

# Life to the full

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## **Life to the full**

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 17th October 2004

The thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10.10)

## **Introduction**

In these words Jesus tells us the gracious purpose he had for coming into the world. He came so that his "sheep", his people, may have life, and have it to the full. He is the Good Shepherd who truly loves his sheep, who wants the very best for them. In this he contrasts with the false shepherd, the thief, whose purpose is only to steal, and to kill and to destroy.

As we think about this verse, I want us to see what Jesus says about the destructive purpose of thief, the false shepherd, and then to see by contrast the good purpose that he, the true shepherd has for his people.

## **1. The destructive purpose of the false shepherd**

The context of this verse is that Jesus is speaking about himself as the Good Shepherd, and his people as "sheep". He is the one who really loves the sheep. He knows his sheep. He leads them. He feeds them. He is the "gate" for them: protecting them from harm. He gives them life by laying down his own life for them.

Jesus shows more clearly the greatness of the love that he has for his sheep by showing the lack of love for them that the "thief" has. Who is this thief? I think it is clear from the passage that the thief is the false teacher. He is a person who pretends to be a shepherd for God's people, and pretends to love them, but in fact is only interested in his own good. Instead of feeding the sheep and caring for them, he exploits them for his own end. So Jesus calls him a "thief and a robber".

What is it that the thief wants to do? Jesus says in this verse that the thief wants to "steal, and to kill, and to destroy." Let us think briefly about these things.

### **1) To steal**

Jesus says that the thief wants to steal. What does he want to steal? He wants to steal your love. He wants to steal the affection that should be given to the Good Shepherd, and to take it for himself. He wants to steal your knowledge of the truth. He wants to steal your innocence. He wants to steal your purity. He wants to lead you into false ideas about God, and false ideas about how to live.

## **2) To kill**

Jesus says that thief also wants to kill. What does he want to kill? He wants to kill men's knowledge of God. He does this by telling lies about God. He seeks to kill off in people any real interest in the truth about God. He does not mind people being religious, but he does not want them to know the real truth, according to the Bible.

## **3) To destroy**

Jesus also says that the thief, the false shepherd, wants to destroy. What does he want to destroy? People's bodies and souls in hell. The thief is himself going to go to hell, but he does not want to be alone. He wants to drag as many as possible down to hell with him. So he will do all he can to stop people from becoming real Christians. And for those who have become real Christians, the thief will do all he can to destroy their Christian lives. The thief is incapable of stopping those who are real Christians from going to heaven, but nevertheless he will still seek to do all he can to ruin their usefulness to God.

Who or what could possibly inspire someone to be so wicked as to seek to steal, and to kill and to destroy people? The answer is the devil. The false teacher is inspired by the devil. The hatred that he has for God's people is the hatred that the devil has. It is the devil who wants to steal and to kill and to destroy, and he is the one who inspires the false

teacher. Earlier in this Gospel Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

That is what the devil is, a murderer and a liar, and he inspires false teachers to be the same.

What lessons can we learn from what Jesus says about the thief, the false teacher ?

Firstly, we should be on our guard against false teachers. Some can be very gullible on this point, thinking that everyone who wears a dog collar, or who has the title of "Reverend" must of necessity be an honest and good man who has their best spiritual interest at heart. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear

good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them." (Matthew 7.15-20)

We need to be on our guard. There will be those who look like Jesus' sheep. They wear the right clothing, as it were. They speak the right language. But they do not belong to Christ. They belong instead to the devil. How do we recognise them? By their fruit. By the way they live. We need to ask ourselves about those who would seek to teach us, are their lives characterised by the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Or are their lives characterised by the "works of the flesh": sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and so on. (see Galatians 5.19 – 23). If you have reason to believe that someone is a false teacher, do not listen to him. In fact, do not have anything to do with him. Such a person is the most dangerous person you can meet. He is more dangerous than a murderer or a rapist, because if you listen to him he will lead you to Hell. He might seem to be very charming, very "nice" and he might be very respected in this world, but that does not mean that he is not extremely dangerous.

