

Listen to my voice

22 At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly. 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one." (John 10:22-30 ESV)

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

We have got a very interesting dialogue here. Very interesting. Between Jesus and the Jews. John uses the word "the Jews" to describe Jesus opponents. We read a lot about the Pharisees and the Sadducees in other three gospel, and we may get an impression that they all were really bad people; legalists, moralists, hypocrites, and so on.

It is quite far from being true. Most of them were very religious. Very strict in their obedience to the Law of Moses. They really tried hard not to break God's commandments, not just these 10 which we have inherited, but additional 503, which were listed in the books of Moses.

Just think about it, how much would it take to learn all of them? Can we imagine us doing it? But then there also were different applications and exceptions for each of these commandments. They tried to follow them not just in deeds, but also in words and thoughts.

We have testimonies of how different laws were discussed and applied. In case if they saw a beautiful woman, they tried to cross a street to avoid temptations, and if temptations still got them, they were advise to hit their head against a wall; to turn their attention away from these temptations. Do you know many who would be so devout in their faith and so strict in following God's law?

In fact, let me ask this, - how many in our churches today still know the 10 Commandments, and how they apply to our life?

As we know, not a few of these religious people became Jesus disciples. We read about Nicodemus, about Joseph from Arimathea, about the fact that many Jews begun to believe in Jesus. (John 11-12)

Today's Jesus dialogue is with a group of Jews, who are asking this questions: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

There is no reason to doubt their intentions. They seemed to be really interested whether Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, or not. "Come on, tell us plainly, once and for all! Don't keep us in suspense!"

Jesus answer may have surprised them: "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock."

Something strange is going on here. Jews were looking for an answer. Jesus says that He has already given His answer. "I told you, but you don't believe!"

One of them has missed the point.

The Jews knew from the Old Testament that promised Messiah will come from the descendants of Abraham, from the tribe of Judah and from the house of king David. Another important prophecy described the coming Messiah as a prophet like Moses. Both of them were leaders, both of them gave Israel freedom and victories over enemies, and to some extent also the promised land.

If Messiah is like them, he has to liberate them from the Roman oppressors and to restore Israel's kingdom. "So, Jesus, are you the Christ or not?"

Jesus had been going around for quite a while. And what had He been doing? As He announced at the beginning His ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news..." (Luke 4:18-19)

These were the words of prophet Isaiah, describing the work of the Anointed One, of the Christ.

This is exactly what Jesus had been doing during the last few years. Moreover, He repeatedly had called God of Israel His Father. Several times Jews even wanted to stone Him as He, being human, was making Himself equal with God.

Why did these Jews missed this point?

Because they had done the very thing they so hardly tried to avoid. They had sinned against the highest of the Commandments. They had built idols for themselves. Their idols were not something bad, but very good things. As it usually is with our idols.

They hoped that God will grant them freedom, they hope that God will restore their land, they hoped that they will have their sovereignty. Good, very good things. Each nation wants them.

But in this dialogue we can see what had happen. They had exchange their God to these good things. They thought that this is enough to try to do your best living a righteous life, that by doing it they can expect to receive whatever they wanted from God. For they deserve it, right?!

They didn't want to have God, they wanted to have their freedom and their Kingdom.

It can easily happen in the church. We can easily lose sight of God and focus on what we want by any means: I want *my* congregation to be exactly the way I want it, I want *my* community to be and to act in a way I want it. I want Christ to give me what I want. If I have been a good Christian, I almost deserve it.

This simple dialogue shows how difficult to spot and how strong are our idols. How easily they can blind us.

Jesus Christ, true God stood before Jews, the One, for whom they had been waiting for almost two thousand years ... but they didn't understand it. They were not listening to Him. "We want our country and our freedom. Stop telling us about eternal things! Are you the One, who will give us what we want, or not?"

What would we ask Him if today He stood before us?

Jesus had come to establish His kingdom. Promised Kingdom. Eternal Kingdom; and He did it. But this is very different Kingdom. He didn't overthrow one earthly power to set up another one. He had come to overthrow the ultimate allegiance of our hearts. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Mat 22:37 ESV)

Not the country you want, not the freedom you desire... not a congregation you like, not your private community. These all are good things, but not the ultimate ones.

