

The Good Shepherd: A Farewell Sermon

By George Whitefield

Sermon 59

(The last sermon which Whitefield preached in London, on Wednesday, August 30th, 1769, before his final departure to America)

John 10:27–28 — “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand.”

It is a common, and I believe, generally speaking, my dear hearers, a true saying, that bad manners beget good laws. Whether this will hold good in every particular, in respect to the affairs of this world, I am persuaded the observation is very pertinent in respect to the things of another: I mean bad manners, bad treatment, bad words, have been overruled by the sovereign grace of God, to produce, and to be the cause of, the best sermons that were ever delivered from the mouth of the God-man, Christ Jesus.

One would have imagined, that as he came clothed with divine effieience, as he came with divine credentials, as he speak as never man spake, no one should have been able to have resisted the wisdom with which he spake; one would imagine, they should have been so struck with the demonstration of the Spirit, that with one consent they should all own that he was ‘that prophet that was to be raised up like unto Moses.’ But you seldom find our Lord preaching a sermon, but something or other that he said was cavilled at; nay, their enmity frequently broke through all good manners. They often, therefore, interrupted him whilst he was preaching, which shows the enmity of their hearts long before God permitted it to be in their power to shed his innocent blood. If we look no further than this chapter, where he

presents himself as a good shepherd, one that laid down his life for his sheep; we see the best return he had, was to be looked upon as possessed or distracted; for we are told, that there was a division therefore again among the Jews for these sayings, and many of them said, 'He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him?' If the master of the house was served so, pray what are the servants to expect? Others, a little more sober-minded, said, 'These are not the words of him that hath a devil;' the devil never used to preach or act in this way; 'Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?' So he had some friends among these rabble. This did not discourage our Lord; he goes on in his work; and we shall never, never go on with the work of God, till, like our Master, we are willing to go through good and through evil report; and let the devil see we are not so complaisant as to stop one moment for his barking at us as we go along.

We are told, that our Lord was at Jerusalem at the feast of the dedication, and it was winter; the feast of dedication held, I think, seven or eight days, for the commemoration of the restoration of the temple and altar, after its profanation by Antiochus. Now this was certainly a mere human institution, and had no divine image, had no divine superscription upon it; and yet I do not find that our blessed Lord and Master preached against it; I do not find that he spent his time about this; his heart was too big with superior things; and I believe when we, like him, are filled with the Holy Ghost, we shall not entertain our audiences with disputes about rites and ceremonies, but shall treat upon the essentials of the gospel, and then rites and ceremonies will appear with more indifference. Our Lord does not say, that he would not go up to the feast, for, on the contrary, he did go there, not so much as to keep the feast, as to have an opportunity to spread the gospel-net; and that should be our method, not to follow disputing; and it is the glory of the Methodists, that we have been now forty years, and, I thank God, there has not been one single pamphlet written by any of our preachers, about the non-essentials of religion.

Our Lord always made the best of every opportunity; and we are told, 'he walked in the temple in Solomon's porch.' One would have thought the scribes and Pharisees would have put him in one of their stalls, and have complimented him with desiring him to preach: no, they let him walk in Solomon's porch. Some think he walked by himself, no body choosing to keep company with him. Methinks I see him walking and looking at the temple, and foreseeing within himself how soon it would be destroyed; he walked pensive, to see the dreadful calamities that would come upon the land, for not knowing the day of its visitation; and it was to let the world see he was not afraid to appear in public: he walked, as much as to say, Have any of you any thing to say to me? and he put himself in their way, that if they had any thing to ask him, he was ready to resolve them; and to show them, that though they had treated him so ill, yet he was ready to preach salvation to them.