Secondly, those of us who teach others, or who have influence over others, need to be very careful that we are true teachers, and not false. Those who teach others have a very great

responsibility and will be judged more severely. James says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3.1). If we lead others astray through bad example or through bad teaching, then we face a very severe judgement.

## **2. The purpose of Jesus in coming**

Let us turn away from the unpleasant subject of the thief, the false teacher, to the far more pleasant subject of Jesus, and his purpose in coming. We see from this verse that, by way of contrast with the thief, the purpose of Jesus in coming is that his sheep may "have life, and have it to the full".

What did Jesus mean when he said that he has come that his sheep may have life, and have it to the full?

For us to understand what he meant, we need to appreciate the condition that we are in naturally. In our natural state, until Jesus works in our lives to save us, we are dead, even though we are alive physically. There are two ways in which we are dead:

Firstly, we are dead in the sense that we are under the sentence of death. We have all sinned. What this means is that we have broken God's commandments, or his laws. We have done what we wanted to do, instead of doing what God told us to do. There is a judgement day coming when Jesus will judge

everyone who has ever lived. All those who have not been forgiven for their sins will be sent by Jesus to Hell, to be punished eternally for their sins. The Bible calls this "the second death" (Revelation 20.14). So we are dead, or as good as dead, in our natural state, heading for eternal destruction in hell. So when Jesus says that he has come so that his sheep may have life, he means that he has come so that they may be delivered from the second death, and that they may be given instead eternal life. Eternal life means having a relationship with God. Jesus said when he was praying to his Father, "This is life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17.3). Jesus has come to give us the life of being right with God, and knowing him eternally, in place of the death and destruction of being sent to Hell, and being separated from friendship with God for ever. How can this be? How can we be saved from going to Hell? Because as Jesus says in this passage, he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10.15). By laying down his life, Jesus paid the price that was necessary for his sheep to be forgiven.

The second way in which we are dead in our natural state is that we are dead spiritually. We have no relationship with God. In one of his letters the apostle Paul describes like this the situation that the people that he was writing to were in before God made them alive:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of

this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. (Ephesians 2.1 - 3)

He says they were dead in their transgressions and sins. They had no relationship with God, any more than a dead person has a relationship with those who were his friends and family. Instead they were "living in sin", not necessarily by living with a partner without being married to him or her, but by living their lives apart from God's rule. They were following the ways of this world, and following "the ruler of the Kingdom of the air", by which he means the devil. They were following the desires of their sinful natures. And what the apostle says of these people before God made them alive in Christ is true for all men in their natural state. It is true for you now if you are not yet a real Christian. So when Jesus says he has come to give life, he means he has come to make his "sheep" spiritually alive where previously they were dead; to make them have a living relationship with God, whereby they know him in an intimate and close way, and whereby they know his power to overcome sin in their lives.

So we see that there is a wonderful message of hope in what Jesus says here. Life for the dead! The sentence of death



revoked, and instead the gift of eternal life imparted! Spiritual resurrection for those who were spiritually dead!

Do you know this life? Has Jesus made you alive? He is holding out life to you now as you read this sermon. You might say, "But this is only for the "sheep". I don't know if I am one of the sheep. Maybe I am one of the "goats", so this is not for me." Let me tell you how you can know if you are one of Jesus' sheep. He says "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." (John 10.27). Listen to his call. Follow him. If you do so, that will prove that you are one of his sheep.

### **3. Life to the full**

But it does not stop there. Jesus goes on to say that he has come that his sheep might "have life to the full". What does this mean?

