

K9 Classics

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Generally speaking, dogs don't have very good press in the Bible. For one thing, the law of Moses brands them as unclean animals. They neither chew the cud nor have cloven hoofs. However, it should be understood that the dogs most often referred to in the Scriptures were not lovable household pets, but semi-wild scavengers that scrounged in the streets and alleys. Working alone or in packs, they often attacked people who had the misfortune to get too near. No wonder that the word dog became a word of reproach and contempt. Jews called Gentiles dogs. (1) Paul turned the tables when he used the offensive epithet to describe Jewish false teachers who insisted that circumcision was necessary for salvation. (2) David and Abner objected to be treated like dead dogs, (3) but Mephibosheth applied the term to himself as an expression of worthlessness. (4) To be eaten by dogs was as dishonorable an exit from this world as could be imagined. (5) In the last chapter of the Bible, sexual perverts are called dogs. (6)

PET TEACHERS

But wait! That is not the whole story! Our subject now shifts to a home with its pet dog, not the wild alley canine. One day a Gentile woman of the city of Tyre asked the Lord Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. (7) To test her faith, the Savior reminded her that His primary mission was to the lost sheep of Israel, not to Gentile dogs. She said, in effect, "I understand that perfectly, but couldn't you let a few crumbs of bread drop from the table to this Gentile puppy?" The word still had a measure of contempt, but the faith that she demonstrated brought healing to her daughter.

It is dogs that are household pets that I'd like to talk about now—Irish Setters, Labrador Retrievers, Collies, and all the rest. I am persuaded that God put these four legged creatures in the world to teach us valuable spiritual lessons. I have a theory, for instance, that they are designed to teach us how to worship. Dogs are worshippers.

This first came to my attention years ago when A. S. Loizeaux drove me from the terminal to his home, where I would be a guest. As I emerged from the car, I noticed two dogs in the yard, one black and the other brown. The black dog rushed over to Mr. Loizeaux, wagged its tail furiously, jumped excitedly, and slobbered all over his outstretched hand. The brown dog slunk in the shadows of the yard. Turning to me, my host said, "The brown dog knows nothing about worship."

THE CONVERTED GUARD DOG

But even dogs can learn how to worship. My friends, Red and Mae Williams, had an Irish Setter that was all affection. It was a leaner. As soon as I sat down, it would come over and lean its head on one of my knees. Irresistible! One day when the Williamses were away, burglars broke into their home. Having never met a stranger, the Setter must have given them a royal welcome. The family returned to find the house looted and the dog contentedly shut up in the kitchen.

The next time I visited, there was an additional dog—a large, muscular German Shepherd. Mae straightly charged me not to pet this dog. She wanted it to be a guard dog, the attack kind, a real man-eater. Eyeing the massive canine again, I meekly complied.

Months later when I came to that home, the Irish Setter had converted the German Shepherd. The attack dog had become a worshipper. No longer a menace, it was now a lover.

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SHELTIES

Other friends, Don and Krista, had a Sheltie of the worshipping kind. Whenever I drew up in front of the house, she recognized the sound of my car door slamming and whimpered softly. Then she greeted me with her whole body wiggling with delight. That's the way she was! When Shelly passed off the scene, the family purchased another Sheltie, this one named Max. Everyone agreed that Max was an outstandingly handsome dog. But he was not a "people's - person." When I showed up, I was lucky to get a passing sniff from him. He'd rather be rushing around, chasing balls or looking for other fun 'n games. He was an activist. One day, when I was being largely ignored by Max, I thought, "I wish Don had bought another dog like Shelly." Then it seemed that the Lord said to me, "Bill, that is a parable of your life. You've always been like Max, super-busy, preaching, teaching, writing, and traveling. I wish you had been more like Shelly. You have been a Martha, distracted with much serving. I wish you had spent more time sitting at My feet in worship and adoration." I was brought up sharp that day with the reminder that "the heavenly Bridegroom is wooing a wife, not hiring a servant."

ONLY TWO DESIRES

On one of my frequent walks at a nearby lake, I stopped to admire a lady's dog. As she extolled her pet's virtues, she said, "This dog wants only two things."

"Really? What are they?"

"He wants to know what I want him to do, and he wants to do it."

What a great spiritual lesson! That's just the way we should be with the Lord. We should have a passionate longing to discern His will for us, and a single, pure desire to do it.

I've never seen that dog again, but never forget the lesson he taught me.

NO REWARD REQUIRED

On a trip to New Zealand, I visited the Agrodome in Rotoua with its outstanding display of sheep and wool. But what fascinated me most was the skill of the collies as they worked with the sheep. Sometimes crouching full length, they crawled toward the flock with a glare that would intimidate any straggler. At other times they would semi-circle to the left or right, keeping the flock on course. It only took a word or whistle from the shepherd and they sprang into intelligent obedience.

In the course of his lecture, the shepherd said, "You don't have to reward these dogs. All they want is to be out on the hillsides, moving the sheep at my command."