In the 24th verse we are told, 'Then came the Jews round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us doubt?' They came round about him when they saw him walking in Solomon's porch; now, say they, we will have him, now we will attack him. And now was fulfilled that passage in the Psalms, 'they compassed me about like bees,' to sting me, or rather like wasps. Now, say they, we will get him in the middle of us, and see what sort of a man he is; we will see whether we cannot conquer him; they came to him, and they say, 'How long dost thou make us to doubt?' Now this seems a plausible question, 'How long dost thou make us to doubt?' Pray how long, sir, do you intend to keep us in suspense? Some think the words will bear this interpretation; Pray, sir, how long do you intend thus to steal away our hearts? They would represent him to be a designing man, like Absalom, to get the people on his side, and then set up himself for the Messiah; thus carnal minds always interpret good men's actions. But the meaning seems to be this, they were doubting concerning Christ; doubting Christians may think it is God's fault that they doubt, but, God knows, it is all their own. 'How

long dost thou make us to doubt?’ I wish you would speak a little plainer, sir, and not let us have any more of your parables. Pray let us know who you are, let us have it from your own mouth; ‘if thou be the Christ, tell us plainly;’ and I do not doubt, but they put on a very sanctified face, and looked very demure; ‘if thou be the Christ, tell us plainly,’ intending to catch him. If he do not say he is the Christ, we will say he is ashamed of his own cause; if he tells us plainly that he is the Christ, then we will impeach him to the governor, we will go and tell the governor that this man says he is the Messiah; now we know of no Messiah, but what is to jostle Caesar out of his throne. — The devil always wants to make it believed that God's people, who are the most loyal people in the world, are rebels to the government under which they live; ‘If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly.’ Our Lord does not let them wait long for an answer; honesty can soon speak: ‘I told you, and ye believed not; the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me.’ Had our Lord said, I am the Messiah, they would have taken him up; he knew that, and therefore he joined ‘the wisdom of the serpent’ with ‘the innocence of the dove;’ says he, I appeal to my works and doctrine, and if you will not infer from them that I am the Messiah, I have no further argument.

‘But,’ he adds, ‘ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep.’ He complains twice; for their unbelief was the greatest grief of heart to Christ: then he goes on in the words of our text, ‘My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand.’ My sheep hear my voice; you think to puzzle me, you think to chagrin me with this kind of conduct, but you are mistaken; you do not believe on me, because you are not of my sheep. The great Mr. Stoddard of New England, (and no place under heaven produces greater divines than New England), preached once from these words, ‘But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep;’ a very strange text to preach upon, to convince a congregation! Yet God so

blessed it, that two of three hundred souls were awakened by that sermon. God grant such success to attend the labors of all his faithful ministers.

‘My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.’ It is very remarkable, there are but two sorts of people mentioned in scripture. It does not say that the Baptists and Independents, nor the Methodists and Presbyterians; no, Jesus Christ divides the whole world into but two classes, sheep and goats. The Lord give us to see this morning to which of these classes we belong.

But it is observable, believers are always compared to something that is good and profitable, and unbelievers are always described by something that is bad, and good for little or nothing.

If you ask me why Christ's people are called sheep, as God shall enable me, I will give you a short, and I hope it will be to you an answer of peace. Sheep, you know, generally love to be together; we say a flock of sheep, we do not say a herd of sheep; sheep are little creatures, and Christ's people may be called sheep, because they are little in the eyes of the world, and they are yet less in their own eyes. O, some people think, if the great men were on our side, if we had king, lords, and commons on our side, I mean if they were all true believers, O if we had all the kings upon the earth on our side! Suppose you had: alas! alas! do you think the church would go on the better? Why, if it were fashionable to be a Methodist at court, if it were fashionable to be a Methodist abroad, they would go with a Bible or a hymn-book, instead of a novel; but religion never thrives under too much sun-shine. ‘Not many mighty, not many noble, are called, but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.’ Dr. Watts says, Here and there I see a king, and here and there a great man, in heaven, but their number is but small.

