding Sheep

I am afraid that at times we pick on Peter too much. We blame him too much. Perhaps it is because it makes us feel a bit better over our own defalcations to know that even Peter fell, denied his Lord, then came back, was forgiven, was reinstated to his apostolic position.

I am not quite certain in my own mind that Peter did wrong by going fishing. He had to make a living.

There was his family to feed. Perhaps the others who went with him were looking for guidance from him in this, as they seemed to do in so many things. After all they had to keep on living. What was so terribly wrong with his going fishing? Should he have stayed in Jerusalem, as he did later to wait for the coming of the Comforter? I cannot believe that he went out on the lake for a lark, for a picnic.

He was disturbed, uncertain, probably unhappy. The memory of his denial was bitter to the taste. Anything to occupy his mind and time, to distract his aching heart, was welcome. Fishing was what he knew best. He went to it. There might even have been in his mind the glimmering of a thought that JESUS would appear there again, as He had done before, on the Sea of Galilee.

Commentators, Bible teachers, preachers have often said that the reason no fish were caught that night was because GOD was punishing them for fishing when they should have been praying. That I do not believe either. It was probably that the fish just were not biting, not catchable that night. That was not the first time Peter had failed in a haul of fish. It is tiresome even for the amateur fisherman to bide the whim of the fish. How much more so was it for these who depended on the task for a living? They were probably discussing giving it up, going home. They had been out all night.

Then, as is so often the case with us in our work, at the end of the trial and failure, JESUS appeared. The rest was as great a miracle as any JESUS CHRIST ever performed. There was a miracle draught of fish, not only in the place where they had failed, but also in the number and size of the fish caught. The lesson caught. The Lord was still on hand, still in the miracle working business, still the Master of the universe, still able to supply all needs, still able to bring victory out of defeat.

He had the right to ask Peter the searching question, "**Lovest thou Me?**" Peter was humbled, once again stabbed awake by the graciousness of His Master. But he needed that question, and so

do you, and so do I. "**Lovest thou Me?**" is our test as much as it was the test of Peter.

Here then is the mind of the Spirit in this. "**Lovest thou Me?**" That is first - then, the commission, the command, the constraint. To love JESUS, then to love for Him, with Him, let Him love through us a world that is desperately in need of love, His love, our love.

W. Griffith Thomas has well said that Christianity is CHRIST. That is better than good - for all of us. Only of Christianity can this be said. Christianity is not so much a creed, or a course of conduct, or a ritualistic practice.

It is primarily a life, pre-eminently the life of the Lord JESUS CHRIST lived out in us, lived out in the power of the Spirit by us. To be a Christian is to be Christopher, a Christ-bearer. Paul said it better than I can:

"For me to live is Christ." "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me, and gave himself for me." That is loving JESUS. That is living JESUS.

The best of us, the most aesthetically, spiritually sensitive of us, cannot fall in love with a book (not even the Bible), or with an organization (not even the church), or a creed (not even the creed of Christendom), but we can fall in love with a Person.

Henry Drummond truly said that Christianity is falling in love with Christ, then doing what you please. But when you or I fall in love with JESUS, we shall not do what we please, but what He pleases. That is the safety valve for the Christian in this world. "**The love of Christ constraineth us,**" and the constraint is the curb to our appetites, the bit on our souls, the good against which we do not kick.

I. The Lord has the right to ask us also, "**Lovest thou Me?**"

It is the absolute test. There is nothing before it, nothing ahead of it. This is the Christian's acid test - to do for love of CHRIST, for the glory of the Lord, to please Him, to make Him happy, to advance the interests of His kingdom, to fill up the cup of His sufferings, to share His heartache, His heartbreak, His unutterable longing for the souls of men.

CHRIST's love led Him into Gethsemane, then to Calvary. Our love for Him must not hesitate at the Blood-sweat, our Blood-sweat, at the crown of thorns, at the agonies of a Cross. Love is the costliest thing in the world; it always has been and always shall be. Love knows neither a royal road nor a bed of roses.