And I thought, "How true this is of the service for the Lord Jesus! The labor is its own reward. It's enough just to be out on the hillsides with the Good Shepherd, seeking the sheep that are lost. It's enough to be serving the very best of masters, spending and being spent for Him. The fulfillment and satisfaction found in being His willing bondsman surpass any reward."

THE LAST FLING

Dr. A. T. Schofield had a dog that needed obedience training, so he put it on a leash and patiently ordered it to heel. The lessons continued day after day. Finally the good doctor felt that the dog had learned its lesson, so he unclasped the leash and sternly ordered, "Heel!" The dog took off as if shot from a gun. It raced around in circles, jumped, barked and released a lot of pent-up energy. When it had finally had its fling, it returned to its master and heeled without being told. From that moment on, the dog never failed to heel.

Dr. Schofield saw in this the experience of many believers. Before conversion they are under the constraints of the law, or, as Paul said, "...in bondage under the elements of the world." (8) But when freed from the law, they don't know how to handle their new-found liberty. It seems that they have to get a taste of the world in order to learn that it doesn't satisfy. Once they experience the liberty of grace, they find true satisfaction in obedience to the Lord. They now can say:

Need I that a law should bind me
Captive unto Thee.
Captive is my heart, rejoicing
Never to be free.

RETURNING GOOD FOR EVIL

Sometimes dogs exhibit behavior that is a rebuke to believers. They act in a more Christian way than many Christians. For example, they are quick to forgive their assailants. When Sir Walter Scott saw a stray pup in his yard, he threw a rock to scare it away. His aim and thrust were better than usual with the result that he broke the dog's leg. Instead of running away, the hapless creature limped up to Scott and licked the hand that had caused the fracture. Said Sir Walter, "That dog preached the Sermon on the Mount to me as few preachers have ever since presented it."

Spurgeon had a similar experience. One afternoon he spotted a dog in his flower garden. Knowing that the dog was a poor gardener, C. H. S. threw a stick at it and ordered it to get going. As Spurgeon told it, "He conquered me and made me ashamed of having spoken roughly to him, for he picked up the stick, brought it to me, and dropped it at my feet. Do you think I could strike him or drive him away after that? No, I petted him and called him good names. The dog had conquered the man."

GRAY FRIAR'S BOBBY

And talk about faithfulness and devotion. Few creatures can equal the dog in that regard. One of history's most outstanding examples is Gray Friar's Bobby, a Skye Terrier that walked the beat with Officer John Gray. When his master died, Bobby followed the procession to the cemetery. But when the crowd left, the dog stayed behind. Later efforts to make him return home and stay there were futile. He insisted on standing watch by the grave. He was fed by the cemetery gardener, then by a neighborhood upholsterer, and later by a nearby restaurant. He always returned to the grave after eating.

When Bobby died at 16, he had lived at the burial place of his master for 14 years. A baroness had a memorial fountain erected near the cemetery. It has a life-sized model of Bobby on the top, a drinking fountain for the public half way down, and a trough at the bottom for dogs.

EYES FIX ED ON THE MASTER

George Goodman used to tell how a dog taught his owner the way of victory over temptation. The man was asked one day how he managed to outstrip many of his companions in the Christian life. He replied, "When I was a young man, in my unconverted days, I used to train bulldogs to fight. And when I had a bulldog in training, I never allowed him any food. Sometimes when I was walking with my dog, Tom, and he would see a bone, I would simply say to him, "Tom!" He would look back at me and as long as I could get his eyes on me, we got past the bone in safety. Now I have been tempted to go back to the evil things of the world, and just as I have been about to partake of them, even though I knew they were wrong,

I heard the Spirit of God say to me, "Toni!" And as long as I was obedient to the Spirit of God, and kept my eyes on Christ, I got past the danger."

Goodman would add, "There will come a time, perhaps even today, when the evil nature will seek to rise within your breast. But that very moment, the Spirit of God will say, "Toni! John! Mary! calling you by name. And as long as you are obedient to the Holy Spirit, and keep your eyes fixed on Christ, you will be taken triumphantly through." (9)

The world has a saying, "A man's best friend is his dog." We know, on the contrary, that the Lord Jesus is our best Friend. But it is easy to see that a dog can rate so high in human affection that some people can characterize themselves as dog lovers. Think of seeing-eye dogs, patiently leading those who are sight-impaired. Or the Saint Bernards and their thrilling winter rescues of mountaineers. Or the blood hounds searching and finding lost children. Think of Alastians and how they guard homes and families. And the Police dogs and their feats of daring and heroism.

All these dogs can teach us many spiritual lessons if we only have time to observe them and ponder their behavior. To me, one lesson stands out above all others. Some of my friends are mildly amused when I propound my theory that God gave us dogs to teach us how to worship. But I really believe it.

ENDNOTES:

1. Ps. 22:16; 59:6, 14; Mt. 15:26
2. Phil. 3:2
3. 1 Sam. 24:14; 2 Sam. 3:8
4. 2 Sam. 9:8
5. 1 Ki. 14:11; 16:4; 21:19, 23; 2 Ki. 9:10, 36.
6. Rev. 22:15
7. Mt. 15:21-28
8. Gal. 4:3b
9. The Keswick Week, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Ltd., 1961, p.1000