Sheep are looked upon to be the most harmless, quiet creatures that God hath made. O may God, of his infinite mercy, give us to know that we are his sheep, by our having this blessed temper infused into our hearts by the Holy Ghost. 'Learn of me,' saith our blessed Lord; what to do? To work miracles? No; 'Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart.' A very good man, now living, said once, if there be any particular temper I desire more than another, it is the grace of meekness, quietly to bear bad treatment, to forget and to forgive: and at the same time that I am sensible I am injured, not to be overcome of evil, but to have grace given me to overcome evil with good. To the honor of Moses, it is declared, that he was the meekest man upon earth. Meekness is necessary for people in power; a man that is passionate is dangerous. Every governor should have a warm temper, but a man of an unrelenting, unforgiving temper, is no more fit for government than Phaethon to drive the chariot of the sun; he only sets the world on fire.

You all know, that sheep of all creatures in the world are the most apt to stray and be lost; Christ's people may justly, in that respect, be compared to sheep; therefore, in the introduction to our morning service, we say, 'We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.' Turn out a horse, or a dog, and they will find their way home, but a sheep wanders about; he bleats here and there, as much as to say, Dear stranger, show me my way home again; thus Christ's sheep are too apt to wander from the fold; having their eye off the great Shepherd, they go into this field and that field, over this hedge and that, and often return home with the loss of their wool.

But at the same time sheep are the most useful creatures in the world; they manure the land, and thereby prepare it for the seed; they clothe our bodies with wool, and there is not the least part of a sheep but is useful to man. O my brethren, God grant that you and I may, in this respect, answer the character of sheep. The world says, because we preach faith we deny good works; this is the usual objection against the doctrine of imputed righteousness, but it is a slander, an impudent

slander. It was a maxim in the first reformers' time, that though the Arminians preached up good works, you must go to the Calvinists for them. Christ's sheep study to be useful, and to clothe all they can; we should labor with our hands, that we may have to give to all those that need.

Believers consider Christ's property in them; he says, 'my sheep.' O blessed be God for that little, dear, great word "My." We are his eternal election: "the sheep which thou hast given me," says Christ. They were given by God the Father to Christ Jesus, in the covenant made between the Father and the Son from all eternity. They that are not led to see this, I wish them better heads; though, I believe, numbers that are against it have got better hearts: the Lord help us to bear with one another where there is an honest heart.

He calls them 'My sheep;' they are his by purchase. O sinner, sinner, you are come this morning to hear a poor creature take 'his last farewell:' but I want you to forget the creature that is preaching, I want to lead you further than the Tabernacle: Where do you want to lead us? Why, to mount Calvary, there to see at what an expense of blood Christ purchased those whom he calls his own; he redeemed them with his own blood, so that they are not only his by eternal election, but also by actual redemption in time; and they were given to him by the Father, upon condition that he should redeem them by his heart's blood. It was a hard bargain, but Christ was willing to strike the bargain, that you and I might not be damned for ever.

They are his, because they are enabled in a day of God's power voluntarily to give themselves up unto him; Christ says of these sheep, especially, 'that they hear his voice, and that they follow him.' Will you be so good as to mind that! Here is an allusion to a shepherd; now in some places in scripture, the shepherd is represented as going after his sheep; 2 Sam 7:8, Ps 78:71. That is our way in England; but in the Eastern nations, the shepherds generally went before; they held

up their crook, and they had a particular call that the sheep understood. Now, says Christ, 'My sheep hear my voice.' 'This is my beloved Son,' saith God, 'hear ye him.' And again, 'The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and live.' Now the question is, what do we understand by hearing Christ's voice?

First, we hear Moses' voice, we hear the voice of the law; there is no going to Mount Zion but by the way of mount Sinai; that is the right straight road. I know some say, they do not know when they were converted; those are, I believe, very few. Generally, nay, I may say almost always, God deals otherwise. Some are, indeed, called sooner by the Lord than others, but before they are made to see the glory of God, they must hear the voice of the law; so you must hear the voice of the law before ever you will be savingly called unto God. You never throw off your cloak in a storm, but you hug it the closer; so the law makes a man hug close his corruptions, (Rom 7:7, 8, 9) but when the gospel of the Son of God shines into your souls, then they throw off the corruptions which they have hugged so closely. They hear his voice saying, Son, daughter, be of good cheer, thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee. 'They hear his voice;' that bespeaks the habitual temper of their minds. The wicked hear the voice of the devil, the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life; and Christ's sheep themselves attended to it before conversion; but when called afterwards by God, they hear the voice of a Redeemer's blood speaking peace unto them, they hear the voice of his word and of his Spirit.