A proper answer to the question, "**Lovest thou Me?**" will do more to conquer sin, to overcome selfishness, to mold Christian character than anything else in the program of the Christian life. It is the worthiest motive, the holiest ambition, the most God-honoring ambition. There can be nothing wrong with it.

It is clean, clear, wholesome. It challenges to heroic sacrifice, to utter devotion, to living, to going, to giving, to sending. It knows no bounds, stops at no cost, hesitates at no pain. It is the

trumpet call to battle, the drum beat to the charge, the challenge to every worthwhile advance with the armies of the Cross.

For love of CHRIST

- more heroic deeds have been engaged in,
- more Blood has been shed,
- more lives have been given,
- more ventures have been launched,
- more money has been raised,
- more pioneers have gone out,
- more enemies have been overcome,
- more dangers have been dared,
- more undertakings have been initiated and brought to function
- in short, more has been accomplished than for any and every other motive put together.

Love for CHRIST

- has belted the globe,
- bridged the oceans,
- tunneled the towering mountains,
- braved the rushing, swollen torrents.

Love for CHRIST

- has braved the jungles,
- endured the hardships,
- melted the stoniest hearts,
- subdued the fiercest tribes.

Love for CHRIST is the key, the "Open Sesame," the rule, the instruction, the drill regulations of and for all missionary endeavor.

Love for CHRIST

- is the church builder,
- the personal soul winner,
- the most winsome preacher,
- the most powerful evangelist,
- the choicest rewarder,
- the sweetest satisfier,
- the most glorious sustainer.

Love for CHRIST

- is the sweetener of toil,
- the supplier of zeal,
- the source of all enthusiasm,

- the crowner of all devotion.

Love for CHRIST is

- the dispeller of doubts,
- the discharger of fears,
- the dismitter of misgivings,
- the harmonizer of hearts.

Love for CHRIST is

- the eye opener,
- the mind filler,
- the heart enlarger,
- the soul inspirer.

Love for CHRIST says: "Oh! to set Him upon a glorious high throne, and to crown Him with many crowns; to prostrate ourselves at His feet, and to bring others to be prostrate at His feet, too, that He might be King in Jeshurun, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, reigning in our souls forever and ever."

Love for CHRIST! There is nothing before that. There is nothing beyond that. There is nothing to compare with that. That is Christianity, the beginning, the end, and the middle thereof. That is loyalty to the highest ideal an earth - the will or the Master. That is the mightiest motive to service. That is the crowning reward in service.

II. But, we go on. "**Lovest thou Me?**" is the test of our conviction, the ultimate test.

Love is the backbone, the brain, the heart, the soul, the breath, the Blood or our convictions. Love makes the difference. Love for CHRIST.

- Be you ever so orthodox,
- ever so gifted,
- ever so moral,
- ever so generous,

if you have no overwhelming love, you are sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

- Prayer without love is an insult to GOD.
- Preaching without love is an abomination unutterable.
- Giving without love will acceptably serve neither GOD nor man.
- Study without love is a weariness of the flesh.
- Witnessing without love is as ineffective as shooting at an elephant with a child's pea-gun.

Love is

- mightier than force,

- greater than talent,
- the essence of beauty,
- more forceful than personality,
- more advantageous than the most exhausting activity.

Love for CHRIST is the best teacher, the choicest expositor, the most effective illuminator.

Love for CHRIST will cause the Bible to become alive, cause its precepts to shine and sparkle as the jewels of Heaven that they actually are.

Love for Christ, naught else, made me a Christian, putting me under the silken chains of debt to it forever.

Had the preacher who led me to CHRIST spoken to me about Heaven, had he warned me about hell, had he pointed sin to me in all of its bleak, blackness, he never would have won me.