Let me at this point address a common misconception about this verse. There are those who will claim that this verse promises that Jesus' people will have an abundance of material goods in this life. They would say something like this: "Jesus promised life to the full, so I am going to claim from Jesus my big house, expensive car, luxury holidays, designer clothes" and so on. However, if we look at the context it is clear that what Jesus is talking about is spiritual life in abundance. God has arranged this world so that some are very rich, but most of us only have just about enough to keep body and soul together. Whether or not you are rich may have very little to

do with your relationship with God. Some people are strong Christians yet have very few of this world's goods. Others are complete unbelievers but have an abundance of material goods. But what Jesus is saying is that his purpose is that his sheep may have abundant spiritual life, whether they are rich or poor in this world

Let me illustrate it like this. Suppose you are walking out in the country one day and you see two sheep. One of them is thin, emaciated, diseased, dirty, covered with parasites and walks with a limp. The other is fat, healthy, strong, clean and energetic, bounding around the field. Both could accurately be described as alive. But the first one has "one foot in the grave", whereas the second one is abounding in life. So it is with us. Jesus wants his people to be abounding in spiritual life, rather than barely existing.

How can we know this life to the full, this abundant life? Through the abundant spiritual provision that Jesus has made for his people. There is a remarkable parallel between this passage and Psalm 23, where David is rejoicing in the fact that God is his shepherd. This psalm speaks repeatedly about God's abundant provision for his people.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul....You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will

follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23.1 – 3, 5 – 6)

What is it that Christ provides for his people that they may have this life to the full? Let me mention some things:

God's Word. We have been provided with an inexhaustible supply of rich spiritual food in the Word of God. With the Bible we have all we need to be able to live a godly life in Christ.

The Holy Spirit. In another place in John's Gospel Jesus said that for the person who believes in him, "streams of living water will flow from within him", by which he meant the Holy Spirit (John 3.38). He promises a great and overflowing supply of the Holy Spirit to all his people.

The Church. All God's people have the wonderful privilege of being included in the church, the body of Christ. We are tremendously enriched by being able to have fellowship with one another, being able to share our burdens with each other and pray for each other, as well as being taught together from the Word of God.

God's abounding grace and mercy. We have been given access to the overflowing love and mercy of God, which is more than sufficient to meet all of our needs. As the apostle Paul says,

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5.17)

And the life which Jesus gives his people is an ever-increasing life, into eternity. It is a life which will never end, which can never be stamped out.

So here is a further encouragement for anyone reading this who is not as yet a Christian. Come to Christ, as his purpose is not just to give life to those who come to him, but life to the full. Do not be afraid to come to him, thinking that somehow it will stifle your life. Sometimes people labour under a misconception about Christianity. They see it as a massive kill-joy, as a matter of negative rules: "Don't do this, don't do that." They say, "I don't want to become a Christian, as being a Christian is so restrictive, so negative." Of course there are rules, or laws, in our relationship with God, as there are in any worthwhile activity, but these rules are not given to make our lives miserable, but to give us a safe environment within which we can enjoy the abundant life that God has for us. Suppose you go on a skiing holiday. On the first morning, before you are allowed onto the slopes, you have training session with the instructor, and the first thing he does is to go through all the safety rules. Suppose at that point you say, "This skiing business is boring. All it is is a set of rules. I am

going home." What a fool you would be to do that! What exhilaration you would miss out on! Yet that is what so many do with Christianity. They take a superficial look at the teaching of the Bible, and say to themselves "Oh, this is just a load of rules. I am not interested." So they miss out on the abundant life that they could know through Christ. Do not be a fool. Do not listen to the lies of Satan, who will try to tell you that there is no life in Christianity.

There is also a challenge here for believers as well. If you are a true Christian, do you know this abundant life that Jesus says he has come to give his people? Or are you in the spiritual equivalent of a persistent vegetative state: the pulse can just about be felt, there is the odd flicker of an eyelid, the odd twitch of a muscle, but hardly any discernible sign of life in you? If this is the case, go to Christ in prayer, and hold him to his word in this promise. He has said he will answer prayer that is according to his will. Well here in this verse he has told us what his will for his people is, that they may know life to the full. So ask him for it. Seek him with determination, and do not rest until you know this life in your experience. And as you pray, do all you can to facilitate the answering of your prayers: get to meetings of the church, have regular times of personal prayer and Bible study, examine your life and repent of any sin that you are aware of. Be absolutely determined to know this life to the full, and you will not be disappointed.

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