The consequence of hearing his voice, and the proof that we do hear his voice, will be — to follow him. Jesus said unto his disciples, 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.' And it is said of the saints in glory, that 'they followed the Lamb whithersoever he went.' Wherever the shepherd turns his crook, and the sheep hear his voice, they follow him; they often tread upon one another, and hurt one another, they are in such haste in their way to heaven. Following Christ means following him through life, following him

in every word and gesture, following him out of one clime into another. 'Bid me come to thee upon the water,' said Peter: and if we are commanded to go over the water for Christ, God, of his infinite mercy, follow us! We must first be sure that the great Shepherd points his crook for us: but this is the character of a true servant of Christ, that he endeavors to follow Christ in thought, word, and work.

Now, my brethren, before we go further, as this is the last opportunity I shall have of speaking to you for some months, if we live; some of you, I suppose, do not choose, in general, to rise so soon as you have this morning; now I hope the world did not get into your hearts before you left your beds; now you are here, do let me entreat you to inquire whether you belong to Christ's sheep, or no. Man, woman, sinner, put thy hand to thy heart, and answer me. Didst thou ever hear Christ's voice so as to follow him, to give up thyself without reserve to him? I verily do believe from my inmost soul, (and that is my comfort, now I am about to take my leave of you,) that I am preaching to a vast body, a multitude of dear, precious souls, who, if it were proper for you to speak, would say, Thanks be unto God, that we can follow Jesus in the character of sheep, though we are ashamed to think how often we wander from him, and what little fruit we bring unto him. If that is the language of your hearts, I wish you joy; welcome, welcome, dear soul, to Christ. O blessed be God for his rich grace, his distinguishing, sovereign, electing love, by which he has distinguished you and me. And if he has been pleased to let you hear his voice, though the ministration of a poor miserable sinner, a poor, but happy pilgrim, may the Lord Jesus Christ have all the glory.

If you belong to Jesus Christ, he is speaking of you; for, says he, 'I know my sheep.' 'I know them;' what does that mean? Why, he knows their number, he knows their names, he knows every one for whom he died; and if there were to be one missing for whom Christ died, God the Father would send him down again from heaven to fetch him. 'Of all,' saith he, 'that thou hast given me, have I lost none.' Christ knows his sheep; he not only knows their number, but the words

speak the peculiar knowledge and notice he takes of them; he takes as much care of each of them, as if there were but that one single sheep in the world. To the hypocrite he saith, 'Verily, I know you not;' but he knows his saints, he is acquainted with all their sorrows, their trials, and temptations. He bottles up all their tears, he knows their domestic trials, he knows their inward corruptions, he knows all their wanderings, and he takes care to fetch them back again. I remember, I heard good Dr. Marryat, who was a good market-language preacher, once say at Pinner's hall, (I hope that pulpit will be always filled with such preachers), 'God has got a great dog to fetch his sheep back,' says he. Do not you know, that when the sheep wander, the shepherd sends his dog after them, to fetch them back again? So when Christ's sheep wander, he lets the devil go after them, and suffers him to bark at them, who, instead of driving them farther off, is made a means to bring them back again to Christ's fold.

There is a precious word I would have you take notice of, 'I know them,' that may comfort you under all your trials. We sometimes think that Christ does not hear our prayers, that he does not know us; we are ready to suspect that he has forgotten to be gracious; but what a mercy it is that he does know us. We accuse one another, we turn devils to one another, are accusers of the brethren; and what will support two of God's people when judged by one another but this, Lord, thou knowest my integrity, thou knowest how matters are with me?