But he told me about JESUS,

he told me about JESUS loving me,
he told me about JESUS living for me,
he told me about JESUS dying for me,
he told me about JESUS living again for me,
he told me about JESUS ascended into glory, there to intercede for me

- and he broke my stubborn, sinful, selfish heart.

I was enthralled by the love of CHRIST, which evoked within me a never extinguished love for CHRIST.

Love for CHRIST will challenge almost any soul with the loving, grateful acknowledgment of His atoning death. It will serve better than fear, achieve more than any other constraint.

III. "**Lovest thou Me?**" is a test of character. Character is personality in the dark. Love for CHRIST is the outshining of the indwelling Redeemer. It will show up always, everywhere. It cannot be hidden. It will break out in fervency, in enthusiasm, in self-sacrifice.

Sacrifice and love are synonymous. Love is another name for sacrifice. There is no such thing as love without sacrifice. Sacrifice is cheapened if it is motivated by anything other than love.

Sacrifice that is compelled is abortive, a misnomer, an abomination. Sacrifice made for the sake of popularity, promotion, privilege, is an insult to GOD. Sacrifice that has about it even the slightest taint or thought or touch of self is not acceptable at the foot of the Cross. That is the chief reason why so much of what we term sacrifice is so barren, so powerless, so fruitless.

"**The love of Christ**" is the test of character.

- It constrains our abstaining from the world.

- It impels us to clean, holy, surrendered living.

The heart of JESUS, the holiness of JESUS, the happiness of JESUS, are the standards. What would JESUS have me to do? is the criterion.

The entire matter of sin is viewed from the standpoint of the love of CHRIST:

- Any place we cannot take Him with us is no place for us.
- Anything we do in which we cannot have His full approval, yea, His best blessing, is "out of bounds" for the child of GOD.
- Anything we cannot shout in His presence is best left unsaid.

CHRIST JESUS is the mirror. The love of CHRIST is the yardstick, and therein lies safety, certainty, enjoyment, peace, power, prosperity of soul.

These are universals for the home, for the school, for the market place, for the preacher, the deacon, the pew Christian, always, everywhere, in all conditions. There is no exception to this. There never has been. There is not now. There never shall be. We are not left in doubt, to grovel, to seek, to wonder, to graze, to test. Here is the love of CHRIST. That suffices for all of us. Anything short of that begs the question, is not acceptable.

"**Lovest thou Me?**" is also the one true, sure test of our consecration. I know a little of what it means to face criticism. My being a Jew is both for and against me. People do come to "hear the Jew preach CHRIST," and many of them, Jews and Gentiles, are saved. It is still a bit extraordinary and drawing.

It is against me because some people are ever looking for an unholy motive, generally the matter of finances. These critics forget the fact that in twenty years of ministering around the globe there has never been the slightest taint of seeking monetary rewards, never a word said about how much the honorarium should be - these things are always handled by the local committees. Perhaps even if they knew these things, their tongues would still keep on wagging.

There has not been enough money coined, minted, or printed to pay me for the agony of one revival, for the crushing load of one plea for souls. GOD forgive me for defending myself, when I need no defense, for speaking as speaks a fool. The love of CHRIST is the constraint that drives me by day and spurs me by night. Oh, to burn out for CHRIST JESUS and, in His Name, for the souls of men.

Oh, to lay some trophies of sacrificial devotion at His pierced feet, to thank Him for having first loved me by winning souls to Him. There is nothing that can possibly compare with this urge.

Popularity, promotion, prestige, possessions, all pale into ashes and smoke in the wind when placed by the side of the Blood-proved love of CHRIST.

What in all the universe can be compared to the love of CHRIST, the ever satisfying, eternally increasing love of CHRIST?

When the whirling spheres comprising the galaxies of the far-off worlds shall have fallen from their sockets, when the glamour of the Milky Way shall have paled into the hoariness of exhausted age, when the blazing sun shall have grown dim with the passing of the centuries, when the brilliant moon shall have donned the shroud of inevitable death, the love of CHRIST shall have just begun to shed its golden beams into the hearts of the believing children of GOD.