Jesus has come as our Savior to show what is God's merciful and gracious attitude towards us, sinners, and by His sacrificial love to kindle our heart to love Him.

Do we think that we are much different than these Jews? Do we want to listen to His voice and follow Him, or do we want Him to listen to our voice, and to deliver what we want?

What kind of Christ are we looking for? The one who will fulfill our desires, or for one, who is God Almighty Himself, who has come to rescue us from death and to give us eternal life in His presence? Who says: "Follow me, leave everything and follow me!"

It is so difficult demand: "Love me more than anything and follow me!"

But it helps us to see, which are these things, which we are afraid to leave. Which are these things we believe can give us more than Christ can give. But, can they really give more than God can give?

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

“I know my sheep, I give them eternal life, they will never perish, no one will snatch them from my hand.” Wonderful words. Comforting words. Do they apply to us?

Of course, they do! Of course. But how do we know that we hear Jesus voice and follow him? Especially if we realize that there are many things that are so dear to us.

We tend to think that listening to Jesus voice and following Him is about what we do. About what we ought to do as Christians. If only we strive hard to be good persons then we are good Christians. No, no, no! If we think that we just have to strive hard and then we are good Christians, then, in a fact, we are good pagans.

Remember those Jews. They were much better than we are in following instructions of the Law. Taking care of poor, widows, orphans, giving gifts, supporting different kind of temple ministries, fighting temptation with all their heart, trying to live a perfect life in service to God and others. They strive so hard that it sounds almost unbelievable for us.

Jesus still said: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mat 5:20 ESV) What did He say? How can we be better?

We are not Christ’s sheep primarily because we are good, moral and caring people. There are many moral and caring people who are far, far away from Christ.

Christ doesn’t give us eternal life by what we do. We do not become His sheep by what we do. I need to repeat it – Christ doesn’t give us eternal life by what we do.

Instead, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The *words* that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63 ESV)

To be one of Jesus sheep, to be a Christian is not primarily about doing. It is about receiving. Yes, about receiving! About receiving gifts of God, about receiving Holy Spirit, about being surprised and transformed by God’s love.

But how exactly does it happen, one may ask. “My sheep hear my voice.” It happens when we listen to Jesus. Every time when we listen to the Word of God, every time we read, meditate, discuss, learn what God is saying to us, - we are listening to His voice.

We need to see clearly the close connections between listening to Jesus voice, between following Him and between receiving His gifts and promises.

We tend to think, that the most important things are those, which we do. And we organize our priorities accordingly. But Jesus says otherwise. The most important part of being Christian is - *listening* to His voice.

Listening to His voice. Listening, reading, learning what our Lord says to us.

His words are spirit and life. His words change and transform us. Then we are ready to follow Him. Not with a purpose to become good people, but because gracious and merciful God has accepted us as we are.

When we remain in Jesus words, we have these beautiful promises – “I give you eternal life, you will never perish, no one will snatch you from my hand.”

Our logic is – if I do what is required, then I’ll receive what I want.

But the logic of God’s grace is different. If you know how to receive my gifts, you will receive more and more. “To everyone who has, will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not [who doesn’t know how to receive God’s gifts], even what he has will be taken away.” (Mat 25:29 ESV)

Just learn how to receive... listen to Jesus voice! He is God who delights in giving. In abundant giving.

One last thing. We know that sometimes we don’t want to listen, what Jesus is saying to us, we may not like what He says, we may think that this is more important to run and to do something than to listen, or we want Him to listen to what we say to Him, or we even may want to listen to other voices. It’s true. We are weak, and sometimes we are confused, and we are not sure whom to listen to.

Then we need to remember Jesus words. “My Father, who has given [my sheep] to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.”

You are now listening to Jesus words as He Himself says them to you. They are said to comfort us. No one is able to snatch you from my hand. No one!

We can be confident that as we listen to Jesus voice “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38-39 ESV)

Amen.