But, my brethren, here is something better, here is good news for you; what is that? Say you: why, 'I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand.' O that the words may come to your hearts with as much warmth and power as they did to mine thirty-five years ago. I never prayed against any corruption I had in my life, so much as I did against going into holy orders so soon as my friends were for having me go: and bishop Benson was pleased to honor me with peculiar friendship, so as to offer me preferment, or do any thing for me. My friends wanted me to mount the church

betimes, they wanted me to knock my head against the pulpit too young; but how some young men stand up here and there and preach, I do not know how it may be to them; but God knows how deep a concern entering into the ministry and preaching, was to me. I have prayed a thousand times, till the sweat has dropped from my face like rain, that God, of his infinite mercy, would not let me enter the church before he called me to, and thrust me forth in, his work.

I remember once in Gloucester (I know the room, I look up at the window when I am there and walk along the street; I know the window, the bedside, and the floor, upon which I have lain prostrate) I said, Lord, I cannot go, I shall be puffed up with pride, and fall into the condemnation of the devil; Lord, do not let me go yet; I pleaded to be at Oxford two or three years more; I intended to make an hundred and fifty sermons, and thought I would set up with a good stock in trade but I remember praying, wrestling, and striving with God; I said, I am undone, I am unfit to preach in thy great name, send me not, pray, Lord, send me not yet. I wrote to all my friends in town and country, to pray against the bishop's solicitations, but they insisted I should go into orders before I was twenty-two. After all the solicitations, these words came into my mind, 'My sheep hear my voice, and none shall pluck them out of my hand.' O may the words be blessed to you, my dear friends, that I am parting with, as they were to me when they came warm upon my heart; then, and not till then, I said, Lord, I will go, send me when thou wilt.

I remember when I was in a place called Dover-Island, near Georgia, we put in with bad winds; I had an hundred and fifty in family to maintain, and not a single farthing to do it with, in the dearest part of the king's dominions; I remember, I told a minister of Christ, now in heaven, I had these words once, sir, "Nothing shall pluck you out of my hand." 'O', says he, 'take comfort from them, you may be sure God will be as good as his word, if he never tells you so again.' And our

Lord knew his poor sheep would be always doubting they should never reach heaven, therefore says he, 'I give to them eternal life, and they shall never perish.'

Here are in our text three blessed declarations, or promises:

First. I know them.

Second. They shall never perish; though they often think they shall perish by the hand of their lusts and corruptions; they think they shall perish by the deceitfulness of their hearts; but Christ says, 'They shall never perish.' I have brought them out of the world to myself, and do you think I will let them go to hell after that? 'I give to them eternal life;' pray mind that; not, I will, but I do. Some talk of being justified at the day of judgment; that is nonsense; if we are not justified here, we shall not be justified there. He gives them eternal life, that is, the earnest, the pledge, and assurance of it. The indwelling of the Spirit of God here, is the earnest of glory hereafter.

Third. Neither shall any pluck them out of My hand. He holds them in his hand, that is, he holds them by his power; none shall pluck them thence. There is always something plucking at Christ's sheep; the devil, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, all try to pluck them out of Christ's hand. O my brethren, they need not pluck us, yet we help all three to pluck ourselves out of the hand of Jesus; but 'none shall pluck them out of my hand,' says Christ. 'I give to them eternal life. I am going to heaven to prepare a place for them, and there they shall be.' O my brethren, if it were not for keeping you too long, and too much exhausting my own spirits, I could call upon you to leap for you; there is not a more blessed text to support the final perseverance of the saints; and I am astonished any poor souls, and good people I hope too, can fight against the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. What if a person say they should persevere in wickedness? Ah! That is an abuse of the doctrine; what, because some people spoil good food, are we never to eat it? But, my brethren, upon this

text I can leave my cares, and all my friends, and all Christ's sheep, to the protection of Christ Jesus' never- failing love.