Serve the Lord, and the more you serve Him the more you shall be criticized, not too much by outsiders, but - oh, the tragedy of the thought - by those who claim to know CHRIST. But, keep on, for love of CHRIST, keep on serving. It is the love of CHRIST wherein you find your only satisfaction.

Doctor Nowlin preached for A. C. Dixon in the Moody Memorial Church for four consecutive Sundays. On the last Saturday Mrs. Nowlin called her husband from their home in Lexington, Kentucky.

"Husband," she said, "our baby daughter Annie is ill. I took her to the doctor and he told me to call you to come home as soon as you can arrange it. He would not tell me what is wrong with our baby."

"All right, darling. I'll be home Monday by the first train I can take out of Chicago."

Monday the preacher made arrangements to have the family physician see the child Tuesday morning.

The doctor again examined the baby thoroughly and excused Mrs. Nowlin and the child from the room.

"Preacher," spoke the doctor, "Annie is very, very ill."

"Wait, doctor," said the preacher, "my wife must hear this also."

They called the mother and child back into the room. Again the physician spoke softly, hesitatingly, regretfully.

"Annie has a growth in her side. There must be an operation. The chances are all against its success, but if we do not operate, she will die. With an operation she at least stands a chance."

"Doctor, we are all in your hands. If Annie needs an operation, we must go through with it."

"All right, take her home. Enjoy her for a week. Bring her back next Monday and we shall operate."

The week sped past. Sadly they prepared for the ordeal.

Annie could not be found until she came carrying in her arms a foul, vermin covered kitten. In spite of Annie's protests, the kitten was taken out of doors. Annie was operated on - and died the same day. The tiny, precious body was buried. The house seemed empty, cheerless. Annie's running feet, cheerful prattle, shouts of laughter were gone. The family - father, mother, ten-

year-old son - were in the kitchen eating quietly.

Suddenly the boy dashed out the back door shouting, "Mamma, there is Annie's kitten!" The same filthy, diseased kitten was fondled, fed, petted. She was Annie's kitten.

These we are trying to reach for the Lord are CHRIST's kittens.

For His sake, let us sacrifice for them. We ourselves were not any more worthy.

GOD forgive us preachers. We have sold our people on shallow loyalties. We have sold them on Sunday school loyalty, on church loyalty, on denominational loyalty, but, in too many cases, we have failed to sell them on loyalty to CHRIST. Loyalty to the person of CHRIST will bring with it loyalty to all the program of CHRIST.

The CHRIST, the love of CHRIST, the Cross of CHRIST, will do more than all the organizational activities combined, good as they are. No man willingly dies for a program. Nor are there too many who would joyously give their lives for an institution, the best of organizations.

Thousands have died for an ideal. Other thousands have given their lives for a vision, a dream, a hope. Still others have counted themselves fortunate in being able to die for a person, a leader. In CHRIST we have all our dream, our hope, our goal, our passion, our aspiration. To live for Him or to die for Him, either is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Where in all this glorious universe of ours, with its multitudes even of worthy causes, is there anything to compare with the service of the Redeemer, so breathtakingly satisfying here, so eternally rewarding hereafter?

To us also CHRIST JESUS comes with the words of this ageless plea stirring our hearts. "**Lovest thou Me? ... Feed My lambs Feed My sheep My sheep As My Father sent me, even so send I you.**"

- He wept over His sheep - shall we not weep over them?
- He prayed for His sheep - shall we not pray for them?
- He went out into the wilderness, into the desert dark and drear for His sheep - shall we not go out for them?
- He bled and died for His sheep - shall we not bleed and die for them?
- They crucified Him. They may crucify us.
- He prayed for them - "**Father, forgive them for they know not what they do**"; shall we not pray for them as their cruel words smite us and their cruel lips mock us?