I thought this morning, when I came here, riding from the other end of the town, it was to me like coming to be executed publicly; and when the carriage turned just at the end of the walk, and I saw you running here, O, thinks I, it is like a person now coming just to the place where he is to be executed. When I went up to put on my gown, I thought it was just like dressing myself to be made a public spectacle to shed my blood for Christ. I take all heaven and earth to witness, and God and the holy angels to witness, that though I had preferment enough offered me, that though the bishop took me in his arms, and offered me two parishes before I was two- and-twenty, and always took me to his table; though I had preferment enough offered me when I was ordained, thou, O God, knowest, that when the bishop put his hand upon my head, I looked for no other preferment than publicly to suffer for the Lamb of God. In this spirit I came out, in this spirit I came up to this metropolis. I was thinking, when I read of Jacob's going over the brook with a staff, that I could not say I had so much as a staff, but I came up without a friend, I went to Oxford without a friend, I had not a servant, I had not a single person to introduce me; but God, by his Holy Spirit, was pleased to raise me up to preach for his great name's sake. Through his divine Spirit I continue to this day, and feel my affections are as strong as ever towards the work and the people of the living God. The congregations at both ends of the town are dear to me. God has honored me to build this and the other place; and, blessed be his name, when he called me to Georgia at first, and I left all London affairs to God's care, when I had most of the churches in London open to me, and had twelve or fourteen constables to keep the doors, that people might not crowd too much; I had offers of hundreds then to settle in London, yet I gave it all up to turn pilgrim for God, to go into a foreign clime; and I hope with that same single intention I am going now —

Now I must come to the hardest part I have to act; I was afraid when I came out from home, that I could not bear the shock, but I hope the Lord Jesus Christ will help me to bear it, and help you to give me up to the blessed God, let him do with me what he will. This is the thirteenth time of my crossing the mighty waters; it is a little difficult at this time of life; and though my spirits are improved in some degree, yet weakness is the best of my strength. But I am clear as light in my call and God fills me with a peace that is unutterable, which a stranger intermeddles not with. Into his hands I commend my spirit; and I beg that this may be the language of your hearts. Lord, keep him, let nothing pluck him out of thy hands. I expect many a trial while I am on board, Satan always meets me there; but that God who has kept me, I believe will keep me. I thank God, I have the honor of leaving every thing quite well and easy at both ends of the town; and, my dear hearers, my prayers to God shall be, that nothing may pluck you out of Christ's hands. Witness against me, if I ever set up a party for myself. Did ever any minister, or could any minister in the world say, that I ever spoke against any one going to any dear minister? I thank God, that he has enabled me to be always strengthening the hands of all, though some have afterwards been ashamed to own me. I declare to you, that I believe God will be with me, and will strengthen me; and I believe it is in answer to your prayers that God is pleased to revive my spirits. May the Lord help you to pray on. If I am drowned in the waves, I will say, while I am drowning, Lord, take care of my London, take care of my English friends, let nothing pluck them out of thy hands.

And as Christ has given us eternal life, O my brethren, some of you, I doubt not, will be gone to him before my return; but, my dear brethren, my dear hearers, never mind that; we shall part, but it will be to meet again for ever. I dare not meet you now, I cannot bear your coming to me, to part from me; it cuts me to the heart, and quite overcomes me, but by and by all parting will be over, and all tears shall be wiped away from our eyes. God grant that none that weep now at my parting,

may weep at our meeting at the day of judgment; and if you never were among Christ's sheep before, may Christ Jesus bring you now. O come, come, see what it is to have eternal life; do not refuse it; haste, sinner, haste away. May the great, the good Shepherd, draw your souls. Oh! If you never heard his voice before, God grant you may hear it now; that I may have this comfort when I am gone, that I had the last time of my leaving you, that some souls are awakened at the parting sermon. O that it may be a farewell sermon to you; that it may be a means of your taking a farewell of the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. O come! Come! Come! To the Lord Jesus Christ; to him I leave you.

And you, dear sheep, that are already in his hands, O may God keep you from wandering; God keep you near Christ's feet; I do not care what shepherds keep you, so as you are kept near the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls. The Lord God keep you, lift up the light of his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.