If they did this to a green tree, should we complain of what they do to dry trees such as we are?

Thinking clearly, we know that it is not they but the legions of demons possessing them which snarl at us, seeking to be left alone. Note the difference in their feelings and actions toward us once they are saved.

We ought to feed the sheep not only because they belong to JESUS, but also because He has entrusted them to us. By Him, they have been made our responsibility.

- It is a great thing to be a professor in some eminent university.
- It is a great thing to mold a man's mind, a woman's mind.
- It is a great thing to develop character.
- It is a great thing to open the books of learning.
- It is a great thing to build scientific acumen.
- It is a great thing to unfold the mysteries of the universe.

But, my friends, the greatest contribution we can make to our fellow men, after leading them to CHRIST, is to feed them on this same Lord JESUS CHRIST,

- to build them up,
- to strengthen them in the Lord,
- to root them,
- to rest them,
- to haven them,
- to fold them in the assurance of GOD's eternal love.

This is our responsibility for which we shall give an accounting to JESUS CHRIST.

We must feed the sheep as a testimony of the worth of Christianity, of the availability for victorious living of the power of CHRIST. Sleek, well-fed sheep are a good witness to our claims for CHRIST.

IV. How are we going to feed the sheep?

First, we must ourselves be well fed on the Word of GOD. We must ourselves know the way to the still waters, the haven of rest to us in the darkest hours, the most distressing circumstances, there must be a place where we can find comfort and inspiration.

We must know what it means to turn to JESUS CHRIST for all our needs. Our sermons, our testimonies, our songs, our services will echo hollowly unless they come from our own personal experiences. It is only the Christian who has himself been fed who can feed others. That is the law of the Christian life. Saved to serve. Empowered to win. Fed to feed.

You cannot do much with a hungry sheep. You can do even less with a hungry Christian.

There are two ways of making a horse work. One is to give it whip and more whip. Another is to feed it oats and more oats. For a while you can drive church members into action. You can scold them into action for a period. You can rouse them to an emotional appeal by a moving story.

But if you want action, constant, continuous, conquering action . . .

- feed them the Word of GOD.
- Feed them on the love of CHRIST.
- Feed them on the revelations, the assurances, the promises of GOD's Word.

In feeding the sheep, we ourselves shall know the richness of the provisions of GOD. Had the Lord listened to the querulous disciples and sent the multitude away, the miracle of the loaves and the fishes would never have been performed. The crowd would have gone away hungry, but the disciples themselves would not have been fed.

This is our task - to feed CHRIST's sheep.

Despite the multiplicity of churches, of Sunday schools, of Christian activities, of religious programs, of an ocean of Christian literature, books, tracts, radio broadcasts, television programs, religious movies, this generation of Christians is a weak, sick, troubled, trembling, uncertain, staggering, easy prey for Satan's lot.

The answer to this plight is to go back to the appeal of our Redeemer, to heed and obey this unchanging, unchangeable Word - "**Feed My sheep.**"

When we feed them, they will in turn go out to find other lost, straying, hungry, shepherdless, fainting, scattered-abroad sheep and bring them also to the great Shepherd of our souls. In this you must be prepared to go hungry, to grow tired, to suffer stress and strain, to know sleepless nights and toil-filled days, to be buffeted by Satan and demon-possessed souls.

But the reward is great, and the toils of the journey will seem nothing when we came to the end of the way.

No greater reward can come to the Christian than to be used of the HOLY SPIRIT to gather in the sheaves, to bring them to the feet of our Redeemer.

In the Name of the Lord, sent of the Redeemer, endowed with the HOLY SPIRIT, let us then dedicate all we are and have to feed the sheep. It will enlarge our own souls, enlist the souls of others, enrapture sinners with the beauties of JESUS, exalt the CHRIST, the Son of GOD.

~ end of chapter 7 ~
